Parent-infant psychotherapy - Promoting parent reflective functioning and enhancing child mentalizing capacity

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Parent Infant Psychotherapy (PIP) is a relationship-based treatment for infants who are experiencing mental health problems or who are at risk for such disturbances.

PIP is a psychodynamic oriented approach. It was developed by the psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg (1918–1981), in the middle of the XX century. At this time, following a different path of Sigmund Freud, many analysts started to focus on children development and internal world. Here are some of the new authors that emphasize the crucial role of earlier relationships, namely child-parent interaction:

- **Anna Freud** – considered by some as “the mother of child psychotherapy”; she worked individually with many children and expanded her father work on defense mechanism
- **Donald Winnicott** – some of the concepts developed by this author: good enough parent, transitional object, handling and holding
- **Melanie Klein** - Paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions
- **Margaret Mahler** – separation- individuation process

Additionally, an important and still valid today theory was developed by **John Bowlby – the Attachment Theory**. Despite not being well accepted by the psychoanalytic community at that time, it was a revolutionary theory. **Mary Ainsworth**, developed the **Strange Situation**, to qualify child attachment type – a procedure widely used both in clinical and research settings. Four different attachment classifications have been identified in children:

1. **Secure**
2. **Insecure-Ambivalent**
3. **Insecure-Avoidant**
4. **Disorganized.**

It was on this fertile and changing atmosphere, that **Selma Fraiberg** developed PIP – she was the first to work with both child and mother in the same session, side by side. Fraiberg hypothesized that child signs and symptoms were the product of parents’ projections on them; those parents reenacted on their children their own past neglect and abuse experiences. Fraiberg called this **“Ghosts in the Nursery.”**

Since Fraiberg, many authors have dedicated their work to PIP – Serge Lebovici, Bertram Cramer, Palacio-Espasa, Daniel Stern, McDonough, Lieberman and Pawl, among others. One of the new concepts developed was reflective function and parental reflective function, integrated in Mentalization.

Mentalization was developed by Anthony Bateman and Peter Fonagy, being its main center Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (London, United Kingdom). Mentalization is defined as the process by which we make sense of each other and ourselves, in terms of subjective states and mental processes. This capacity is deeply dependent on early childhood experiences.

Parental reflective function is defined as the caregivers’ capacity to reflect on the child’s current mental state as well their own mental states as they affect the child’s mental states and the parent-child relationship - when it is troubled, child development is restricted. Parent Infant Psychotherapy helps the parents to better mentalize (both them and their child).

In PIP sessions, the therapist will work as a translator between parent and child – he will give meaning to actions and gestures; deconstruct wrong attributions, clarify intentions. The therapist will help, in a secure setting, the development of more coherent, accurate and predictable parents’ answers to the child needs – a better **parental mirroring function**. This is critical for the development of symbolization, emotional regulation and, consequently, mentalization.

In conclusion, PIP improves parental reflective function and consequently child emotional regulation and mental health.

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