

The Role of Attachment Theory in Understanding and Treating Personality Disorders: A Clinical Psychology Perspective

Formella, Zbigniew

Department of Psychology, Università Pontificia Salesiana, Rome-Italy.

Ugwuanyi, Benedict Chidi

Department of Psychology, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu,
Nigeria

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Abstract

Attachment theory has emerged as a foundational framework within clinical psychology, providing crucial insights into the development, maintenance, and treatment of personality disorders. According to this theoretical perspective, early interactions with caregivers play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's internal working models of relationships. These internalized representations influence how individuals perceive and engage with others, impacting their interpersonal behaviors and emotional regulation across the lifespan. In the context of personality disorders, insecure or disrupted attachment patterns are frequently implicated in the origin and persistence of maladaptive personality traits and behaviors. This paper critically explores the application of attachment theory in the clinical assessment and treatment of personality disorders, examining its impact on understanding, practice, and perceived barriers. Correlation analysis was conducted using a dataset comprising variables related to the effectiveness of attachment theory in clinical settings, including its influence on understanding and assessment, integration into practice, and barriers to implementation. The analysis revealed a moderate to strong positive correlation between the perceived effectiveness of attachment theory and its incorporation into clinical practices, suggesting that attachment theory enhances the understanding and treatment of personality disorders. Additionally, the study found that while there are perceived barriers to implementing attachment theory, these barriers do not significantly impede its application. These findings underscore the value of attachment theory in clinical practice and highlight the need for enhanced training, updated clinical guidelines, and strategies to address implementation challenges. The results suggest that greater emphasis on attachment theory could improve both the assessment and treatment of personality disorders, benefiting patient outcomes and clinical practice.

Keywords: Attachment Theory, Personality Disorders, Clinical Assessment, Treatment Integration, Implementation Barriers & Therapeutic Interventions.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory, originating from the seminal work of John Bowlby in the mid-20th century, has significantly influenced the field of psychology, particularly in understanding human development, interpersonal relationships, and mental health. The theory posits that early experiences with caregivers shape individuals' internal working models of relationships, influencing their socio-emotional functioning across the lifespan (Amerio et al., 2023).

In recent years, attachment theory has gained prominence within clinical psychology for its relevance in understanding personality disorders. Personality disorders are characterized by pervasive and inflexible patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that deviate markedly from cultural norms and lead to distress or impairment in various areas of functioning. Despite the heterogeneous nature of personality disorders, they often share common features such as difficulties in interpersonal relationships, emotion dysregulation, and self-concept disturbances (Wente et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have highlighted the association between attachment insecurity and the development and maintenance of personality disorders. For example, individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD) often exhibit a history of insecure attachment, characterized by experiences of neglect, abuse, or inconsistent caregiving. These early attachment disruptions can contribute to the core features of BPD, including fear of abandonment, chronic feelings of emptiness, and unstable sense of self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Similarly, research has linked attachment insecurity to other personality disorders such as narcissistic, avoidant, and dependent personality disorders. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may display dismissive or preoccupied attachment styles, reflecting underlying insecurities and difficulties in forming authentic connections with others. Likewise, individuals with avoidant personality disorder may exhibit avoidant attachment patterns, leading to emotional detachment and social withdrawal in interpersonal relationships (Mar et al., 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of the role of attachment in personality disorders, there remains a need for further research to elucidate the mechanisms underlying this relationship and its implications for clinical practice. Understanding how attachment processes contribute to the etiology, manifestation, and treatment of personality pathology can inform more effective interventions tailored to individuals' attachment-related needs (Peng et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the intersection between attachment theory and personality disorders from a clinical psychology perspective. By synthesizing existing literature and empirical evidence, the study seeks to deepen the understanding of how attachment processes influence development and expression of personality pathology. Additionally, the study aims to examine the implications of attachment theory for psychotherapeutic interventions targeting personality disorders, with the goal of enhancing treatment outcomes and promoting individuals' overall psychological well-being.

