

KEY CONCEPT: PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Concept origins

Developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founding moment of psychoanalysis is typically associated with Freud's self-analysis, commenced in 1897 following the death of his father. A series of key texts from this period, beginning with *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer and Freud, 1893–1895), the seminal *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), and then works on **sexuality**, jokes, parapraxes ('Freudian slips'), and other topics, ensued, in which basic tenets were outlined. These depicted psychoanalysis as a way of investigating and understanding the mind (the Greek *psyche* referring to soul), much of which it depicted as unconscious to both the individual and the wider world, with mental conflict being ubiquitous, and its life driven by sexual and aggressive instincts, which were often expressed as wishes, dreams and fantasies. The early psychoanalytic emphasis on sexuality and repressed mental contents gave rise to much popular opposition, conflicting as it did with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century values, while others criticised its subjectivity and methodology. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis influenced, not only much of the rise of psychological therapies and counselling, but would also become an important tool for understanding **culture**, arts and **humanities**, while offering a liberating model for many involved in **alternative education**.

Current status and usage

Like other **disciplines**, psychoanalysis has considerably changed and developed over its history. An important turning point towards contemporary psychoanalytic thinking began with the introduction of the structural model (Id, Ego and Super-Ego) of the mind by Freud (1923). This subsequently developed into a profound focus on **relationships**, both in the social world and

as internalised object-representations, as key drivers of human action. While psychoanalysis is now an umbrella concept, incorporating many divergent models (Frosh, 2012), this emphasis on relationships, the subjective meanings constructed within them, and struggles for freedom and expression are part of their common focus. While its strict use—of long duration and commitment on an analysand's part—is in decline as a therapeutic option, in the face of psychopharmacology and very brief forms of therapy, psychoanalysis continues to exercise a significant influence within intellectual and academic circles (Bell, 1999). Within education, psychoanalytic ideas offer profound ways of approaching its relational and affective dimensions, while challenging repressive and alienating practices (Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al.*, 1999; Youell, 2006; Willoughby and Demir Atay, 2016).



Popular depictions of psychoanalysis concentrate on it as a form of psychological treatment, but it can be additionally positioned as a body of knowledge of the mind and human **culture** and as a research activity (Bell, 1999). Typically, it concentrates on aspects of experience that are consciously unknown, through repression or various forms of denial, for example, and seeks to make these conscious. Our subjectivity and everyday human experience can thus be expanded, allowing greater freedom of action and life satisfaction. Psychoanalysis can allow educationalists one way of beginning to enquire into hidden aspects of human experience, whether those relate to an individual, a **class**, a total institution or wider **society**. The results of such enquiries can be unsettling. Freud (1907) saw traditional education as part of a 'civilizing' process that often entails the repression of spontaneity and the creation of emotional inhibitions. Within the **curriculum**, Freud regarded religious instruction as particularly problematic, while inadequate sex and relationship education compounded problems. Simply put, education can be dangerous to your emotional health. In such cases, psychoanalysis could offer a limited 'after-education' (Freud, 1913; Britzman, 2003), seeking to undo the excesses of an individual's earlier experiences, here including their toxic education. The challenge, of course, and Freud saw this clearly, was how to bring about systemic change in the education system.



Within **alternative education**, psychoanalysis has had a wider impact, its influence on the thinking of A.S. Neill at Summerhill School being perhaps one of the best-known examples (Bailey, 2013). However, Neill's model included ideas from non-psychoanalytic sources and few would thus regard Summerhill as a test case for psychoanalytic educational ideas. More generally, psychoanalysis has been used within **critical theory** and critical **education studies** (Appel, 1996), not so much as a utopian model for **schooling**, but as a means for interrogating **ideology** and opening up a reflective space on existing educational **praxis**. Such usage may be indirect or inexplicit. For example, when Althusser (1971, p.161) hypothesises that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects', he is implicitly drawing on ideas from his own psychoanalytic formation with Rene Diatkine and Lacan. Similarly, Gramsci's important ideas on ideology may be elucidated using psychoanalytic insights into the ways in which we sustain incompatible and conflictual thoughts in our minds, using dissociation, negation and other coping or defence mechanisms.



Psychoanalysis is a site of contest. It is disputed both from within (and thus has multiple divergent sub-types, e.g., Freudian, Kleinian, Lacanian, Object Relations Theory, Self-Psychology, Ego-Psychology, **Attachment** Theory, etc.) and without, having numerous philosophical and scientific critics. Robinson (1993), however, argues that these latter critiques tend to be poorly founded. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on students to question and evaluate this as much as any other tool they may use in educational **praxis**. This imperative comes from academic formation, **identity**, and reflective practice: processes that indelibly carry the imprint of psychoanalysis. Taking these issues up from the point of view of the **learning** and **teaching** relationship, we may here use Bion's (1962) psychoanalytic model of mental development to highlight one such understanding of their affective foundations. Bion argues that these essentially interpersonal processes entail repeated meaning-conferring cycles of projection, containment and transformation of psychic elements into higher-order thoughts. In a way reminiscent of Vygotsky's more **social constructivist** model, Bion proposes that it is the significant other's developed capacities for thought that allows them (traditionally the infant's mother, but in this case, the person in the position of the **teacher**) to both witness and assist the child in the painful and uncertain process of learning from emotional experience. Transposing Bion's ideas to education contexts, Alcorn (2010, 2013), and others (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Youell,

2006; Archangelo, 2007, 2010; Mintz, 2014) have increasingly explored defences against thinking, learning and academic engagement. While such work is very promising, its extension within the standards-driven climate will be challenging.

Questions to consider

1. Is it important to know about psychoanalysis to be a good **teacher**?
2. Can we compare psychoanalysis with other models of the mind?
3. Considering Freud's ideas on education and the '**hidden curriculum**', is education consciousness raising or a form of repression?
4. What might a truly psychoanalytically informed **school** look like?
5. How might psychoanalysis help us understand and address barriers in **learning** and widespread student disaffection?

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