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Sidney J. Blatt Dies at 85;

Developed 'Double Helix' Theory of Depression

By BENEDICT CAREYMAY 18, 2014

Dr. Sidney J. Blatt published more than 200 papers and scores of monographs and books throughout his career. Credit Charles Gershman/Yale School of Medicine

Sidney J. Blatt, a psychologist whose theory about the origins of depression guided treatment decisions for a generation of psychotherapists and helped deepen scientists' appreciation of the diverse nature of chronic distress, died on May 11 in Hamden, Conn. He was 85. The cause was heart failure, his daughter Susan Schwab Goetsch said.

Dr. Blatt was a widely published Freudian analyst at Yale in the 1970s when he began arguing in essays and scientific reports that personality developed along two intertwined pathways, one focused on identity and the other on relationships. Disruptions in either pathway could cause identical symptoms of depression, he wrote, yet the two conditions were distinct and called for different treatment approaches. The identity-based depression — "I am a failure" — responded well to classical psychoanalysis, with the therapist as a passive listener, helping to elicit growth in an independent sense of self; the relationship-based type — "I am unlovable" — could be relieved more effectively by a more assertive therapist, guiding the formation of relationships.

Thousands of psychoanalysts integrated this theory into their practice, and its practical implications contributed to a debate about how (or if) Freud's classic approach might be adapted for fundamentally different conditions. In the 1980s and '90s, when tempers flared between these therapists and those who favored alternatives like medications or short-term talk therapy, Dr. Blatt emerged as a moderating influence, an easygoing presence who could move between opposing camps and integrate their ideas.

"He was like Joe Torre that way," said Zindel Segal, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. "He had this ability to keep a disparate group together and focused on a common goal, which in this case was getting real clarity on these subtypes of depression."

Scientists have made numerous distinctions in depression and other mood disorders since then, but Dr. Blatt's "double helix" model, as he called it, has endured. It has echoed through the scientific literature to this day, most recently in a paper published last month in The American Journal of Psychiatry on sex differences in depression (males are more likely to have the identity-related kind, females the relational).

"That idea has spread so far and wide in the field that people sometimes forget where it came from," said Dr. Andrew Gerber, a psychiatrist at Columbia University. He added, "You might even say that Sid was a pioneer in the field of personalized medicine."

Sidney Jules Blatt was born in Philadelphia on Oct. 15, 1928, and was the eldest of three children born to Fanny and Harry Blatt. At various times his father delivered milk and ran an ice cream store. He entered Penn State University in 1946, graduating with a B.S. in psychology in 1950 and an M.S. in 1952. He completed a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in personality theory in 1957 and, after a year training at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, secured a position at Yale. He completed his analytic training at the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1972. He spent the remainder of his career at Yale, serving as chief of the psychology section of the psychiatry department for almost 50 years. He was also a visiting professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and elsewhere.

In addition to his daughter Susan, he is survived by a son, David; another daughter, Judi Casey; and nine grandchildren.

Productive throughout his career, Dr. Blatt published more than 200 papers and scores of monographs and books, including “Polarities of Experience” in 2008 and “The Theory and Treatment of Depression” in 2005, which he coedited. He also remained ever loyal to his Freudian roots. He based his conclusions on case studies, observations and analyses of study data. But as a rule he avoided doing randomized clinical trials, the rigorously controlled studies considered the gold standard of evidence throughout medicine and in psychology.

“I’ve learned an enormous amount from my patients,” he said in a 2007 interview. “Therapy has been a way of being intellectually active and discovering, and at the same time caring and compassionate. I couldn’t think of a better profession.”