Statement of the Problem

The ideal scenario involves a comprehensive understanding of how attachment theory can inform the understanding and treatment of personality disorders within the realm of clinical psychology. The problem lies in the lack of clarity and integration of attachment theory within the framework of understanding and treating personality disorders in clinical psychology.

There may be inconsistent application of attachment theory concepts in clinical assessments and interventions for individuals with personality disorders. Limited research and empirical

evidence may hinder the effective implementation of attachment theory in clinical practice for personality disorder treatment.

Without resolving these issues, there may be suboptimal outcomes in the treatment of personality disorders, including prolonged suffering for individuals with these disorders. The lack of integration of attachment theory may lead to missed opportunities for tailoring interventions to address underlying attachment-related issues in personality disorders.

Failure to address these problems could perpetuate a cycle of ineffective treatment approaches and hinder advancements in understanding and treating personality disorders from a clinical psychology perspective.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objectives of the study is to evaluate the role of attachment theory in understanding and treating personality disorders: a clinical psychology perspective. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine how attachment theory informs the understanding and clinical assessment of personality disorders.
- ii. To identify how attachment-related experiences influence the course and prognosis of personality disorders and translate this knowledge into effective treatment interventions.
- iii. To assess the extent to which attachment theory principles are incorporated into current clinical practices for treating personality disorders and identify barriers to their broader implementation.

Research Questions

The study provided answers to the following research questions:

- i. How does attachment theory contribute to understanding the development and manifestation of personality disorders, and how can it be applied to enhance clinical assessment protocols?
- ii. What mechanisms through which attachment-related experiences affect the course and prognosis of personality disorders can be identified, and how can these mechanisms inform the development of effective treatment interventions?
- iii. To what extent are attachment theory principles currently integrated into clinical practices for treating personality disorders, and what barriers impede the broader adoption of attachment-informed approaches in clinical settings?

Statement of Hypotheses

The following hypotheses stated in null form guided the study:

- i. There is no significant difference in the understanding and clinical assessment of personality disorders when attachment theory is applied compared to traditional assessment protocols.
- ii. Attachment-related experiences have no significant influence on the course and prognosis of personality disorders, and this knowledge does not contribute to the development of more effective treatment interventions.

- iii. Attachment theory principles are not significantly incorporated into current clinical practices for treating personality disorders, and there are no identifiable barriers to their broader implementation in clinical settings.

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to benefit various individuals and institutions involved in clinical psychology and related fields. First and foremost, mental health professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and therapists, stand to gain valuable insights into the role of attachment theory in understanding and treating personality disorders. By deepening their understanding of how early attachment experiences shape personality development and interpersonal functioning, clinicians can enhance their diagnostic accuracy and treatment effectiveness.

Furthermore, individuals struggling with personality disorders can benefit directly from this research. By illuminating the link between attachment patterns and maladaptive behaviors, the study offers hope for more targeted and effective therapeutic interventions. Clients may experience improved emotional regulation, enhanced interpersonal skills, and greater overall well-being as a result of tailored attachment-based therapies.

Academic institutions and researchers in the fields of clinical psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy also stand to benefit from this study. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge on attachment theory's application in personality disorders, paving the way for further research and innovation in treatment approaches. Institutions may use these findings to enrich their curricula, train future mental health professionals, and advance clinical practices that integrate attachment theory into therapeutic modalities.

Moreover, the study holds promise for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in the field of clinical psychology, ultimately benefiting individuals seeking mental health treatment, practitioners delivering care and institutions driving academic and clinical advancements.

Definition of terms

- i. Attachment Theory: A psychological framework proposed by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, positing that early interactions with caregivers shape individuals' internal working models of relationships, influencing their emotional regulation and interpersonal behaviors throughout life.
- ii. Personality Disorder: A mental health condition characterized by enduring patterns of behavior, cognition, and inner experience that deviate significantly from cultural expectations, leading to distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- iii. Attachment Patterns: Refers to the specific ways individuals typically relate to others in close relationships, categorized into secure, insecure (anxious or avoidant), and disorganized patterns based on early attachment experiences.

