

# Overlaps and Theoretical Triangulation

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This chapter focuses on overlaps and instances of theoretical triangulation identified across the five major theoretical approaches to psychotherapy presented in Part 2. Some such overlaps may be anticipated in advance because the developmental paths of two or more approaches may have been influenced by a common perspective. At other times overlaps can emerge between therapeutic approaches that do not have an influencing theory in common, and their overlapping theoretical beliefs may be expressed in quite divergent language. Connection and overlap between perspectives may be overtly acknowledged in some instances, but in others the practitioners and researchers involved may not recognize, or may actively reject, that possibility. As external observers, however, we may see things otherwise.

Those elements of theory that do not overlap, but are not incompatible with each other are all available to contribute to our understanding of human psychological functioning and to the processes of effective psychotherapy on a theoretically integrative basis.

## **An Analysis of Theoretical Content Across the Major Approaches**

This work represents an enhanced version of the type of informal analysis that all of us might undertake as we read, think about and apply differing theoretical approaches to psychotherapy within our everyday practice. Based on the content of Chapters 6-10, I generated lists of key elements of theory associated with each major approach. Overall, I noted a total of 100 elements of theory: 19 for attachment theory; 14 for humanistic theory; 28 for psychodynamic theory; 19 for cognitive and behavioural theory; and 20 for behavioural and cognitive theory.

The lists generated are provided in Appendix 1, and as in all aspects of this work, in order to be manageable, it was not feasible for them to be fully exhaustive or reflect each theoretical approach in its totality.

Comparisons across these lists helped to support and advise my judgements regarding the overlap of theoretical elements across approaches. This work highlights the frequency of theoretical connections, and supports the identification of compatible and incompatible differences.

A few words are also relevant here regarding the theoretical status of unconscious mind. It is rare for cognitive behavioural theories to refer to unconscious mind, although aspects of experience outside our conscious awareness are clearly recognized, as well as the existence of psychological constructs and processes that do not function at the level of conscious awareness. If it is directly discussed, the nature of mind involved in this lack of awareness tends to be described as something that is very different from the unconscious mind of psychodynamic theory, and is generally deemed to be incompatible with it. In this work I take the position that the unconscious mind discussed by psychodynamic theory is not incompatible with the mind that is described as outside of conscious awareness within cognitive behavioural approaches.

## **Descriptions of Overlaps and Theoretical Triangulation**

Overlaps and triangulation support the validity of theory. The compatible differences that are so often part of those overlaps, then provide us with fertile ground for enhanced and dialectically driven understanding. The above informal analysis of theoretical content supported me in identifying the following eleven instances of substantial overlap and theoretical triangulation across our five major approaches. In two instances the differing terminologies used by individual approaches have been replaced by new labels that are as theory-neutral as possible: unconscious internal models of self, others, relationships and the outside world and the constructive developmental relationship.

- conscious mind
- unconscious mind
- the innate capacity for growth
- the processing of emotion
- psychological defences
- the relevance of overt behaviour
- the importance of relational processes
- the importance of past experiences
- unconscious internal models of self, others, relationships and the outside world

- the experience of acceptance
- the constructive developmental relationship

The specific theoretical content justifying these judgements and decisions will now be discussed.

*Conscious and Unconscious Mind:* Our capacity for the conscious experience of thoughts, emotions, physiological and behavioural responses is a self-evident given for every one of us. All of our approaches to psychotherapy inevitably overlap in this respect, although the specific, focused attention that each theory gives to conscious mind differs considerably. That our minds can and do process experience at an unconscious level outside of our conscious awareness has to be based on the assumed outcomes of that processing. Brewin (1988/2014) and Williams et al. (1997) provide interesting research-based reviews of such evidence from the perspective of cognitive psychology.

