

Critically Evaluate Freud's Theory

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) he was Jewish and educated in Vienna, where he trained in medicine. Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis. He was the first psychologist to recognise the importance of the conscious and unconscious mind. His theory was psychoanalysis. The value and validity of his theory has been greatly questioned, since its inception in the early 1900s.

His critics and devotees, see the answer lying in opposite extremes. Having him all the magician or all the messiah, was he either? Was Sigmund Freud a great medical scientist who uncovered important truths about human psychology? Or was he something different? His theories offer a science, but his critics of psychoanalysis question whether or not it is indeed a science; the value of Freud's data, the methods that he used and the effectiveness of the treatments. Throughout this essay I intend to show the positive and negative criticisms of Freud's theory psychoanalysis.

Freud spent many years hypothesizing about the role of dreams and their interpretation. He argued that dreams allowed a person to discharge otherwise unacceptable and unconscious wishes and urges. He defines the state of sleep to be a period of uproar and chaos during which the unconscious thoughts of the (Id) attempt to force their way into consciousness. More specifically, a dream was the disguised fulfilment of a repressed desire. It had to be disguised because the repressed desires could be sexual or aggressive urges unacceptable to the dreamer when awake.

However, the major problem with Freud's theory of dream function is that interpretation of a dream function is not something that can be objectively achieved. Webb and Cartwright 1978 see dreams as a way of dealing with problems relating to work, sex and relationships that occur during working hours. Cartwright 1984 argued that whatever is symbolised in a dream are the dreams 'true meaning' and unlike Freud, he saw no reason to distinguish between dreams content and meaning.

Jung and Freud had worked together at first interpreting dreams, and then had a major falling out over their different ideas of dreaming. Jung did not agree with the distinction between content and meaning. To him dreams had no disguised meaning, but directly reflected the mind's current state. Their content included thoughts, memories and emotions from the day's conscious events and images reflecting our unconscious world. A major difference between Jung and Freud was Freud emphasised the dark and destructive nature of the unconscious influences on dream imagery, Jung emphasised the positive and constructive nature of these influences. On a positive note one similarity between Freud and Jung on dreaming was they both used imagery and symbolism for dream interpretation. However, Jung's framework was totally different to Freud's.

Moving on to one of the more controversial aspects of Freud's theory, and one that probably caused the greatest problem for his critics, was his ideas of sexual instinct and its importance in the development of the individual. Freud's account on development is closely related to other aspects of his theory, in particular the structure of personality and the stages of psychosexual development. Freud believed that the

personality comprises of three parts the id, the ego and the superego. The id contains everything inherited at birth. The ego is the part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world. The superego represents morals and values. Freud's psychosexual development stages; oral stage 0-1 yrs, pleasure associated with the mouth. Anal stage 1-3 yrs pleasure focuses on the bowel/bladder, phallic stage 3-5 yrs pleasure zone genitals. Latency period 5-6 yrs associated with puberty and finally genital stage, associated with puberty and maturity.

According to Freud how well we deal with each of these stages, and whether or not we receive the optimal amount of gratification, determine psychologically healthy we are as an adult. The major conflict in the Freudian view in the development is the oedipal conflict, this in brief is where Oedipus unwittingly kills his father, and marries his mother. In the female version the Electra complex girls between the ages of 4-6yrs envy their father for possessing a penis that they have been denied.

This particular part of Freud's theory has many supporters and critics. One of the most important implications of adopting this view of human behaviour is its reliance on the concept of an unconscious mind, which influences our thinking and behaviour in ways we are not aware. If we are unaware of the forces that guide us, then it follows that we are not capable of intervening to change or go against them. (Slife&Williams 1995).

Jung and Adler disagreed with Freud about the idea of such a pervasive sexual instinct, and proposed their own ideas of what motivated human behaviour. Grunbaun(1986) believes that the reasoning on which Freud based his entire psychoanalytic theory was "fundamentally flawed, even if the validity of his clinical evidence were not in question" but that "the clinical data are themselves suspect; more often than not, they may be patients responses to the suggestions and expectations of the analyst".