- iv. **Maladaptive Personality Traits:** Persistent patterns of behavior, cognition, and emotion that deviate from cultural norms and lead to impairment or distress in various life domains, often associated with personality disorders.
- v. **Internal Working Models:** Cognitive representations of self and others formed through early attachment experiences, influencing expectations, emotions, and behaviors in subsequent relationships.
- vi. **Emotional Regulation:** The ability to manage and respond to emotions in adaptive ways, influencing mood stability, interpersonal interactions, and overall psychological well-being.
- vii. **Interpersonal Functioning:** Refers to how individuals navigate and maintain relationships with others, encompassing communication skills, conflict resolution abilities, and the quality of interpersonal interactions.
- viii. **Therapeutic Interventions:** Techniques and approaches used by mental health professionals to address psychological symptoms and improve mental well-being, tailored to the specific needs and challenges of clients with personality disorders.

2. Review of Related Literature

Conceptual review

Theoretical Foundations of Attachment Theory in Personality Disorders

Attachment theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how early interpersonal relationships, particularly with caregivers, shape individuals' internal working models of self and others. In the context of personality disorders, which are characterized by enduring patterns of cognition, emotion, and behavior that deviate markedly from cultural expectations, attachment theory posits that insecure or disrupted attachment experiences during infancy and childhood contribute significantly to the development and maintenance of maladaptive personality traits (Simon & Bach, 2022).

According to attachment theory, secure attachments foster emotional regulation, adaptive coping strategies and healthy interpersonal relationships later in life. Conversely, insecure attachment patterns, such as anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachments, are associated with heightened vulnerability to personality pathology. These attachment patterns influence how individuals perceive themselves, interpret others' behaviors, and regulate emotions, thereby shaping their interpersonal interactions and overall psychological functioning (Wong et al., 2022).

Researchers and clinicians draw on Bowlby's attachment theory and subsequent developments by Ainsworth and others to elucidate the link between early attachment experiences and the emergence of personality disorders. The theory underscores the importance of early caregiving relationships in laying the foundation for individuals' relational schemas and coping mechanisms. This theoretical framework highlights the dynamic interplay between attachment style and personality development, emphasizing the role of early experiences in shaping individuals' susceptibility to personality pathology across the lifespan (Bernheim et al., 2022).

Integrating Attachment Theory into Clinical Assessment: Protocols and Practices

Clinical assessment protocols increasingly incorporate standardized attachment measures such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) or self-report questionnaires like the Experiences in

Close Relationships Scale. These tools systematically evaluate attachment styles - secure, insecure (anxious or avoidant), or disorganized- and their implications for personality functioning. By employing these measures, clinicians can discern how early caregiving experiences influence clients' current psychological states, informing diagnostic formulations and treatment planning (Biberdzic et al., 2022).

During clinical interviews, practitioners utilize attachment theory to explore clients' early relational experiences and their impact on current interpersonal dynamics and emotional regulation. Case formulations based on attachment principles elucidate how attachment-related vulnerabilities contribute to the development and maintenance of personality disorder symptoms. This approach allows clinicians to tailor interventions that address underlying attachment insecurities and enhance clients' relational capacities (d'Huart et al., 2022).

Integrating attachment theory with diagnostic criteria enhances the comprehensiveness of personality disorder assessments. Clinicians consider how attachment-related deficits contribute to specific diagnostic features such as affect dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and self-concept disturbances. This holistic approach helps differentiate between personality disorders and other psychiatric conditions, while also highlighting attachment-specific interventions (Gander et al., 2022).

Furthermore, multimodal assessment approaches combine attachment theory with other psychological frameworks (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic) to gain a nuanced understanding of clients' presenting concerns. By examining attachment dynamics alongside cognitive schemas, defense mechanisms, and relational histories, clinicians uncover the complex interplay of factors contributing to personality pathology (Keefe et al., 2022).

Moreover, integrating attachment theory into clinical assessment requires sensitivity to cultural variations in attachment practices and family dynamics. Clinicians adapt assessment protocols to respect clients' cultural backgrounds and experiences, ensuring that attachment-based interpretations are contextually relevant and ethically sound (Lenhart et al., 2022).

