

Freud claimed to have discovered ‘scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.’ What according to Freud, is the unconscious, what was its role within the human mind, and how did he set about studying it? What was scientific about his methods? What was novel about his theories and methodologies and how much did they owe to the work of others?

Freud proposed that the unconscious is a part of the mind, which is said to be inaccessible to the conscious mind but which affects behaviour and emotions. The conscious and unconscious mind can be in conflict with one another. Such conflicts overflow into the individual's behaviour for example resulting in hysteria, however such behaviours can be resolved according to Freud by bringing the memories that embody the repressed fears and conflicts into consciousness where they can be resolved.

In his theory of psychoanalysis, Freud sought to explain how the unconscious mind operates by proposing that it has a particular structure. He proposed that the self was divided into three parts: the ego the superego and the id. The id represented primary process thinking. Our most primitive need focused, gratification type thoughts. The id Freud stated, constitutes part of ones unconscious mind. It is organised around primitive instinctual urges of sexuality, aggression and the desire for instant gratification or release. The superego represented our conscience and counteracted the id with a primitive and unconscious sense of morality. This primitive morality is to be distinguished from an ethical sense, which is an egoist property, since ethics requires eligibility for deliberation on matters of fairness or justice. The superego, Freud stated, is the moral agent that links both our conscious and unconscious minds. The superego stands in opposition to the desires of the id. The superego is itself part of the unconscious mind; it is the internalisation of the worldview and norms that a child absorbs from parents and peers. As the conscience, it is a primitive child based knowledge of right and wrong, it maintains the forbidden desires specific to a child's internalisation of parent culture. In Freud's view the ego stands in between the id and the superego to balance our primitive needs and our moral beliefs and taboos. He stated that the ego consists of our conscious sense of self and world and a highly structured set of unconscious defences that are central in defining both individual differences in character or personality and the symptoms and inhibitions that define neuroses.

Therefore Freud believed that the majority of what we experience in our lives, the underlying emotions, beliefs, feelings and impulses are not accessible to us at conscious level. The role of the unconscious is one primarily of defence. Holding such impulses, desires and emotions from consciousness to avoid experiencing the anxiety that they create. Freud labelled the suppressing and forgetting of these instinctual impulses by the ego as repression. He presented the process of repression as a dynamic act of forcefully opposing there entrance to consciousness. However the holding of these desires and emotions is never fully achieved as they overflow into the conscious mind. They find indirect expression in neurotic symptoms, dreams and mental errors. Freud believed them to be the deepest sources of much of our behaviour.

Freud arrived at his theory of unconscious conflict by his study and observation of mentally disturbed patients suffering from hysteria. However he later concluded that

the clash of unconscious forces that he believed resulted in symptoms of mental disorder is also found in normal people. Their inner conflicts are under control with less resulting anxiety and fewer crippling effects but the conflicts are present nonetheless. As a result of this conclusion Freud embarked upon three main methods of exploring the unconscious. These are what Freud described as lapses of memory, slips of the tongue in everyday life and the content of dreams. Lapses of memory involve for example the momentary forgetting by the patient of a name that might bring up embarrassing memories or suffering a slip of the tongue that may reveal an underlying motive. In his exploration of patient's dreams Freud argued that dreams have a meaning that can be deciphered if one looks deeply enough. In his view dreams embody the dreamer's past and present and arise from within the subconscious. Although meaningless on the surface when understood they become comprehensible as valid expressions of an unconscious clash between competing motives. Freud acknowledged some dreams to be recounting of life events. He called these 'day residue' however in addition to this he also put forward the concept of 'wish fulfilment' in which the dreamer lives out their wishes and desires that can not be fulfilled in real life. Freud also analysed symbolism within dreams, in which some wishes can find expression in various displaced forms.

Freud's propositions of the unconscious to the field of psychology derive d from his study of patients at his medical practice. Freud developed what he called the 'talking cure' in which the patient would recall anything that came to mind, Freud meticulously recorded everything spoken and later analysed and interpreted the unconscious meaning of what was said. Freud regarded the talk of his patients as scientific data and the analytic session as a scientifically valid method of investigation. Freud intended psychoanalytic psychology to be a science and he desired to make a way for psychoanalysis to be accepted as such within the field of psychology. For Freud successful therapy was not an end in itself but continued evidence that psychoanalytic theory was true. Through his research Freud aimed to reveal physical processes as quantitative determinate states of specifiable material particles.