Additional critics contend that Freud's clinical data are flawed or invalid. Greenberg (1986) believes that Freud's case studies do not place enough stress on revealing the outcome of the treatment and that Freud's aim was more to illustrate his theoretical points. In addition Freud fully presented only 12 cases, but mentioned over 100 minor cases. Greenberg asserts that many of the presented cases would not even be considered acceptable examples of psychoanalysis, and that all of Freud's cases had basic shortcomings. Finally Greenberg finds it "both skirting and curious that Freud chose to illustrate the usefulness of psychoanalysis through the display of unsuccessful cases"

Other powerful critics, (Colby 1960) claim Freud's evidence flawed due to lack of an experiment, the lack of a control group and lack of observation that went unrecorded. In addition, (Holt 1986) found fault with the demographically restricted sample of individuals on which Freud based the majority of his data and theory. However in favour of Freud (shrevin 1986) insists that "Freud's admirable heuristic hypotheses did not come out of thin air or out of his imagination".

Freud used a technique called free association to evaluate his patients. This involved the patients lying on a couch in Freud's consultation room, and he would sit behind their heads, so they could not see him. Patients would be encouraged to relax and to

talk about their life and feelings. They were encouraged by Freud to remember events from their childhood and feelings, associated with the event. Freud often became personally involved in the therapeutic conversation and would explain his thinking to the patient. Freud would then interpret what had been said through transference and relay his thoughts on to the patient.

Critics of this technique including (Storr 1986) claim “Free association” is a method employed in psychoanalysis where the patients speak about any subject matter whatsoever and the analyst draws conclusions based on what is said. “Grunbaun forcefully argues that free association is neither free nor validating evidence for psychoanalytic theory.” “For my own part, however”, Grunbaun concludes “I find it unwarranted to use free association to validate casual inferences”. Grunbaun contends that free association is not a valid method of accessing the patients repressed memories, because there is no way of ensuring that the analyst is capable of distinguishing between the patients actual memories and imagined memories, constructed due to the influence of the analyst leading questions

According to Thomas (1990) transference has become so central to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis that many analysts believe that making interpretations about transference is what distinguishes psychoanalysis from other forms of psychotherapy. Thomas maintains that “in Freud’s time, counter- transference feelings were considered to be failing on the part of the analyst. These feelings were to be controlled absolutely now, counter- transference is considered an unavoidable outcome of the analytic process, irrespective of how well prepared the analyst is by analytic training and its years of required personal analysis...most modern analysts are trained to observe their own counter- transference feelings and to use these to increase their understanding of the patients transference and defences”.

In order to evaluate the strength of Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis one must consider a few of the qualities that make a theory of personality or behaviour “great”. Among the many qualities that people consider important are that the theory addresses its problem, and can be applied in a practical ways, fits with other theories and withstands the test of time. In addition according to many philosophers of science, is falsifiable, able to be generalised, leads to new theories and ideas, and is recognised by others in the field. Clearly psychoanalysis meets many of these criteria. Freud coined the term “psychoanalysis” in 1856, even today as we are approaching the twenty first -century, psychoanalysis remains as a valid option for patients suffering from mental illness. The theory psychoanalysis was innovative and revolutionary, and clearly has withstood the test of time.

Finally to evaluate the critics Grunbaun (1986) asserts that “while psychoanalysis may thus be said to be scientifically alive, it is currently hardly well”. The criticisms of Freud’s theory can be grouped into three general categories. First, critics contend that Freud’s theory was lacking in empirical evidence and relies too heavily on therapeutic achievements, whereas others assert that even Freud’s clinical data are flawed, inaccurate and selective at best. Second, the actual method or technique involved in psychoanalysis, such as Freud’s ideas on the interpretation of dreams and the role of free association, have been criticised. Finally, some critics assert that psychoanalysis is simply not a science and many of the principles upon which it is based are inaccurate. Eysenck and Wilson (1973) there is not one study which one

could point to with confidence and say “Here is definitive support of this or that Freudian notion.”

In conclusion many of the critics and devotees of Sigmund Freud all have valuable opinions, to which I have shown throughout this essay. However, despite the weaknesses of psychoanalysis I believe that the many strengths of the theory are extremely significant and have withstood the test of time and are widely used today. Therefore in my own opinion psychoanalysis should not be disregarded. Although many criticisms exist, there are as many arguments, if not more, in support of the rich and diverse contributions that Freud’s theory gave to psychoanalysis. His legacy lives on indisputable form.