



Psychoanalytic Inquiry

A Topical Journal for Mental Health Professionals

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/hpsi20

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To cite this article: Golan Shahar & Linda C. Mayes (2025) Development as a Multi-Systemic Endeavor: Personal and Professional Reflections on S. J. Blatt's Philosophy of Development, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 45:1, 7-16, DOI: [10.1080/07351690.2025.2451007](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2025.2451007)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2025.2451007>



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Published online: 17 Mar 2025.



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Development as a Multi-Systemic Endeavor: Personal and Professional Reflections on S. J. Blatt's Philosophy of Development

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ABSTRACT

We offer personal (life-story based) and professional (theoretical, empirical) reflections on Sidney J. Blatt's *philosophy* of human development. By *philosophy*, we mean the very metaphysical assumptions about human nature and its development throughout the life span, which guided Blatt's seminal contribution to the areas of psychoanalysis, developmental psychology and psychopathology. Of the various assumptions we discuss, we title the most central one is "multi-systemic development." Namely, Blatt's thinking was adamantly broad, as he strongly believed that to understand the developing mind, one has to put together all components of the person's upbringing, personality, and life circumstances. Such holistic thinking enabled Blatt to make connections between seemingly unrelated areas of scholarship, and – in turn – to arrive at, arguably, the most comprehensive theory of psychological development in academic psychology.

KEYWORDS

Sidney Blatt; development; psychoanalysis; philosophy; object-relations

As we reflect on our respective relationships with Sid Blatt, we realize that he has not only played a central role in our lives, but that he had also taught us some valuable lessons about life-span development, which we have readily internalized into our professional work and personal lives. We title the common denominator of these lessons as "multi-systemic development." By this term, we refer to Blatt's philosophy of development which construes humans as (a) constantly evolving; (b) shaped by the interacting forces of past, present, and future; (c) repeatedly challenged by life's dialectics, i.e., seaming tensions and contradictions; (d) influenced by multiple personality systems which work in tandem. Below we explicate these themes and their manifestations in Blatt's work, and relate his philosophy of development to extant literature in psychoanalysis and developmental psychopathology.

Sidney Blatt's philosophy of human development

Humans are constantly evolving. As a student of Carl Rogers, Blatt was fundamentally optimistic about the human condition (e.g., Shahar & Mayes, 2017). For instance, in an interview with Dimitrovsky (2007), Blatt said: "Our task [in therapy] is to free the patient's natural tendency and potential to become who they are capable of becoming, like the mother with the developing child" (pp. 317–318). The underlying premise of such a statement is that humans continue to develop throughout the life span, with or without help (e.g., therapy). And indeed, Blatt was a devoted student of Erikson (1950, 1968), and in his theoretical writing he drew extensively from Erikson's life-span theory of development (Blatt, 1995, 1998, 2008).

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In what sense do people – according to Blatt (drawing from Erikson) – constantly evolve? The answer to this is clear for those cognizant about SJB's comprehensive theory of interpersonal relatedness and self-definition (by now, probably the vast majority of academic psychologists around the world). The theory, also known by "Blattians" as "the two polarities" or "anacitic/introjective," construes interpersonal relatedness and self-definition as two central trajectories of personality development that advance and augment each other (Blatt, 1974, 1998, 2004, 2008). Interpersonal relatedness pertains to the ability to attain stable and nurturing relationships, whereas self-definition refers to our ability to secure a coherent, essentially positive, sense of self (Blatt et al., 2001). Development along one of these trajectories facilitate a complementary development along the other (Blatt, 1995). For instance, when the infant learns to trust – and relate confidently with – her caregiver, she gains the experience and confidence needed for self-exploration. In turn, a more multifaceted and rich sense of self enables more complex ways of relating to others (Blatt, 1995, 2008). Accordingly, Blatt argued that each developmental step in Erikson's developmental theory (Erikson, 1950, 1968) represents either relatedness or self-definition, and that steps representing relatedness are immediately followed by steps representing self-definition, and vice versa (Blatt, 1995). Blatt's theory has inspired developmental research across the entire life-span, from birth to death (Besser & Priel, 2005; Kaminer et al., 2007).

