"An accessible and insightful exploration of working with complexity through a psychodynamic lens. Rich case studies bring theory to life and the inclusion of a clear and helpful glossary strengthens understanding of key concepts, supporting deeper reflection on what may be happening beneath the surface. This is a valuable and timely read."

Dr Tracey Williams, principal educational psychologist, Brighton and Hove, UK

"The helpful definitions, analysis, and interpretations in this work guide readers into considering how they might also incorporate psychoanalytical thinking. It is demonstrated that assessment incorporates these concepts, informing understanding, formulation, and intervention. Particularly motivating is the guidance towards advanced freeing of our imagination and creativity through reflection on contributions from great thinkers in philosophy, poetry, and psychoanalysis, with a hint of Indie rock on the side."

Dr Brian Davis, director Peaches Psychology Ltd; former Director for Child and Educational Psychology Professional Doctorate Training

LEARNING BEYOND REASON

Psychodynamic Case Studies in Education

Edited by

Christopher Arnold, Dale Bartle, and Xavier Eloquin

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For all the people working to improve children's lives

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.

—William James

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Introduction

Christopher Arnold

Just before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, the editors of this volume developed an earlier book proposal. The subject was the application of psychodynamically informed approaches in contemporary educational psychology. The obvious outlet for such a text was thought to be the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the proposal was submitted to it. To our surprise, the response received suggested that this was not an appropriate title for the Society, as the evidence base was not well established. The latest guidance from the World Health Organization does not include any reference to psychodynamically informed practice for the treatment of disorders (WHO, 2024). However, when the book proposal was submitted to two alternative publishing houses it was accepted quickly. The book appeared in 2021 with the title *Learning from the Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Approaches in Educational Psychology*. It received favourable reviews. The final chapter of that book considers the nature of evidence in complex systems and suggests that understanding the features of such systems is not common in this field. It is with this in mind that this book is offered.

It may help us to consider the origins of the modern concept of evidence. We can find these back in classical times. Understanding the

underlying principles can reveal both the strengths and difficulties that envelop our thinking.

The conventional understanding of the scientific method can be traced back to the time of the ancient Greeks with writers such as Aristotle, Pythagoras, Euclid, and Archimedes, among others. One of the problems that they tried to understand came from astronomy. While most of the stars remained fixed in the skies, some moved. The ancient Greek word *planētēs* means "wanderer" and refers to the movement of the object in the sky. The assumption by most of the thinkers of the time was that the Earth was fixed and that objects revolved around it. This included the sun, moon and stars, but the planets seemed to move in a way that was predictable, but it was difficult to fathom the rules that governed these paths. Mathematics was thought to offer insights into the patterns of movement.

The wisdom of the ancient Greeks was much admired in many European states, and at the beginning of the fourteenth century, artists, scientists, and musicians worked on rekindling the knowledge and approaches of the ancients. The Renaissance (or "rebirth") was the movement that aimed to understand and build on their work. There were, however, some significant differences between the beliefs of the ancient Greeks and, say, the Italian Catholic Church based in Rome. One such difference came from religious beliefs. In ancient Greece, there were multiple gods, which an individual could follow and worship. In Renaissance Italy, there was just one God, and the Catholic Church held a strong belief that the words of Scripture offered the only truth available. This was a problem for scientists using new tools to explore the universe. The centre of the Catholic Church was the Vatican and the pope. The dominating group here were the Jesuits, and they held the fundamental belief that Scripture in the Bible was the only truth and should be taken literally.

The belief that the Earth stood still and that the sun and stars moved around the Earth was widespread. The world that we inhabit doesn't feel like it is moving; however, the movement of the planets was difficult to explain without extremely complex mechanisms. The ancient Greeks did consider the proposition that the Earth went round the sun, but it didn't attract much attention. Thinkers in the early Renaissance were again trying to understand the movement of the planets. In the

fifteenth century, a Polish polymath, Nicolas Copernicus, developed the theory that the Earth went round the sun, a heliocentric theory. This was dismissed by the Church, but new tools for exploration were being developed, and in particular an Italian scientist, Galileo Galilei, found that a new invention from the low countries (the Netherlands) called a telescope created images that no one previously had seen. Although he didn't invent the telescope, he was probably the first person to use such a tool to look carefully at the skies. He saw craters on the moon, satellites around Jupiter, and spots on the sun. Scepticism was rife, and the sun spots were attributed to blemishes in the instrument. The sun was created by God and therefore pure. Spots could not be part of the Creator's plan. However, the suggestion that the Earth went round the sun was one that Galileo found compelling even if it was at odds with the strongly held beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Galileo was not to be bullied by these beliefs, so he developed two principles that are still in use in science and psychology.

Principle 1: Scientific explanations need to be independent of the observer. Two or more observers see the same thing.

Principle 2: Scientific explanations of phenomena need to be independent of time. If you set up the same conditions at the beginning of a study, you will get the same results at the end if the study is repeated.

These principles are used today in psychology in the development and evaluation of instruments. We talk of "inter-observer reliability" and "test-retest reliability" when evaluating tests and other tools. High measures of both are taken as positive indicators that the instrument is good and will reveal information that is worthy of public use.

We locate educational psychology in the social sciences. While Galileo's first principle is probably easy to apply, his second is more problematic. People are complex, and in most naturalistic settings, exactly repeating the initial conditions of a situation is not possible. A more useful framework for analysing human behaviour respects the complexity and understands the limitations of the second principle.

Galileo's intention was to create an unambiguous way of understanding the world. Evidence transcended both observers and time. These principles still pervade our work.