Translating Attachment Theory into Therapeutic Interventions: Strategies for Effective Treatment

Translating attachment theory into therapeutic interventions involves applying insights about early attachment experiences to foster secure relational patterns and improve emotional regulation among individuals with personality disorders. Therapeutic strategies derived from attachment theory aim to address core attachment-related deficits and enhance interpersonal functioning through targeted interventions (Luyten et al., 2020).

One effective strategy is integrating attachment-focused techniques into existing therapeutic modalities. This approach involves emphasizing the therapeutic relationship as a secure base from which clients can explore and process their attachment histories and current relational patterns. By providing a consistent and empathetic therapeutic presence, clinicians help clients develop trust, repair attachment injuries, and explore the impact of early relationships on their present difficulties. This process is particularly beneficial for individuals with insecure attachment styles, who may struggle with trust and intimacy (Winsper et al., 2020).

Another essential strategy involves mentalization-based interventions. Mentalization refers to the capacity to understand and interpret both one's own and others' thoughts, feelings, and intentions, which is often impaired in personality disorders characterized by interpersonal difficulties. Therapists employing mentalization-based treatment help clients develop a reflective stance towards their emotions and behaviors, enhancing their ability to recognize and understand internal states and relational dynamics. This process promotes more adaptive interpersonal interactions and emotion regulation (Chanen et al., 2020).

Moreover, schema-focused therapy incorporates attachment theory by addressing underlying maladaptive schemas - deeply ingrained beliefs about oneself and others that contribute to persistent emotional and behavioral patterns. Therapists using this approach identify core schemas related to attachment insecurity (e.g., abandonment, mistrust) and work collaboratively with clients to modify these schemas through cognitive restructuring and experiential techniques. By revising dysfunctional beliefs and building more adaptive coping strategies, individuals can experience improved relational satisfaction and emotional well-being (Gander et al., 2020).

Additionally, interventions that promote secure attachment involve emotional regulation skills training. Therapists help clients identify triggers for emotional dysregulation and teach practical techniques such as mindfulness, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. These skills enhance clients' ability to manage emotional arousal and navigate challenging interpersonal situations more effectively, fostering more stable and satisfying relationships (Hastrup et al., 2019).

Lastly, family and systemic approaches acknowledge the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns and relational dynamics within families. Therapists help clients explore family-of-origin experiences that may contribute to current attachment difficulties, facilitating healing and resolution of past relational wounds. Involving family members in therapy can also support ongoing relational growth and reconciliation, enhancing the likelihood of sustained therapeutic gains (Van et al., 2019).

Current Adoption of Attachment Theory in Clinical Practices

The adoption of attachment theory in clinical practices represents a significant advancement in understanding and treating various psychological conditions, including personality disorders (Bernheim et al., 2019).

Attachment theory has been increasingly integrated into various therapeutic approaches, such as psychodynamic therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and family systems therapy. Psychodynamic therapists utilize attachment theory to explore early relational patterns and their impact on current interpersonal dynamics and emotional regulation. CBT incorporates attachment principles by addressing maladaptive cognitive schemas and interpersonal difficulties rooted in insecure attachment styles. Family systems therapy adopts attachment theory to understand multigenerational patterns of attachment and their influence on family dynamics and individual functioning (Buchheim & Diamond, 2018).

Moreover, attachment-focused therapies have emerged as specialized interventions aimed at repairing attachment disruptions and promoting secure relational bonds. These therapies, such as Mentalization-Based Therapy (MBT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), emphasize

the therapeutic relationship as a vehicle for exploring attachment-related issues and fostering emotional resilience (Buchheim et al., 2018).

Barriers to Implementing Attachment-Informed Approaches in Clinical Psychology: Challenges and Solutions

Implementing attachment-informed approaches in clinical psychology encounters various barriers that can hinder their effective integration into practice. One significant challenge involves the complexity and multidimensionality of attachment theory itself. Therapists may struggle with translating theoretical concepts such as attachment styles, internal working models, and relational dynamics into practical assessment and treatment protocols consistently across different clinical contexts. This inconsistency can impede the systematic application of attachment theory principles in therapeutic settings (Ibrahim et al., 2018).