On the surface Freud's theory had the appearance of being strongly scientific. It has the capacity to accommodate and explain every possible form of human behaviour. However, it is precisely this factor, which has been used strongly to undermine its claim to scientific status. Karl Popper developed a criterion based on the notion that every genuine scientific theory must be testable and therefore falsifiable at least in principle. Therefore if a theory is incompatible with possible observations it is scientific, but if a theory is compatible with all possible observations it is not scientific. Therefore in relation to Freud's theory Popper's criterion would label it wholly unscientific, because the theory is compatible with every possible state of affairs, it cannot be falsified by anything since it purports to explain everything.

Further criticism of the scientific value and status of Freud's work comes from the fact that Freud himself drew conclusions from what he himself observed. Freud attempted to interpret his patient's free associations, slips of the tongue and dreams and then tried to weave them into a coherent pattern that would follow the theory. It has to be noted that one cannot draw clinical conclusions from this kind of evidence alone. Clinical practitioners cannot be totally objective, it is highly likely that themes

arising in the session that fit with the psychotherapists own view are more likely to be remembered.

An additional problem with Freud's arguments for scientific status is that the analyst's theory often determines whether a patient's statement should or should not be accepted at face value. This two-way reasoning means that it is difficult to find any form of disproof. No matter what the patient says, it will fit the analyst's interpretation.

In relation to the scientific status of the methods by which Freud used to study the unconscious, it can be concluded that Freud's work as science was seriously flawed. The methods by which Freud tried to prove his claims hold little validity, lacking a source of objective fact and often being vague and metaphorical, unclear in how they can be tested. Freud also seemed vulnerable to confirmation bias looking for evidence that would support his theory and shying away from disconfirming data.

However despite these serious criticisms of his theory Freud should nevertheless be acknowledged as one of the major figures in psychology. Despite much modification and reinterpretation of Freud's theories, the notion that there is some kind of internal conflict of which we are often unaware still stands. In relation to the work of others Ellenberger, 1970; Sulloway, 1979 pointed out that Freud was far from the first to recognise that as individuals we are often torn in different directions and that we frequently deceive ourselves about what we want. However he was the first for whom this insight was the cornerstone of an entire point of view. Freud's contribution remains, because he saw so clearly that we do not know ourselves, that we are no masters of our own souls. By pointing out this fact Freud set a task for later investigators who may ultimately succeed in revealing the causes of our behaviour.

A final novel aspect of Freud's work and a further reason as to why he deserves acknowledgement as one of the leading psychologists of his time is that he was the first to attempt to present a view of human nature that was virtually all-embracing. Freud attempted to encompass both rational thought and emotional urges. It saw humans as biological organisms as well as social beings, as creatures whose present is rooted in their past. Freud's theory has many faults however it dealt with matters of genuine human significance; it was an attempt to account for the whole of humanity.

In relation to how much Freud was influenced and built upon the work of others Freud was not first to put forward the concept of unconsciousness of mind. He knew from his study with Brentano that many predecessors – going back at least to Leibniz with his 'minute perceptions' had already postulated the existence of unconscious psychological existence. However Freud did break new ground by hypothesising specific rules for the unconscious, describing it as a lawful phenomenon. Thus his development of the concept of there being a primary process as an unconscious mode of thought characterised by displacement, was an important milestone in the history of dynamic psychology. Through Freud's life there were also important role models who inspired Freud and further those who worked along side him. In the investigation of Hysteria during the earlier days of Freud's career, a physician named Josef Breuer collaborated with Freud in developing the idea that hysterical symptoms derive from emotionally charged memories that need to be recovered. This work formed the basis of Freud's latter proposition of the unconscious and its role within the mind.

In final conclusion Freud's views in relation to the unconscious mind constitute a lifetime of work by Freud himself developed and build upon concepts already in existence, for example the work of Leibniz. Freud's theories have come under serious criticism since there proposal especially debating their scientific validity, however there is no doubt that they have influenced many theories and ideas that have been presented since. Freud showed the kinds of questions that must be answered before any psychologist can claim to have a full theory of human personality, influencing the progression of the field of psychology drastically.

References

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