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Freud's psychoanalytic
approach to psychology

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Freud's Psychoanalytic Approach to Psychology

The psychoanalytic approach to psychology is based on the system of psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud (1859 – 1939). Freud was interested in studies of the unconscious mind and mental illness. He performed studies to look into human personality, psychosexual development and conducted method of treatments to determine the causes of neurotic mental illness.

Freud thought that mental illness was caused by early childhood trauma of which treatment for such illness could only be successful when these childhood memories were dealt with and overcome. He developed his own technique to try and remember and overcome the events from their past that had disturbed their development. He made his patients describe anything that came into their mind no matter how silly they thought it may be. This technique helped Freud determine the cause of the mental illness and encouraged the patient to resurface repressed memories. Freud thought this would help them come to terms with the events helping overcome the illness, which was said to be 'removing the neurosis'.

According to Freud, everything we do, why we do things, who we are and how we became like this are all related to our sexual drive. Childhood sexual experiences will determine our personality in adult life. Freud outlined 5 stages of sexual development. In each stage the libido, the energy from the love instinct, Eros, fixates on different parts of the body, focusing on sexual pleasure on that specific part. Differences in the way sexual pleasure is obtained in each stage will lead to differences in adult personalities.

Oral Stage – This occurs from birth to 8 months old when the libido fixates on the mouth. Sexual pleasure is obtained by sucking, gumming, biting and swallowing. Insufficient and forceful feeding can cause fixation in this stage causing symptoms like smoking, eating and drinking to excess, argumentative, sarcastic, demanding and exploitive personalities in adult life.

Anal Stage – This occurs from 8 months to 4 years old when the libido fixates on the anal orifice. Sexual pleasure is obtained through stimulation of the anal membrane with bowel movement and withholding of such movement. Fixation in this stage can be caused by how the child copes with toilet training and how they are trained by their parents. There are 2 types of anal fixation.

Phallic Stage – This occurs from 3-6 years old, when the libido fixates on the genitals. Sexual pleasure is obtained through stimulation of the genitals. The key event at this stage is the attraction to the parent of the opposite sex together with the envy and fear of the parent of the same sex. In boys this situation is called the 'Oedipus Complex' and in girls it is called the 'Electra Complex'. Boys experience 'castration anxiety' caused by the fear of the fathers punishment for the desire for his mother, which is overcome when his conscious comes to realise that incest is wrong. Girls on the other hand experience 'penis envy' believing that they once had a penis, but due to castration has lost it. She becomes hostile and aggressive towards her mother who she believes did the castration

and a special tenderness for her father. This is overcome when the girl's affections are directed towards other males.

The Latency Period – This occurs from 5-12 years when the libido is de-sexualised and directed out into peer group activities. It is a stage where there is little sexual activity and allows children to focus their energy on other aspects of life. Earlier sexual activities are repressed to the unconscious mind and this stage lasts until puberty when their sexuality is re-awakened.

Puberty and Adolescence – This occurs from 12-16 years when all sexual impulses re-appear. The child experiments with all their previous patterns of sexual activity until gradually leading to normal genitality. After this stage the individual will develop intimate sexual relationships.

Freud's theories enabled him to develop a dynamic model of personality. His writings on psychosexual development set the groundwork for how our personalities developed. He also believed that there were 3 different driving forces that develop during these stages which played an important role on how we interact with the world.

According to Freud we are all born with our Id. This is a drive that needs immediate satisfaction and does not consider anything else. Like a newborn baby, the Id is present at birth and causes the baby to cry when it needs feeding, changing, and is the baby's way of getting its needs met immediately. The second part of our personality comes within the next three years, which Freud called the Ego. As the child interacts more with the world they learn and understand the needs and desires of others. It is the Ego that works to satisfy the Id, as well as considering others. Eventually, usually after the phallic stage of development, the Super-Ego develops. This is the moral part of our personality letting us know what is right and what is wrong.

Freud's theories brought with them a lot of criticism. Many psychologists thought Freud's theories were imprecise and un-testable, as in the latency period of psychosexual development all experiences and sexual activities in the earlier stages are repressed. This meaning the individuals will have no memories of these experiences, therefore they can not be proven. His theories were said to be unfair in the way they had been studied. It was based on a small sample of people which were middle class, middle aged Jewish women, most of which had mental illnesses. These factors such as age, gender, culture and mental state should have been considered through Freud's studies as they could well be factors that also affect the way in which we develop mentally and sexually and could differ from each individual dependent upon these factors.

References

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