The strongest position advocating for the existence and importance of our unconscious mind lies within psychodynamic theory, where powerful processes taking place outside conscious awareness are seen as fundamental to our human existence. Attachment theory overtly recognizes unconscious processing, and humanistic theory allows for aspects of self and experience to become hidden from conscious awareness. Within the CBT umbrella, cognitive therapy theory relies on the existence of latent schemas outside of conscious awareness. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Behavioral Activation all appreciate that feelings can become unhelpfully hidden from that awareness, all of which supports the existence of unconscious mind by implication. Functional Analytic Psychotherapy accepts the relevance of private events that exist at an unconscious level. Constructivist Psychotherapy, Compassion Focused Therapy and Safran's approach to cognitive therapy overtly acknowledge, allow for and work with unconscious processes, and Constructivist Psychotherapy explicitly refers to the existence of unconscious mind.

We also find largely implicit support for unconscious processes from within applied behaviour analysis and radical behaviourism, since the reinforcement and association processes of operant and classical conditioning, and the functions they fulfil are mostly not consciously apparent to us, taking place within our minds at an unconscious level. This reality is commented on within Behavioral Activation. The powerful and complex life-long learning histories that automatically feed into current psychological functioning also exist outside conscious awareness.

Whilst considerable inter-theoretical divergence exists regarding its nature and the types of structures, mechanisms and processes that may exist and unfold within it, all five of our major theoretical positions support the existence of unconscious as well as conscious mind.

*The Innate Capacity for Growth:* Three of our major approaches strongly overlap in advocating the position that all of us have within ourselves the innate capacity and potential to grow, develop and change. We may see this as being articulated most ardently within humanistic theory where it is defined as the actualizing tendency. Within attachment theory Bowlby clearly believes in the existence of this capacity, and from a psychodynamic perspective it ties in well with the classic concept of the life instinct and libido, which was re-defined by Rank as the autonomous striving of the life force, or the will, and is reflected in Winnicott's concept of the true self. It is also clearly supported within Constructivist Psychotherapy from a cognitive perspective. In total four of our major approaches make reference to our innate capacity for growth and development.

*The Processing of Emotion:* A strong consensus exists regarding the importance of emotion within human psychology and psychotherapy. It is central to so much of psychodynamic and analytic theory, and plays absolutely crucial roles within attachment and humanistic/experiential theories. Within the cognitive and behavioural therapies, access to emotional experience and the soothing of painful emotion is important within Compassion Focused Therapy, and has a core place within Constructivist Psychotherapy and Safran's work on cognitive-interpersonal cycles. It is mutually connected with cognition, cognitive distortions and schema activation and maintenance within more traditional cognitive therapy/CBT interventions, and there is a significant place for the experience of emotion within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Behavioral Activation and Functional Analytic Psychotherapy.

Overall within radical behaviourism, human emotions relating to pleasure, displeasure, anxiety and fear constitute the basis for the behavioural processes of operant and classical conditioning. To be either rewarding or aversive within the processes of operant conditioning, behaviour must result in experiences such as these, and although felt emotion as a private event is excluded from the traditional theoretical base of radical behaviourism, emotional reactions lie at the heart of behavioural theory. Similarly, the effects of classical conditioning result from the association between external or internal events and either positive or aversive emotions.

In a range of respects, all of our major theoretical perspectives endorse the central, and fundamentally important place of emotion within human psychological existence and processes of change. In this context Greenberg and Safran (1987) provide a comprehensive review of the ways in which emotion is embedded within psychodynamic, cognitive behavioural and experiential psychotherapy traditions.

*Psychological Defences:* Defence mechanisms are conscious or unconscious self-protective mental processes whereby feelings and thoughts that cause discomfort,

inner conflict, anxiety and distress may be avoided and become hidden from our conscious awareness, or disguised by aspects of distortion so that we no longer experience them in the same way. The term used here is taken from psychodynamic theory where defences constitute fundamental and core understanding, since the same term is often used from within other theoretical positions and has common colloquial understanding.

Attachment theory considers defences primarily from the perspective of the evolving attachment relationship in childhood and the defensive exclusion of emotions and our own needs in the context of insecure attachment. Client-centred theory similarly pays primary attention to defences in the context of our early developmental relationships, and the exclusion of experience from awareness.

