

## A Personal Evaluation of the Psychoanalytic Approach to Psychology

### Origins and History

For many centuries, the treatment applied to those suffering mental disorders was extremely barbaric. It was thought that mental diseases were caused by demons or other supernatural forces. However, real progress in solving the origins of mental illness was achieved by the Austrian mystic and physician, Franz Mesmer. He managed to show that using the power of suggestion when in a trance-like state could cure some mental disorders. Members of the Nancy School argued that suggestion could not only cure mental illness but could also cause it in the first place.

The most influential psychoanalyst of recent times is Sigmund Freud. His name is referred to more than any other psychologists in psychology literature. He is well known for his theory on personality development. His fame rests largely on his position as the originator of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis refers to a complex set of theories about human emotional development. His fame rests largely on his position as the originator of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis refers to a complex set of theories about human emotional development and to a form of treatment based on theoretical ideas.

### Assumptions

The psychoanalytic approach is an approach to psychology which seeks to explain the unconscious mind and the influence of earlier experiences. This suggests that behaviour and feelings as adults are rooted in our childhood experiences and our behaviour and feelings are powerfully affected by the meaning of events to the unconscious mind and by unconscious motives.

Freud believed there were three major parts to personality. The largest the unconscious part, the 'id', works on animal instinct and the pleasure principle. The 'ego', which develops slightly later in life, is the conscious, problem solving part of personality which strives to please the id, and works on the reality principle. The 'super ego' is the last component of personality to develop and is concerned with moral judgement and feelings. The idea of an iceberg can be used to portray his ideas. Over two thirds of personality is said to be in the unconscious sea, most of which is taken up by the id. The third that is left is believed to be the conscious tip, ego and super ego.

In a sense, this part of Freud's thinking represents a combination of a theory of motivation, a cognitive theory and a social psychological theory. The id contains basic motivational forces; the ego corresponds to the cognitive system and the super internalises the values of family and of society in general.

## Areas of Explanation

Freud suggested that children normally go through a series of developmental stages. This was the first theory of child development.

- The first stage of the theory is the oral stage. Between the ages of 0 and 6 months, a child gains pleasure through its mouth. This stage is dominated by the child's awareness of what it wants. Too little or too much stimulation at this stage may lead to oral fixation which may eventually lead to oral dependency. A child who has too little stimulation may become pessimistic aggressive, often depressed, talk, drink and smoke and will see other people as objects to satisfy themselves. On the other hand, children who have too much stimulation will create a child who is easily fooled and have a high opinion of him/herself and will be unable to make decisions.
- The second stage, between the ages of 6 months and 3 years, is the anal stage. This stage is dominated by bowel control. The id demands immediate satisfaction (the child wants to relieve itself), however, the ego knows that the parent doesn't want this during potty training and so conflict may arise. As a result, fixation may also occur. Those who become fixated at the anal stage can become one of two types of personality. The anal expulsive personality (children who enjoy getting rid of faeces) will be overgenerous and untidy. The anal retentive personality (children who are forced to get rid of faeces) become obsessive about punctuality and tidiness and become generally miserable.
- Next comes the phallic stage between the ages of 3 and 5/6 years. At this stage, bodily satisfaction is important. However, what makes this the most important stage is the 'Oedipus complex'. Freud believed that boys unconsciously want their mother and resent their father for having their mother's love. As a consequence, in a bid to become more like his father, the boy takes on the characteristics of his father. Freud called this 'identification'.
- During the latency period, 5/6 to puberty, nothing much happens to personality development and most of the libido's energy is being used up in going to school. The child unconsciously prepares for the next major stage.
- In the genital stage, children between 12 and 18 begin to alter physically and hormones in the body increase. Children begin to have sexual feelings for the opposite sex and have 'crushes'. If fixation occurs in this stage, the adult will have difficulties in relating to the opposite sex.

### Defence mechanisms.

As we pass through the various stages, there are times when the id, ego and superego conflict. The conflicts between the pleasure, reality and morality principles will produce anxiety. To reduce this anxiety, Freud said we all had a number of defence mechanisms, ie:

- Repression – forcing painful or frightful memories, feelings and wishes out of conscious awareness and into the unconscious (motivated forgetting). According to Freud, this is the most basic and important defence mechanism and is often supported by other defences.
- Denial – refusing to accept reality, for example that you are seriously ill or that partner is unfaithful. This is considered to be the most primitive defence.
- Regression – reverting to behaviour characteristics of an earlier stage of life when no conflict or threat was present.
- Displacement – redirecting feelings or behaviour onto a substitute object or person because you cannot express them towards the real target.
- Sublimation – a variant of displacement where unacceptable impulses are channelled into a substitute activity. Therapists believe this to be a positive and beneficial defence mechanism.
- Projection – assigning your own unacceptable feelings or characteristics towards someone else, for example saying “She hates me” when your true feeling is “I hate her”.

### Personal Evaluation

It is thought that psychoanalysis has many successes to its credit. Although others had suggested that mental illness could be treated by psychological means, it was Freud who was the first to develop a systematic form of treatment for neuroses. From this a number of other psychotherapies have been devised.

Psychoanalytic theory also has had some successes. For example, the idea that childhood experiences play a part in determining adult behaviour is now commonplace but was revolutionary when Freud first suggested it, and the suggestion that much important activity occurs below the conscious level now has plenty of strong evidence to back it up.

The major problem, however, is that we do not know yet exactly why psychoanalytic therapy is effective. It is thought that what a patient says may have more to do with what the therapist says than what the unconscious mind of the client is thinking. Another problem is that Freud's theories were presented in such unscientific ways that it is always impossible to prove or disprove his theories. Numerous studies have shown psychoanalytic theory to be true but just as many have shown inconclusive evidence to support such a theory.