Interaction of past, present and future: Another important manifestation of Blatt's conviction that individual develop across the life span was his view of *regression and progression* (Blatt & Ford, 1994; Shahar, Blatt, & Ford, 2003; Blatt & Shichman, 1983). As a staunch psychoanalytic thinker, Blatt believed that individuals not only progress – during healthy development and/or psychotherapy – alongside predictable trajectories, but that they also regress – at times of stress and strife – to early, predictable modes of functioning. Most importantly, Blatt believed that within the same person, regression and progression are to be expected (Blatt & Ford, 1994; Shahar et al., 2003). For instance, individuals suffering from introjective (self-critical) depression may progress out of this debilitating condition, but at other points of their lives, they may regress toward paranoid positions that manifest more extreme "introjective" concerns than those central to depression (Blatt, 1995, 2008; Blatt & Ford, 1994; Blatt & Shichman, 1983; Shahar, Blatt, & Ford, 2003).

Interestingly, a focus on individuals' future representations and goal-directed actions has permeated Blatt's work with one of the current authors, Golan Shahar. Thus, using the anacitic/introjective distinction, Blatt, Shahar, and their colleagues demonstrated that "introjectives" – i.e., individuals characterized by high self-criticism – actively contribute to their own distress by crafting malevolent goal-related future representations (for instance, goal representations that they themselves deem unattainable; Shahar et al., 2006), possibly because these future representations are based on inauthentic motivations (for instance, motivations stemming from the wish to appease others rather than from enjoying an endeavor; Shahar et al., 2003; Shulman et al., 2009). This work adds an existential twist to what Shahar and Mayes (2017) called "Blatt's Cognitive-Humanistic Psychodynamics."

Centrality of life's tensions and seaming contradictions: Central to Blatt's clinical, theoretical, and empirical work was a steadfast appreciation of life's tensions and seaming contradictions (what some would label as dialectics). Specifically, psychological health, according to Blatt, is predicated upon individuals' ability to tolerate, the tension emanating from interacting opposites. Rather than being given (or guaranteed), this ability develops (slowly, with difficulties) across the life span, and is dependent upon the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships, constitutional factors, and stressful events. Some may hear hints of other theorists such as Winnicott and Bion focusing on how, for example, a parent's ability to be present for the infant or young child, to *hold* their emotions, helps them "survive" potentially disorganizing emotions and ultimately their own capacity for emotional regulation, for tolerating distress, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Or perhaps even more profoundly, how caring relationships early in development create a *containing* environment that allows the infant and young child both to feel safe and develop as fully emotionally expressive individuals able also to tolerate fear and uncertainty.

While Blatt did not formally nod to either Winnicott or Bion in these respects, he was a developmentalist, understanding how these early relationships, whether *holding* or *containing*, are templates for relationships throughout life. But he also acknowledged what many developmental theorists do not – that throughout life, all individuals cycle between polarities of safety and danger, secure and uncertain, comfortable and disease. Indeed, the ability to cycle between these polarities but stay intact as an individual is a developmental achievement in and of itself. This cycling is the notion of dialectical thinking so central to Blatt's work. The reader familiar with Blatt's writing would readily locate the concepts of anaclitic-introjective – relatedness/self-definition – as his greatest contribution to dialectical thinking (Blatt, 1974, 1998, 2004, 2008). However, as noted elsewhere, Blatt also highlighted other important dialectics, e.g., between cognition and emotion (Blatt, 1995), pathology and strength (Shahar et al., 2003), the inner and outer world (Shahar, Blatt, et al., 2004), positive and negative aspects of therapeutic outcome and patient–therapist relationships (Blatt & Zuroff, 2005), among others.

Blatt's appreciation of, and contribution to, dialectic psychological thought has three important implications for psychoanalysis. Namely, it takes psychoanalytic theory and therapy to a more humanistic, integrative, and evidence-based position. To be able to tolerate dialectics, the individual must be able to be flexible (as in Rogers's, 1963 Fully Functioning Person) or – in Winnicottian terms – to play (Winnicott, 1971). Indeed, recent research attests to the importance of cognitive and emotional flexibility in the prevention of stress-related psychopathology such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD (e.g., Zhu & Bonano, 2017). Blatt's emphasis on dialectics renders his psychoanalytic thought more inclusive (Berman, 2017) and integrative, and as he often pointed out, an appreciation of dialectics is a theme surfacing in other psychotherapy schools of thoughts (e.g., Almagor & Ben-Porath, 2013).

