

An Integrative Theory of Psychotherapy: Research and Practice

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A dual-process personality theory and supporting research are presented. The dual processes comprise an experiential system and a rational system. The experiential system is an adaptive, associative learning system that humans share with other higher-order animals. The rational system is a uniquely human, primarily verbal, reasoning system. It is assumed that when humans developed language they did not abandon their previous ways of adapting, they simply added language to their experiential system. The 2 systems are assumed to operate in parallel and are bidirectionally interactive. The validity of these assumptions is supported by extensive research. Of particular relevance for psychotherapy, the experiential system, which is compatible with evolutionary theory, replaces the Freudian maladaptive unconscious system that is indefensible from an evolutionary perspective, as subhuman animals would then have only a single system that is maladaptive. The aim of psychotherapy is to produce constructive changes in the experiential system. Changes in the rational system are useful only to the extent that they contribute to constructive changes in the experiential system.

Keywords: experiential system, rational system, dual process, adaptive system, maladaptive system

A basic assumption in cognitive-experiential theory (CET) is that people operate with two systems, an experiential system and a rational system (Epstein, 2014). The experiential system is primarily nonverbal and imagistic and learns automatically from experience, normally doing so outside of awareness. The rational system is a uniquely human verbal reasoning system. Both systems are adaptive, though in different ways, and each has limitations. This article describes the conceptual foundation of CET, presents supporting research, and addresses its clinical implications.

A Cognitive-Experiential Theory of Human Functioning

To understand the experiential system, it is useful to divide it into process and content. Process consists of operating principles, while content consists of what has been automatically learned. Particularly important content includes implicit needs and beliefs automatically learned from experience. Such implicit needs and beliefs influence almost all aspects of functioning, including the interpretation of events, automatic thoughts, feelings, conscious thinking, and behavioral tendencies.

Experiential System—Process

There are three important ways humans and other higher-order animals automatically learn from experience: classical conditioning, instrumental/operant conditioning, and observational learning (i.e., modeling; Epstein, 2014). The different learning methods comprise a single system because they all serve a common purpose. That is, regardless of how we learn, if we feel good or bad, it reinforces an implicit need and/or belief. This is fundamentally different from classic learning theory that narrowly links reinforcement to modify-

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