

## Exploring Object Relations Theory

The Scottish psychoanalyst Ronald Fairbairn (1889-1964) was one of the leading figures in the development of the *object relations* approach within psychoanalysis. Fairbairn was particularly interested in the difficulties that many of his patients had in making 'real' contact either with him, or with anyone else in their lives. He came to describe the inner worlds of such patients as 'closed systems', in which their emotional energy was locked into relationships with internalised 'objects' (imaginary representations of significant others, such as a person's mother or father). Toward the end of his career, he characterised the aim of psychoanalysis in the following terms as one of challenging the domination of these internalised objects, and breaking through into a more authentic way of relating to others:

“the aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to effect breaches of the closed system which constitutes the patient's inner world, and thus to make this world accessible to the influence of outer reality”.

This key idea has been a cornerstone of much of the subsequent development of the *object relations* school of psychodynamic therapy.

### Learning exercise

Take a piece of paper and draw a map of the internalised 'objects' that make up your own inner world. In making this map you may find it helpful to think about the 'voices' that you hear, which tell you what to do and what not to do, and the rules and values that dominate your life: your internalised 'objects' are the sources of these voices and rules.

Once you have made this map, you may find it interesting to reflect on the extent to which it has changed over the years, and the factors in your life that have brought about this change.

You can read more about Fairbairn's ideas at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~rr322/FAIRBAIRN.html>

Further information about the object relations approach can be found at:

[http://www.psychnet-uk.com/psychotherapy/psychotherapy\\_object\\_relations.htm](http://www.psychnet-uk.com/psychotherapy/psychotherapy_object_relations.htm)

The object relations approach is explored on pages 89-95 of *An Introduction to Counselling*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.