Synergistic effects of personality components: Blatt's work on personality development and psychopathology highlights the notion of personality synergy, namely, that various personality components and processes work in tandem to create a gestalt, which is a person's personality organization (Blatt, 1974, 1991, 2008; Bornstein, 2006; Freud, 1961; Kernberg, 1967). In Blatt's formulation of the anaclitic/introjective distinction, each of the two personality configurations is characterized by related forms of “object relations” (i.e., mental representations of self and others), affect, motivation, and defense mechanisms. For instance, the anaclitic personality configuration is characterized by representations of others as absent and abandoning, and by defense mechanism characterized by anger suppression (e.g., turning against the self), which prevent “making a mess” and propelling others to leave. Similarly, the introjective configuration is characterized by representations of others as punitive and judgmental, rendering the self as inferior, and by “counteractive” defense mechanisms aimed at evacuating the self from the aforementioned painful position of inferiority (e.g., projection, see Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Importantly, changes in the anaclitic and introjective configuration in the course of both development and treatment entail coordinated changes in all segments of personality functioning (for a research demonstration, see Shahar et al., 2003).

Bornstein (2006), has proposed a specific label for the notion of personality components and processes working in tandem:

“In theory, the 3 key constructs in the psychodynamic model should covary in predictable ways: High levels of ego strength should be associated with mature defenses and healthy introjects whereas low levels of ego strength should be associated with comparatively immature defenses and malevolent introjects. Although relatively few investigations have addressed this issue directly, extant data generally support the psychodynamic “covariation hypothesis” (e.g., Auerbach & Blatt, 2002; Gordon, 2001; Shahar et al., 2003; Sugarman, 2000)”.

(p. 344).

In general, the idea of personality synergy has recently returned to the forefront in both psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic personality theories (see Shahar, 2018). Within psychoanalysis, see, for instance, Horowitz' (1998, 2014) states of mind, and Shahar's reformulation of Melanie Klein's notion of the positions (Shahar, 2018, 2021, 2024). Outside psychoanalysis, see

Beck's (1996) notion of modes (and its application to suicidality, see Joiner et al., 2004), and Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Personality Systems (CAPS). The common denominator of all of these theoretical formulations, strongly echoed by Blatt's work on the anaclitic/introjective distinction, is that they highlight the totality of the human *internal* situation.

Conclusions

In her treatise on the nature of development, one of the current authors, Linda Mayes, posits that "These interactive models redirect psychoanalytic theories of development toward a focus on individual patterns of adapting and maladapting and on the possibility that individuals may move back and forth between normal and abnormal modes of functioning as a consequence of differing developmental stressors and environmental conditions (Cicchetti, 1993; Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995). Development in this more contemporary view is driven in part by self-correcting forces occurring in the face of unforeseen environmental contingencies, and the individual capacity for self-correction in and of itself reflects genetic endowment and past gene-environment interactions. Instead of stages that contain the history of each preceding stage, any one pattern of ordered or disordered behavior reflects multiple transactions between biological or genetic factors and external environmental conditions and the selective loss, suppression, or enhancement of functions. An emphasis on prediction is replaced in part with an emphasis on understanding the functions that a given arrangement of behaviors attempt to serve at any one point in development. The assumption of a regular, sequenced, unfolding while still true holds less explanatory power than a model of probabilistic change in which no one event or state is primary and past history is, at least in part, rewritten at each new stage." (Mayes, 1999, pp. 181–182).

The above paragraph is strikingly consistent with Blatt's philosophy of development as involving a situation that imbues complexities, (seeming) contradictions, a dialectics involving the normal and abnormal (see also Shahar et al., 2012), and time-traveling along past, present and future. This consistency between Mayes' treatise and Blatt's work is to be expected, however, in light of their close relationship. That Shahar, who enjoyed the mentoring of both Blatt and Mayes, has attempted to extend this line of thought is also to be expected (e.g., Shahar, 2018; Shahar, Cross, et al., 2004).