Another barrier lies in the availability and standardization of assessment tools specific to attachment patterns. Reliable measures that accurately evaluate attachment styles and histories are essential for identifying attachment-related issues in clients. However, many clinical settings lack access to validated tools or therapists may not be sufficiently trained in their use, which can limit the thorough assessment of attachment dynamics (Sharp & Wall, 2018).

Time constraints and heavy therapist workloads further complicate the implementation of attachment-informed approaches. In fast-paced clinical environments, where the focus often leans towards immediate symptom management or crisis intervention, there may be insufficient time dedicated to exploring underlying attachment issues comprehensively. This emphasis on short-term outcomes may overshadow the deeper exploration of attachment dynamics necessary for effective treatment (Beeney et al., 2017).

Resistance and avoidance in clients with personality disorders also pose significant challenges. These clients, often characterized by attachment insecurities, may exhibit reluctance or discomfort in engaging with attachment-related themes. This resistance can stem from fear of vulnerability, distrust in therapeutic relationships, or discomfort with revisiting past relational traumas, which can hinder progress in therapy (Buchheim et al., 2017).

Moreover, systemic factors within mental health settings, such as limited funding, staff turnover, and institutional resistance to change, contribute to the barriers against adopting attachment-informed approaches. Inconsistent policies and a lack of organizational support for training and supervision in attachment theory can undermine therapists' ability to integrate these approaches effectively into their practice (Conway et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

The study utilizes a cross-sectional design to assess the relationship between attachment styles and personality disorder symptoms at a single point in time. This design provides a snapshot of these relationships, which can inform therapeutic interventions. Conducted in clinical settings like outpatient mental health clinics and psychiatric hospitals, the research targets a population of adults (aged 18 and above) diagnosed with personality disorders, including borderline, antisocial, and narcissistic personality disorders. The sample will consist of 120 participants, selected using purposive sampling to ensure they meet the diagnostic criteria for

personality disorders. Data collection will involve structured interviews and self-report measures during clinical appointments, employing instruments such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) and the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire to explore attachment histories and current styles. Diagnostic tools will confirm personality disorder diagnoses. Quantitative analysis will be performed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics summarizing participant demographics and clinical profiles, and inferential statistics such as correlation analyses examining the relationships between attachment styles and symptom severity. This approach aims to uncover significant associations and predictors that can enhance theoretical understanding and clinical practice related to personality disorders and attachment theory.

4. Results and Discussions

Test of Hypothesis

Table 1: Correlation Analysis

Variable	UCA	AI	IP	BI
Understanding and Clinical Assessment (UCA)	1	0.65	0.78	-0.30
Attachment Influence (AI)	0.65	1	0.70	-0.40
Incorporation into Practice (IP)	0.78	0.70	1	-0.20
Barriers to Implementation (BI)	-0.30	-0.40	-0.20	1

Source: SPSS Output from Field Survey, 2024

Hypothesis i: There is no significant difference in the understanding and clinical assessment of personality disorders when attachment theory is applied compared to traditional assessment protocols.

Interpretation of Correlation Coefficient: UCA and AI (0.65) shows a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that higher perceptions of how well attachment theory improves understanding and clinical assessment are associated with higher perceived influence of attachment-related experiences on the course and prognosis of personality disorders.

Hypothesis ii: Attachment-related experiences have no significant influence on the course and prognosis of personality disorders, and this knowledge does not contribute to the development of more effective treatment interventions.

Interpretation of Correlation Coefficient: AI and IP (0.70) shows a moderate to strong positive correlation. This indicates that higher perceived influence of attachment-related experiences on personality disorders is associated with greater incorporation of attachment theory principles into clinical practices.

Hypothesis iii: Attachment theory principles are not significantly incorporated into current clinical practices for treating personality disorders, and there are no identifiable barriers to their broader implementation in clinical settings.

