

Development And Psychopathology: Studies In Psychoanalytic Psychiatry



Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome 2017; volume 20:3-11

The contributions of Sidney J. Blatt: a personal and intellectual biography

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ABSTRACT

Sidney J. Blatt was a major figure in psychology and psychoanalysis. As a psychoanalyst, he was both a master clinician and a leading researcher in personality theory, personality development, psychopathology, personality assessment, and psychotherapy. Best known for his two-configurations model of personality, he was the author or coauthor of more than 250 articles and 18 books and monographs. This paper describes his three main contributions to our understanding of personality, both normal and abnormal, and clinical change: the two-configurations model, the cognitive morphology of mental representation, and the theory of internalization. The implications of these three concepts for psychotherapy research are delineated. Also discussed in this paper are the formative experiences, personal and intellectual, that influenced his ideas. Early experiences of loss are highlighted as crucial to Blatt's understanding that some experiences of depression, and therefore some aspects of personality development and functioning, are rooted in relational issues, not only loss but attachment more generally, rather than in issues of guilt, self-criticism, and self-definition.

Key words: Two-configurations model; Cognitive morphology; Mental representation; Internalization; Object relations; Personality assessment.

Introduction

Within the field of clinical psychology, contributors who are both psychoanalysts and leading empirical researchers are exceedingly and increasingly rare. Yet one figure who made extensive contributions as an analytic clinician, as a researcher, and as a theoretician was Sidney J. Blatt (1928-2014). In addition to being trained as a psychoanalyst, he conducted extensive research on personality development, psychological assessment, psychopathology,

and psychotherapeutic outcomes. In contemporary times, psychology is a field divided into specialties and subspecialties, but in a career spanning more than five decades, Blatt made contributions to multiple subdisciplines within psychology, crossing boundaries between specialty areas as if those boundaries were simply not there at all. Chief of the Psychology Section in the Department of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine, he authored or coauthored more than 250 articles and 18 books and monographs. A wide-ranging intellect, he made contributions not only in psychology but also in art history, with a particular focus on the role of spatial representation in art (Blatt & Blatt, 1984). He is perhaps best known for his two-configurations model, according to which personality forms along two developmental lines, relatedness and self-definition (e.g., Blatt, 1974, 1995b, 2008; Blatt & Blass, 1990; Blatt & Levy, 2003; Blatt & Luyten, 2011; Blatt & Shichman, 1983; Luyten & Blatt, 2013). In formulating this model, as in all of his contributions, he remained committed to the proposition that it is not only possible but also essential to investigate psychoanalytically derived hypotheses through rigorous empirical science.

As his earliest major theoretical statement (Blatt, 1974) indicates, Blatt started his career highly influenced by psychoanalytic ego psychology (e.g., Freud, 1965; Jacobson, 1964; Mahler, 1968; Rapaport, 1951) and cognitive developmental psychology (e.g., Piaget, 1954, 1962; Werner, 1957), and he ended it, as his later statements (e.g., Auerbach & Blatt, 2001; Blatt, 1995b, 2008; Blatt & Levy, 2003; Blatt & Luyten, 2011; Diamond & Blatt, 1994; Luyten & Blatt, 2013) demonstrate, as a relational thinker influenced by research on attachment theory; (e.g.,

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Citation: Auerbach, J.S. (2017). The contributions of Sidney J. Blatt: a personal and intellectual biography. *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, 20(1), 3-11. doi:10.4081/rpp.2017.222

Received for publication: 28 June 2016.
Revision received: 7 January 2017.
Accepted for publication: 9 January 2017.

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Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome 2017; 20:3-11.
doi:10.4081/rpp.2017.222



[Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome 2017; 20:222]

[page 3]

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