

Discuss one explanation of personality development and evaluate its conclusion.

For this assignment I am going to discuss Freud's perspective of personality development. Freud used psychoanalytic theories that are based around the emotional development of the personality, whereas Erikson's psychosocial theory focuses more on the role of social factors in development. Personality development can be broken down into three strands within Freud's theory: the personality structure, defence mechanisms and psychosexual development.

Personality can be defined as 'the distinctive and characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour that define an individual's personal style, and influence his or her interactions with the environment'. (Atkinson et al, 1992)

Freud developed his theories by psychoanalysing adults, mostly middle-aged women and individuals with personality problems. He used various methods to study his patients, such as, dream analysis; which are interpretations of individual's dreams as they are a "window on the unconscious" (Davenport, 1988), free association; where the person is given a word or a phrase and encouraged to say the first thing that enters their head and 'slips of the tongue'; which is when a person says something in error but these can subconsciously reflect what they really mean.

Freud suggests that adult personality is derived from the interaction between the desires for pleasure and how early desires were gratified. He believed that all human behaviour is controlled by drives, which he relates to human instincts. Freud insisted that there are two forces feeding our instinctual urges with energy; the Libido and the Death Instinct; the Libido being a sexual energy and the Death Instinct being more of an aggressive energy.

According to Freud, the adult human mind is made up of three different parts and levels of awareness; the unconscious mind, which he named the 'Id'; the preconscious mind, which he named the 'Superego', and the conscious mind, which he named the 'Ego'.

The Id is at the centre of a person's very being. It is the initial part of a human's personality structure, which exists, right from birth and can be described as the most primitive instinct. This part of the personality craves satisfaction and pleasure; therefore it has been coined 'the pleasure principle'.

The Ego is known as the second part of the personality structure. This is the part of our personality that keeps us in touch with reality. Its aim is to protect us and it helps us to perform tasks safely; therefore-coined 'the reality principle'. The Ego controls both other parts of the personality, the Id and the Superego, which help keep our lives in balance.

The last part of the personality structure is the Superego. This is the part that moulds our morals and conscience. It helps prevent us from doing things, which we have learnt and know to be morally wrong; therefore this part has been coined 'the morality principle'. The ego ideal exists as part of the superego. Rather than telling us what we should not do, the ego ideal tells us what is good and what we should do and be like. If the person has a strong superego they are more likely to have stronger morals than a person with a weak superego.

Because the Id and the Superego are always conflicting against one another, the Ego needs to have strategies to reduce anxiety. This helps push problems away and in a way pretending the problems don't exist, a form of denial, these are known as defence mechanisms. Another defence mechanism is repression; this is where the Id's impulses are blocked from reaching the conscious mind. There are a number of other defence mechanisms, including projection; where unacceptable desires or characteristics are projected on to someone else, and displacement; this refers to the transfer of repressed desires or impulses onto a substitute person or object. (Mike Cardwell, 2000) Freud's contributions with his theories on defence mechanisms are still being practiced today and are experienced as valid and useful.

According to Freud we acquire our personalities in several stages, known as psychosexual development. Freud thought that different parts of our bodies become particularly sensitive as we grow through these different stages; he called these areas erogenous zones. (Davenport, 1988)

As children grow up and are experiencing the stages of psychosexual development, different parts of their bodies become more sensitive, first the mouth, then the anus, then the phallus, and finally the genitals. The libido seeks pleasure through these erogenous zones.

The five different stages of psychosexual development are labelled as:

The Oral Stage – this is the first year of a baby’s life where the baby gains pleasure from sucking and biting. The Id exists here right from birth.

The Anal Stage – this is around the age of one to about three years where the pleasure derives from retaining and expelling faeces. At this stage the Ego begins to develop.

The Phallic Stage – this is around three until six years where the sensitivity is placed around the genitals. This is where the Oedipal Complex or the Electra Complex unfolds. It is during this stage the Superego starts to develop.

The Latency Period – this is around seven until twelve years where the body seems to have no sensitised area. A child will be more interested in interacting with other people but are not strongly attracted to others.

The Genital Stage – this is around the age of 14 to 17 years. The child becomes more aware of the opposite gender and a sexual awareness is developed.

The Oedipal Conflict that occurs in the Phallic Stage involves the child experiencing feelings of desire for the opposite-sex parent. The child experiences a fear that the same sex parent will find out and punish them for this, resulting in feelings of envy and the development of ‘castration anxiety’. Whilst all this is happening to the child subconsciously, they start to become more like the same sex parent adopting their characteristics to conquer the Oedipal Conflict, (known as the ‘Electra Complex’ in girls). This is known as ‘Identification’. His ideas on psychosexual development are known to be quite controversial, as they seem to be overly obsessed with sexuality. Freud developed the theory that sex was a major motivational force at a time of great sexual repression. This could have caused sex to be something that was repressed in many minds (Beryard & Hayes, 1994).

Freud alleges emotional disturbances that occur in adult life could be to do with poor psychosexual development. He believes that a person could be fixated at an early pleasure seeking stage of the development. This is caused if the child experiences severe problems or excessive gratification at any of the stages. The adult may display regression whereby their behaviour could become less mature and similar to behaviour displayed at the stage, which they are fixated. Freud places great importance on the roles of regression and fixation in determining personality. Freud's theories have not been without criticism, they have mostly been criticised for being unscientific. His research support seems to be rather weak as the case studies he carried out mainly consisted of adults, mostly middle-aged women, from the same culture, so the results may be biased. The only child Freud studied was Little Hans, a five-year-old boy, who suffered from a phobia.

Freud's 'evidence' for his explanation of how children's personalities grow does not come from experiments or any scientifically acceptable means of data collection. It doesn't even come from observing 'normal' children. It comes from the dreams and spoken memory of a relatively small number of people who mostly lived in Vienna, who had some personality 'problems'. (Davenport, 1988) Another method Freud used to analysis people was hypnosis. This was another widely criticised method, as even Freud admitted himself can be suggestive.

However, despite many criticisms Freud remains known for having the most influential impact in modern psychology, especially in the areas of abnormal behaviour and psychotherapy. Today his ideas are used in everything from childcare, education, literary criticism, and psychiatry. He founded the psychoanalytic movement, which today many Neo-Freudians still actively use, although the emphasis of it is different.