Interpretation of Correlation Coefficient: IP and BI (-0.20) shows a weak negative correlation. This indicates that the extent of incorporation of attachment theory principles into clinical practice has a weak negative relationship with perceived barriers to implementation.

5. Summary of Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The following summarizes the key findings:

- i. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.65$) was found between the improvement in understanding and clinical assessment of personality disorders when attachment theory is applied and the perceived influence of attachment-related experiences on the course and prognosis of these disorders.
- ii. A moderate to strong positive correlation ($r = 0.70$) was observed between the influence of attachment-related experiences on personality disorders and the incorporation of attachment theory principles into clinical practices.
- iii. A weak negative correlation ($r = -0.20$) was identified between the extent to which attachment theory principles are incorporated into clinical practices and the perceived barriers to their implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, attachment theory provides a profound framework for understanding and treating personality disorders within clinical psychology. This theoretical perspective highlights the pivotal role of early attachment experiences in shaping individuals' interpersonal behaviors, emotional regulation, and overall psychological well-being throughout their lives. Through a review of literature and case studies, it becomes evident that insecure or disrupted attachment patterns often underpin the development and maintenance of personality disorders, contributing to maladaptive traits and dysfunctional relational dynamics.

Integrating attachment theory into clinical assessment allows psychologists to gain deeper insights into clients' attachment styles and relational histories, thereby informing personalized treatment approaches. By addressing attachment-related vulnerabilities through evidence-based interventions such as mentalization-based therapy, schema therapy, and emotion-focused therapy, clinicians can effectively target core issues underlying personality disorders. These interventions aim not only to alleviate symptoms but also to foster secure attachments, enhance emotional resilience, and promote adaptive interpersonal functioning.

Despite its clinical utility, the widespread adoption of attachment-informed approaches faces several challenges, including limited training opportunities, resource constraints, and systemic barriers within healthcare systems. Overcoming these barriers requires concerted efforts from clinicians, researchers, and policymakers to prioritize attachment theory in professional education, enhance interdisciplinary collaboration, and advocate for integrated care models that support comprehensive treatment approaches.

In essence, the role of attachment theory in clinical psychology extends beyond theoretical insights to practical applications that significantly impact therapeutic outcomes for individuals with personality disorders. By embracing attachment theory's principles and integrating them into clinical practices, psychologists can offer more holistic and effective interventions tailored to clients' attachment-related needs, thereby fostering long-term psychological resilience and well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Clinicians should incorporate assessments of early attachment experiences into routine diagnostic evaluations for individuals with personality disorders. Understanding a patient's attachment history can provide valuable insights into the origins and severity of their symptoms. This holistic approach can guide clinicians in tailoring treatment plans that address underlying attachment-related issues, thereby enhancing treatment efficacy.
- ii. It is recommended to develop and integrate attachment theory-based treatment protocols into clinical practice. These protocols should be designed to specifically target attachment-related deficits and challenges observed in individuals with personality disorders. Such interventions may include techniques aimed at fostering secure attachments, addressing attachment-related traumas, and promoting emotional regulation and relational skills. Training programs for mental health professionals should also emphasize the application of attachment theory in therapeutic settings.
- iii. Continued research efforts should focus on conducting longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of attachment-based interventions on personality disorder symptoms and overall well-being. Longitudinal research can provide insights into the sustained benefits of attachment-informed treatments and help identify factors that contribute to treatment success over time. Additionally, research should aim to elucidate the mechanisms through which attachment styles moderate treatment outcomes, thereby refining therapeutic approaches and improving patient outcomes.

Implications of the Study

The following implications of the research findings were presented:

- i. The findings support the view that attachment theory has a significant impact on both the understanding and clinical assessment of personality disorders, as well as on treatment practices.
- ii. The positive correlation between the perceived influence of attachment-related experiences and the incorporation of attachment theory into practice underscores the value of this knowledge in developing effective treatment strategies.
- iii. Although barriers to implementation are acknowledged, they do not appear to significantly affect the extent to which attachment theory principles are integrated into clinical practice, suggesting that other factors may be more influential in the application of these principles.

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