Amongst the cognitive behavioural therapies, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy recognizes the existence of painful hidden experience; Constructivist Psychotherapy describes the importance of self-protective processes associated with hidden emotional truths; Safran (1998) acknowledges the functioning of schema related defences/security operations; Compassion Focused Therapy sees cognitive distortions as resulting from defence-related processes; and the powerful influence of avoidance and escape from unbearable suffering is recognized as an underlying motivation for problem behaviours within Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

From a position influenced by radical behaviourism, Behavioral Activation uses the term experiential avoidance to refer to the avoidance of aversive thoughts and emotions which people may not be consciously aware of, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy discusses the similar experience of emotional avoidance.

All of the above positions are consistent with the basic nature of psychological defences, which are theoretically supported across all of our major approaches.

*The Relevance of Overt Behaviour:* Behaviour is automatically important across every approach to psychotherapy. We cannot enter the therapy room and talk about ourselves, our difficulties and the lives we lead without talking about our behaviours, even if the actual term is never used. We tend to see the cognitive behavioural therapies, particularly those led by behavioural theory, as the approaches that particularly take behaviour into account and seek to influence it directly. Therapies influenced by attachment, humanistic/client-centred and psychodynamic theories all pay their own intimate attention to behaviour in terms of the ways in which clients' live and experience their lives and their relationships, the ways in which they behave towards themselves and others, and the nature of the varying activities of their lives, but not in terms of the specific details that behavioural theory addresses. Behavioural approaches seek to effect change explicitly by focusing on behaviour directly, while other approaches influence it indirectly and more implicitly.

*The Importance of Relational Processes:* In different ways four of our five major theoretical approaches pay attention to the specifics of relational processes and the ways in which they evolve between people. For example, within psychodynamic theory we find the principles of transference and countertransference, repeated relational patterns and re-enactments which are echoed by attachment theory. Within the cognitive and behavioural therapies relational processes are specifically addressed by Safran's approach to cognitive-interpersonal cycles. Within behaviourism the operant conditioning and patterns of reinforcement that maintain our lives largely involve relational processes. Much of the theoretical attention to behaviour within behavioural and cognitive theory has an influence on relational processes, and Functional Analytic Psychotherapy specifically addresses operant relational responses to conditioned interpersonal behaviours within therapy sessions.

*The Importance of Past Experiences:* The principle that our past experiences influence the ways in which we behave in the present has a central place within all of our different theoretical approaches to the human mind and to the process of psychotherapy. All of our major theoretical approaches believe that the past matters, that memories are held within us, and that these memories and the learning associated with them influence us in the present time; whether this relates to the processes of classical and operant conditioning coalesced into a complex learning history, simpler processes of association, the schemas of cognitive therapy theory, the inner world of object relations of psychodynamic theory or the internal working model of attachment theory. Whichever way we look at it, our personal pasts matter enormously.

*Unconscious Internal Models of Self, Others, Relationships and the Outside World:* Psychodynamic, attachment and cognitive and behavioural theories, whilst using different terminologies, all support the existence of organized memory structures that develop from the start of our lives, are heavily influenced by our early developmental experiences, are maintained and modified during adulthood and influence our day-to-day experiences, behaviours and relationships, very largely without our conscious awareness.

The inner world of object relations is of core importance within psychodynamic approaches to therapy and the internal working model is central to attachment-based approaches. Schemas are crucial aspects of the cognitive and behavioural therapies, with self and interpersonal schemas having particular relevance within Schema Therapy and Safran's approach to unhelpful cognitive-interpersonal cycles. Constructivist Psychotherapy also refers to unhelpful unconscious constructions and meaning-making processes in a similar context, and the importance of schemas is clearly evident within Compassion Focused Therapy.

Functional Analytic Psychotherapy as a modern behavioural approach recognizes the existence of repeated patterns of inter-personal behaviour that originate in past relational experience and live on within our cumulative complex learning histories. These histories encompass patterns of contingencies and reinforcing or punishing experiences from early childhood onwards. They generally exist outside of our conscious awareness and influence our inferences, judgements and behaviours in relation to ourselves, others and the world around us.

