

## **The Psychodynamic Perspective.**

One of the key beliefs of the psychodynamic approach is that our adult personality and behaviour are determined by our childhood experiences. Sigmund Freud chiefly initiated this approach. Although Freud continually revised many of his theories, three of them remained constant. These were; firstly, that a vast majority (about 6/7) of the mind is unconscious and contains our instincts, drives and repressed memories. The only ways to discover the contents of the unconscious mind are dream analysis, word association and hypnosis. Secondly, that the mind is made up of three parts, the ID, the EGO and the SUPEREGO. The ID works on the pleasure principle. It contains the psychic energy of all our drives, instincts and repressed memories; it requires immediate satisfaction without any regard for reality. It was referred to by Freud as, 'a cauldron of seething excitations' (cited in Hill 2001, pg 73). The EGO works on the reality principle. It aims to fulfil the ID's desires whilst keeping them in line with what is possible in the real world. The SUPEREGO pressures the EGO to keep the ID in line with moral ideology. It sets ideals and consists of the conscience, which makes us feel things such as pride and guilt. To enable the EGO to deal with the demands of the ID and SUPEREGO, it uses a number of defence mechanisms. Some of these are Regression - where we 'go back' to an earlier stage or situation that gives comfort. Denial – where we refuse to accept the 'truth'. Repression – where we push unpleasant ideas into the unconscious and Reaction Formation – where an individual acts in a way contrary to unacceptable feelings they are experiencing. Others include Sublimation, Displacement and Compensation. Thirdly, Freud maintained a theory of psychosexual stages of development, which we all pass through in childhood. The first stage is the Oral Stage at 0-2 years where the focus of pleasure is the mouth. Pleasure is gained from sucking and biting things. Too little

oral satisfaction i.e, being weaned too early or too late can lead to fixation. This is where a person would be 'stuck' in a particular stage. Fixations are revealed by habits in adulthood. Examples of fixation in the oral stage could be nail biting or smoking. The second stage is the Anal Stage at 2-4 years. The focus of pleasure is now the anus. Pleasure is gained from firstly expelling body waste and then later retaining it. Too little satisfaction i.e, being toilet trained too early or too late would lead to fixation in this stage. Fixation would lead to personality traits such as over-generosity or meanness. The third stage is the Phallic Stage at 4-6 years. Development at this stage is different for boys and girls; Freud called it The Oedipus Complex in boys and The Electra Complex in girls. At this stage the child unconsciously feels sexual desire towards the parent of the opposite sex but also fears that the parent of the same sex will discover their feelings and punish them. In order to resolve this conflict the child identifies with the same-sex parent, taking on their attitudes, morals and gender.

Freud supported his theories with case studies. In one famous study, he described the phobia of a five-year old boy called 'Little Hans'. Freud (1909, cited in Gross & McIlveen 1996) interpreted Hans' phobia of horses as an expression of the unconscious fear and hatred he had for his father in relation to the Oedipus complex. Freud proposed that phobias were the expression of unwanted feelings that had been displaced from an internal source onto an external object that is easy to avoid. In Hans' case, a horse was much more easily avoided than his father.

The view taken by the psychodynamic approach on anorexia nervosa is that young girls develop anorexia to avoid becoming an adult. Bruch (1978, cited in Gross & Mcilveen 1996) suggested that in order to prevent gaining the responsibility of

adulthood, the said young girls prevent themselves from gaining the weight they unconsciously associate with pregnancy and therefore maturity.

The psychodynamic perspective provides humans with a way of finding explanations for our behaviour other than just chemicals and cells. However, this approach can be criticised in many ways. Firstly and arguably most importantly, there is very little scientific evidence to support the theories within the perspective and where there is evidence it is extremely subjective due to the work being interpretation of thoughts and dreams. Secondly, the perspective ignores the impact that certain situations have on our lifestyle and personalities. Finally, Freud's theories were very deterministic and suggested that we have no free will in anything that we do as our adult personalities are determined by our childhood experiences. The idea that we cannot change anything about our personality or behaviour is very disagreeable to many people. The theories and therapies associated with this perspective are still very influential in psychology and people who have had some kind of psychoanalytic therapy do report benefit from them.