Complexity is a very powerful vector, one that has the ability to take hold of its own creators. This, too, is arguably the case with Blatt's theoretical work. Thus, while Blatt was known for his suspicion toward biological/neuroscientific explanations of psychological processes, in his latest work – primarily with Patrick Luyten – Blatt increasingly appreciated the potential contribution of biology and neuroscience to the understanding of personality development, primarily work that focused on the anaclitic and introjective configurations (Luyten & Blatt, 2011, 2013; see also Mayes, 2003). This added dimension to the thought of Blatt and "the Blattians" promises to move forward a multifaceted science of developmental psychopathology, which is itself a form of poetry.

Sid Blatt was also dedicated to literature and the arts. In 2011, one of us, Shahar, an amateur poet, published – in Hebrew – a book of poems titled *Psicho-Al-Na-Liza*. In Hebrew, this misnomer includes a skeptical, albeit fascinated, attitude toward psychoanalysis: *Psichoanaliza* in Hebrew is psychoanalysis, whereas *Al-Na* in Hebrew is "please don't." In the book, the author's attitude and exchange with psychoanalysis is described through focal nodes in his autobiography. Perhaps, the most important focal node is Shahar's relationship with Sidney Blatt. This relationship was all-encompassing, and included Blatt's role as Shahar's most important mentor (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJAA_LRb37Q), their shared passion for Israel (they worked together in both the USA and Israel, and Israeli clinical psychology has been, and still is, profoundly influenced by Sid's writings, see Shahar et al., 2007), and Blatt's role as Shahar's personal role model and confidant in family and other personal matters. This multi-systemic relationship between Blatt and Shahar is depicted in the following poem, from the book, translated into English for this article by Shahar:

Who killed softkid?

1. The Crime.

Who killed

softkid?

His body is still lying

Unperturbed

On the beach

Bordering my run-down

Home town.

2. Daunt.

Daunt,

I am serving sentence on your couch

for having killed

a little kid

Thirty-five years ago.

Well, it's not like I really killed him.

Worse,

I abandoned him along the road

Told him to manage by himself, that

I will come back for him shortly.

I then went on, roaming roads

Slashing dragons

Saving at least

Three witches

pardon,

princesses.

In brief, while ***softkid*** was changing hues

I was specializing-blues.

3. *"I then went on, roaming roads"*

Come now, ***Lielle***, my little girl

Let us grab Saturday morning's car, and

Roam roads.

I promised grandma to be there on time

And ***softkid*** to return to the scene-of-the-crime.

As we cross the ***Negev Desert***

Sheep, rebelling against their Shepherd, will greet us.

Three camels will chase our car

Imploring your smile.

We might let one in

So as to sit next to you.

As you read ***Dr. Seuss*** out loud

I'll pretend I'm not listening.

You will then explain

All about "The Poor"

And how wrong it is that they are,

We absolutely must do something about it.

The camel and I are inclined to agree.

Driving midway through my home town

I will turn the steering wheel ferociously

Up.

Spearing skies
 Roaring the **Atlantic**
 We will then navigate toward **New England**,
 Descending into **New Haven**.
 The trees are bloodless there this time of year.
 Just like when you were born.

Your hospital is located
 Right near your adopted grandfather's office
 We must step in
 Say hello.
 You see, years ago
 I served there as a gladiator.
 And I'm still here.

Hence, **JS1**
 The stern looking, Greek-Italian-American,
 Business manager
 Who, years ago, told me I am hopelessly impertinent
 Is going to embrace me fondly.
 "... just came over to check on you"
 I'll smile, provokingly.
 "... just to make sure you are not causing trouble ..."
 "I always do" she will smile back
 "Though who cares about you. Just let me know
 How's the little girl"
 "See for yourself" I will introduce you
 "We also brought a camel with us"

The Department's corridor will stand still
 As you hide behind me shyly.
 I hate to break it to you, **Lielle**,
 But we are so much alike.
 "Where is **Big S?**"
 "He's in his office, waiting for you."
 Step in, **Little S**"
 Winks the Greek.

We will then pass through **JS2**
 Unlike her friend, she is ever smiling
 "Hello-Golan-good-to-see-you-how's-Rachel-how's-the-little-girl?"
 "See for yourself. We also brought a camel with us"

However, she is already on the move
 Opening the door leading to the office
 of the person who opened doors for me,
 who is waiting for me, hand over fist,
 Smilingly,
 Knowingly.