Finally, humanistic/client-centred therapy refers to current relationships being coloured by the nature of past relationships. This rather general position is consistent with the concept of unconscious internal models, but is more limited than the examples above and is not seen as in itself justifying a position of overlap or triangulation. In addition, it is relevant to acknowledge the broader-based position of cognitive science in which schemas are seen as the unconscious memory structures that automatically enable us to identify and relate to the entities within our worlds.

In the context of this work on theoretical integration, the entities referred to above as the inner world of object relations, internal working models, schemas and complex learning histories are all judged to relate the same intransitive entity and are defined by the theory neutral term unconscious internal models of self, others, relationships and the outside world. Overall, I have judged this construct to be supported by four of our five core theoretical perspectives.

*The Experience of Acceptance:* Some attention will now be given to the concept of acceptance within psychotherapy theory and therapy practice, particularly as reflected in the work of Carl Rogers, and the therapeutic approaches advocated by Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Compassion Focused Therapy.

Acceptance can be considered from two perspectives: firstly as referring to our acceptance of ourselves as who we are, and secondly our acceptance of the realities of life as it is currently experienced. In both contexts, acceptance is not being seen as the equivalent of resignation or defeat, or a denial of personal responsibility for our own actions and behaviours. It reflects an acceptance that a certain state of affairs in the nature of who we are and the lives we lead truly does exist; it is not being denied or wished away, or being dealt with by punishing and judgmental attitudes towards ourselves. Its existence is being accepted and experienced in all its reality.

It is in these respects that behavioural therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy tend to refer to radical acceptance. Seeing and accepting the realities of ourselves, accepting and not punishing ourselves for the problematic and painful aspects of who we are and the lives we lead, may be crucial to the process of change. This acceptance is associated with a reduction in unhelpful

defences, and an increased capacity to experience the range of both painful and positive emotions that may be associated with those realities.

Our capacity to accept ourselves is supported by the empathic, attuned acceptance we receive from others. It will also be enhanced by new understanding that makes helpful sense of our problematic ways of being. It improves our self-esteem and self-concept and increases our freedom to become the person we have the natural potential to be. In these respects, it relates strongly to processes associated with psychodynamic, self-psychology and attachment-based theory and practice, although acceptance as a specific concept does not tend to be explicitly discussed within these perspectives.

There is a direct parallel between the way in which Crane (2009) talks about the compassionate understanding and acceptance that can result from Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy and the acceptance that is often movingly advocated by Carl Rogers from a humanistic client-centred perspective. Both Rogers and Crane understand that deep and true self-acceptance can facilitate a natural process of growth and change, and the reduction in negative thoughts and beliefs about the self which accompany such changes are usefully articulated by Crane from the cognitive perspective. The concept is similarly reflected within Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2010). From Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Behavioral Activation perspectives, acceptance of ourselves and acceptance of the current reality of our lives and our present suffering, are explicitly combined with overt, structured approaches supporting growth, development and change.

Overall, self-acceptance can reduce our internal barriers to positive change, enhance the likelihood that positive growth and development will occur, reduce some of the pain and distress in our lives and increase our capacity to value ourselves. Acceptance of the realities of the current context of our lives may reduce unhelpful negativity and enhance our capacity to make changes where possible, with a starting point that reflects the realities of ourselves and our world as they actually are. Whatever approaches help us to experience these aspects of acceptance, they hold an important place within the psychology of our human mind. Overall, its provision is supported by all five major approaches, with three of them making specific mention of acceptance as a concept and overtly addressing it as a priority.

*The Constructive Developmental Relationship:* Maybe the most powerful context of overlap and theoretical triangulation to emerge within the detail of the therapeutic approaches discussed in this work lies with the nature and importance of the human relationship that fosters and supports our psychological growth and development. In both overlapping and differing ways we find aspects of this relationship and their relevance to psychological development being recognized and described within all of our major theoretical approaches.

