

# Psychoanalytic Psychology

## **Patients' Unconscious Testing Activity in Psychotherapy: A Theoretical and Empirical Overview**

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Online First Publication, February 14, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pap0000227>

### CITATION

Gazzillo, F., Genova, F., Fedeli, F., Curtis, J. T., Silberschatz, G., Bush, M., & Dazzi, N. (2019, February 14). Patients' Unconscious Testing Activity in Psychotherapy: A Theoretical and Empirical Overview. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pap0000227>

# Patients' Unconscious Testing Activity in Psychotherapy: A Theoretical and Empirical Overview

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The aim of this paper is to present a theoretical and empirical overview of the hypothesis that patients' behavior in psychotherapy can be understood as an expression of their efforts to disprove their pathogenic beliefs by testing them in the therapeutic relationship. According to Control–Mastery Theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss, 1986, 1994), psychopathology stems from unconscious pathogenic beliefs developed in response to early traumas. Pathogenic beliefs associate the achievement of healthy goals with a variety of unconsciously perceived dangers. Thanks to the inborn human motivation to adapt to reality and to the power of adaptive unconscious mental functioning, patients come to therapy with a unconscious plan to overcome their pathogenic beliefs by testing them with their therapists. Tests are consciously or unconsciously devised actions aimed at disproving pathogenic beliefs. CMT describes two broad categories of tests: transference tests and passive-into-active tests. Tests require specific responses from the therapist to be passed. When therapists pass patients' tests, patients feel safer and may make therapeutic progress; when tests are failed, patients feel endangered and may get worse. Consistent with CMT assumptions, studies on testing have shown that a therapist passing a patient's tests is associated with immediate positive effects on the patient, but more studies are needed.

*Keywords:* Control–Mastery Theory, empirical studies, patients' unconscious plan, psychotherapy process, test

The aim of this paper is to present a theoretical and empirical overview of the hypothesis that one of the main activities of patients in psychotherapy is to test their pathogenic beliefs with their therapists. This hypothesis is one of the core concepts of Control–Mastery Theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss et al., 1986; Weiss, 1993), a relational cognitive-dynamic theory of psychic functioning, psychopathology, and psychotherapy developed and empirically tested by Joseph Weiss, Harold Sampson, and the San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group over the last 40 years.

## The Basic Concepts of Control–Mastery Theory

CMT starts with the assumption, shared by modern biology, ethology, and cognitive sciences, that all animals are motivated—actually, predisposed by evolution—to adapt to their environment and master their problems and adverse experiences. For humans, adaptation requires, among other things, the establishment and maintenance of stable relationships with relevant others and the development of a reliable set of beliefs about reality and “morality” (Weiss, 1993, p. 4).

Another fundamental assumption of CMT is that psychic functioning is basically regulated by perceptions of safety and danger (Weiss, 1990) and that humans unconsciously perform many of the same complex adaptive functions (assessing reality, developing inferences and beliefs, making decisions, establishing and pursuing goals, solving problems, planning, etc.) that they perform consciously (Bargh, 2017; Lewicki, 1986; Lewicki & Hill, 1989) and are able to exert conscious and unconscious control of their mental functioning. This “unconscious higher mental functioning paradigm” (HMFP; Weiss, 1986), together with the centrality it gives to the safety/danger regulatory principle, is compatible with the later writings of Freud (1925, 1938) and finds support in infant research, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive research (Am-bady & Rosenthal, 1992; Bargh, 2017; Chaiken & Trope, 1999;

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