"Hello **Cookie**" he says
 He called you that from day one.
 You are doing the disappearing act again
 And I am mentioning the camel again
 But who cares.

"We are on our way to my home town"
 I explain
 "and are just stopping by
 So that I can
 enumerate
 your serious theoretical mistakes
 see, that is what you're paying me for, and
 we wouldn't want you to feel too good about yourself
 now would we."
 His smile widens.

On the way back from **New Haven**
 We pass through **Rehovot**
 You ask
 "Da-ddy, why do they call you
 Impertinent Golan"
 "Oh," I respond
 "This is just a nickname
 Like **Cookie**"

We reach Kaplan Hospital
 And I introduce you to **Feldi**
 "We also brought a camel with us"
 But **Feldi** is just looking at you with amazement.
 Fifteen years ago he was my mentor
 And now he is serving as my mentor.

Feldi was the one introducing me to **Daunt**
 Fifteen years ago.
 I kidnapped her and held her captive
 inside my memory
 For the post-dragons period.
 She resides in Rehovot
 And the time has come.

"We also brought a camel with us!"
 But **Daunt** and **Lielle** are just looking at each other
 Patient-
 ly.

"Da-ddy, are we in there yet?"
 "See, this is grandma's house," I point
 "This is where it all started."
 And we take the elevator.
 "Grandma!" you bolt
 "Look at my painting,
 where are my presents?"

Such softness in Grandma's eyes
 Such trust
 (Such expectation)
 As argued by our great ancestor
 He/she who receives such treatment
 During the first act

Is bound to slash dragons
during the third.

"I have some errands to run," I say
And I roar toward
The beach
Bordering my run-down
Home town.

Softkid's coffin has not moved.

"Just
Tell
Me
This"

He whispers.

"Have you brought a camel with you?"

In this poem, Shahar unravels his relationship with Sidney Blatt as a central segment of his life story, one that encompasses childhood wounds (e.g., insinuated violence and financial strife; self-estrangement and resultant loneliness), present struggles (e.g., with fatherhood), fascination with the recent past (my encounter and work with Blatt), and a glimpse toward the future (beginning psychoanalytic treatment with Daunt, shortly after leaving Yale and the intense work with Blatt). This attempt at poetic narration is imbued with tensions and seeming contradictions. Thus, alongside the presence of "nurturing objects" such as Lielle's grandmother [my own mother] and "Feldi" [a friend and mentor], there is a mention of childhood trauma and present struggles. As well, the poetic narration seeks, in a somewhat surreal manner, to transcend different developmental periods and distinct geographic and cultural backgrounds.

These themes are echoed in Linda C. Mayes' account of her relationship with Sidney Blatt. She notes that Sid's concurrent investment in both work and relationships was staggering, and that he never let his work come in the way of nurturing others. Sid, according to Mayes, was perhaps the most generative person she has ever met. Whatever personal concerns he may have had, Sid was always ready to help a younger colleague, listen to their needs, and be sure they were launched. He cared deeply about others and was exquisitely in tune to every nuance of his colleagues' and friends' time with him.

Mayes notes that Sid was proud of his contributions to the field, of the rigor of his scholarship, and of how his research positively impacted patients. Clinical work was profoundly important to him, and his sensitivity as a clinician came through in all he wrote and spoke about. He was deeply moved when his patients discovered new insights and when they were willing to stay on the journey even when they struggled. In his last few years, Linda and Sid met regularly for lunch planning writing projects, speaking about research Woven through those conversations about adult development was the harmony offered by the love of Sid's life, Ethel, and his devotion to her as she disappeared into the quiet solitude of Alzheimer's. Perhaps, Ethel was the wellspring of his deep caring for all those around him for his capacity for love seemed endless. That he was still working with younger colleagues on papers and having regular phone calls up to the day of his death is not only so like Sid but also so fitting. He would have never been able to say goodbye or bring any working relationships to an end. He needed to be with people, always curious, always giving, always alive. Mayes felt she learned so much from him and although their time together was only beginning, she feels it continues on in all that he wrote and in her memories.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Patient anonymization statement

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymization policy.

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