The empathic, genuine and accepting relationship between adults in therapy described by Rogers overlaps with and may be considered the absolute equivalent of the secure attachment relationship of childhood and adult life. The relationship principles of client-centred therapy and the maternal behaviour associated with secure infant attachment constitute a research supported example of triangulation within psychotherapy theory. They are added to by psychodynamic understanding, particularly in relation to Winnicott and Bion from an object relations perspective and Kohut from the perspective of self-psychology. Between them these three approaches assert similar but also unique and compatible understanding of developmentally secure relationships throughout the lifespan.

The very strong overlap between psychodynamic, attachment and humanistic theories regarding the central importance of developmental relationships is one that makes sense in terms of their historical connections. In establishing attachment theory, Bowlby was building on his psychoanalytic starting point, influenced by the object relations theorists, and in developing his client-centred approach to therapy, Rogers was influenced by the relationship therapy of Jessie Taft and the thinking of Otto Rank from post-Freudian psychoanalytic positions.

Whilst it is within attachment, psychodynamic and humanistic theories that we find the core base of explanatory theory regarding the developmental relationships essential to human beings, we also discover strong echoes of these themes playing key roles within therapy-based theories from other orientations. From within the CBT theoretical umbrella, we find very clear reflection of the value of empathic attuned acceptance, by others and of ourselves within Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy and particularly Compassion Focused Therapy. The importance of emotional needs being met in childhood, and the damaging consequences if they are not, is powerfully evident within Schema Therapy; the damaging developmental impact of invalidating environments as opposed to the validating context of empathic attunement is a core aspect of Dialectical Behavior Therapy theory; and empathy, validation and compassion are valued within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Behavioral Activation and Functional Analytic Psychotherapy. In addition, Constructivist Psychotherapy strongly asserts the importance of empathic encounter. Overall, we might say that the strongest and brightest overlap of our theatre spotlights, involving all of our major approaches, is generated by the relational context of our human psychological development.

## Core Psychological Constructs

It is being assumed in this work that conceptual overlaps identified across the psychological constructs of our major theoretical perspectives represent instances of theoretical triangulation in relation to those constructs, and in instances of substantial overlap, the judgement is being made that they are addressing the same entity, whatever term they may be using to refer to it, with conscious mind automatically being recognized by all perspectives.

The unconscious mind of psychodynamic and analytic theory is assumed to be the same aspect of mind that contains the latent schemas of cognitive therapy, the complex learning histories and the processes of classical and operant conditioning of behaviourism, and the hidden painful experiences referred to by therapies within the CBT theoretical umbrella. The defence mechanisms of psychodynamic theory are assumed to be referring to the same phenomena as the experiential and emotional avoidance of more recent behavioural perspectives, the security operations incorporated into the functioning of cognitive-interpersonal cycles, and the unconscious self-protective processes of Constructivist Psychotherapy. The schemas of self and others of cognitive therapy theory are assumed to be referring to the same psychological construct as the internal world of object relations of psychodynamic theory, the internal working model of attachment theory, and the learning histories of behaviourism. Similarly, the relationship between therapist and client in humanistic client-centred therapy is assumed to be referring to the same relationship as the secure attachment relationship of attachment theory, the relational component of the good-enough maturational environment of Winnicott, the mirroring relationship of self-psychology, and the empathic/validating relationships of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, Compassion Focused Therapy and Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

On this basis, conscious mind, unconscious mind, psychological defences, unconscious internal models of self, others, relationships and the outside world, and the constructive developmental relationship are identified here as representing five core psychological constructs whose validity is supported by theoretical triangulation.

## Summary

In this chapter, eleven aspects of theory demonstrating substantial overlap across our five major approaches to psychotherapy have been identified. Eight have been judged to overlap across all five approaches, and three across four of them. Five elements of theory have been proposed as core psychological constructs that are validated by this theoretical triangulation.

In Chapter 16 we will explore the ways in which our understanding of these five core constructs may each be advised by an integrative synthesis of the associated compatible differences that each theoretical position has to offer.