It wasn't until the second half of the last century that mathematicians began to study complex systems and the ways that they can move from one state of stability to another. The term "chaos" is used in a variety of ways, including a formal mathematical set of rules collectively named "chaos theory". For readers unfamiliar with these phenomena, we reproduce the following information in Box 1 from the companion book *Learning From the Unconscious*.

Box 1 Conditions for non-linear change and associated phenomena (C. Arnold, 2002)

Non-linear change arises from the following conditions:

- There are at least three similarly empowered elements, although there can be many more.
- These elements learn iteratively. In other words, the output from one learning cycle acts as the input to the next.
- The elements exist in an ecology of finite resources: if one element gains resources, it is at the expense of the others.
- There are no large-scale forces or preset architecture applied to the system.

When the above conditions are met, some of the following phenomena may be found:

- Periods of apparent stability, followed by periods of significant change.
- Small changes either side of a large transition—known as "chaotic markers".
- Predictability is finite and the term "prediction horizon" is applied.
- Non-linear change—a relationship in a system in which the dependent variable is affected by the independent variable in a non-proportional way, or a linear increase in one variable corresponds with a non-linear change in another (Van Geert, 1994).
- Bifurcations—the sudden appearance of qualitatively different solutions to the same problem.
- Strange attractors—unseen features which influence elements of the system in systematic ways. For example, the path of a moth around a single light bulb may not touch the bulb, but the influence is clear.
- Fractals. Processes or transformations which occur at different level or locations in a system (Mandelbrot, 1975, cited in Gleick, 1987).

It is important to understand that chaos has been applied to systems with random features. This is not a feature of the kinds of systems being described here. While there may be random events, the systems are subject to deterministic rules. What singles these systems out is their complexity and instability, both of which result in individual (and unique) presentations.

A number of social scientists have grappled with the absence of the possibility of accurately reproducing conditions surrounding events and actions in social situations. These include Pawson and Tilley (1997) as set out in their book on *Realistic Evaluation*, *Appreciative Inquiry* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), and a range of ways of evaluating qualitative data, including "reflexive text analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Each of these apply pragmatic but systematic methods for evaluating systems. But there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. While the Galilean principle of independence of *time* may not apply, the principle of independence of *observer* can. Implicit in using the scientific method is measurement, and measurement is a feature of evaluating psychodynamic interventions.

Aafjes-van Doorn and Prout (2022) describe a study into attitudes towards evidence-based practice (EBP) in doctoral students following a course of psychotherapies from different orientations. They found that the attitudes towards EBP in psychodynamically orientated practice improved over time. The greatest gains were found in the group previously more positively orientated towards cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) than the others. This suggests that when evidence for efficacy of psychodynamically orientated practice is presented in a systematic way, practitioners view it more positively. It implies that there is a lack of consideration of evidence in these approaches.

When evidence for the efficacy of other treatments, such as CBT, is available when used to help people with a generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), only 57% reported improvement after one year (Probst, Vîslă, & Flückiger, 2022). Other studies report similar findings (e.g. Newman et al., 2013).

We suggest that the statement cited earlier by the BPS that the evidence base for psychodynamically informed practice is weak has to be considered alongside the evidence base for other therapies

and interventions. There seems to be no magic bullet for all psychological ills.

Each approach has its own theory base and ways of evaluating efficacy. No doubt proponents of each school will emphasise different (and perhaps unique) aspects of their therapies. Some are more easily measured than others, but the role of *insight* is not often raised. De Jong et al. (2020) set out an evaluation of a programme which does use insight as a key component of their approach. Their data suggest similar percentages of clients reporting positive outcomes as those cited above.

This book offers five case studies. Each one takes a challenge for young people and those working with them. Each one sets out the challenge, an analysis from a psychodynamic perspective, and an intervention based on this. The outcomes are included.

Three of the case studies are based around individual students or young people, while two involve groups of adults involved in working with young people.

Chapter 1 by G. Ellis gives an overview of the approaches when applied to individual case work.

Chapter 2 by Fleming and K. Ellis outlines the insights and utility of these approaches when applied to a young person not attending school. This phenomenon is now described as emotionally based school non-attendance or EBSNA.

Chapter 3 by Ahmed and Reynolds describes the utility of projective techniques when used to facilitate communication with a young person with multiple social challenges.

Chapter 4 by Eloquin takes a psychodynamically informed view of a difficult whole-school situation. This includes an analysis of complex relationships in a school which specialises in meeting the needs of some very troubled and troubling children.

Chapter 5 by Bartle describes a technique for use with groups of adults working with young people. The chapter both describes the technique and presents the kinds of insights that arise out of the application of these methods.

Each of the chapters focuses on the unique contributions of psychodynamically informed theories and techniques. We aim to highlight their utility and humanity in difficult situations involving young people.

But we hope that the accounts go further than this. We first offer an analogy found in music.

We discussed the legacy of Galileo's struggle with the Vatican earlier in this introduction. A contemporary development was in the arts, and in particular attempts to discover the ancient Greeks' theatrical activities that were able to "move the whole man". Composers such as Monteverdi, among others, started to write music theatre; we now call these "operas" (Arnold, 1974).

The structure of music theatre (or opera) has its roots in two traditions. Plainsong was (and still is) a form of simple tunes used to convey biblical texts. This led early composers to a form known as monody, which is used to tell the story or convey conversations between the characters in the drama. In music theatre, this developed into recitative, a form in which the words are paramount, with little in the way of formal tunes. As a contrast, arias are tuneful developments of folk songs. They are complex and aim to resonate and communicate complex emotions, with the aim of evoking similar emotions in the audiences. They are generally the most beautiful parts of the drama.

We hope that this volume permits space for the reader to reflect on any emotional responses to the situations described in the case studies. Let this book contain both recitatives and arias of the accounts and stories of those described within.