

Evaluate psychoanalytic theory. Refer to research in your answer

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), was a qualified medical doctor who developed a theory of mental life called psychoanalysis. This approach emphasises the psychodynamics of the mind. Freud believes many inner conflicts people may have, stemmed from their childhood. Psychoanalysis therapy is used to help people come to terms with these conflicts.

“Freud claimed that the mind was largely unconscious and that the human motives are largely determined by the sex instinct.” By using the term ‘unconscious’, he meant that we have thoughts and ideas that we are not aware of. He came up with the idea of Freudian slips. This is where we say one thing but mean something else. Freud believes these slips of the tongue are not accidents but they have an unconscious repression.

Freud also thought that people’s dreams are meaningful and could be interpreted. To do this, he used the technique of free association. This is where Freud would say a word e.g. mother, and the patient would say the first thing that came to mind. Freud would then use these words to put together a picture to explain the person’s problems. One of Freud’s most important assumptions was that the primary driving force in a person’s mental life, which also affects behaviour, is the sexual instinct. It broke up the personality into three parts, the id, ego and superego. The id is the part that operates at an unconscious level; the ego satisfies the demands of the id’s sexual instincts. The superego represents the person’s conscience and ideal self. The id and superego work against each other and the ego tries to reduce the conflict. Freud also came up with idea of defence mechanisms. These played an important role in protecting the ego from anxiety-provoking information and situations. They are denial, which prevents our mind thinking about unwanted or threatening situations. Repression, like denial but we are unknowingly exclude these dangerous situations from are consciousness. Projection, which allows us to be aware of our thought but to attribute it to someone else. Displacement, when we direct an impulse from the person who causes it to someone who is a safe substitute. Sublimation, when we redirect a socially unacceptable impulse and turn that energy into a suitable expression. Reaction formation, the defence mechanism where we unconsciously convince ourselves that we feel the exact opposite of the unacceptable impulse that we really do feel. Rationalization, we avoid threatening thoughts by replacing them with non-threatening ones. Regression, is where we begin to regress into behaviour of a younger person to gain attention and try to get what we want. Identification is the last mechanism and this is where we take on the behaviours of someone we admire and we begin to copy the way they act and look.

Freud’s idea that there are stages of development in childhood which were a result of sexual instinct is mentioned in the previous answer. A case study of the Oedipal complex was carried out by Freud. It was “the case of little Hans”. Hans was the son of a friend of Freud’s. His father would write to Freud to let him know of his son’s development. He used this for his own theory of infant sexuality. At the age of four Hans developed a phobia of horses (especially white ones). The child believed the horses would bite him or fall on him. At the time the phobia began, his mother was heavily pregnant, and he also had witnessed a horse fall down. Freud interpreted this phobia as the conscious expression of the unconscious feeling Hans had towards his parents (Oedipus complex). The horse represented his father and the fear of the horse

falling down was his unconscious wish to see his father dead because of his father's baby his mother was carrying. Freud believed it is all due to the Oedipal complex and not the fact the child had seen a large white horse fall over.

As well interpreting people's dreams and phobias, he also used the technique of hypnosis which the first psychoanalytic patient called 'the talking cure'. Her name was Anna O. Her right arm became paralyzed, as did her legs and she had difficulty with her vision and speech. Her symptoms seemed to have no physical cause. Using hypnosis, a physician named 'Breuer' got Anna O to talk about the origin of each symptom which leads to them disappearing. Freud adopted this technique from 'Breuer'. He did later drop this technique but the idea of tapping into the unconscious still played a major part with Freud's work and led to the aforementioned free association technique.

In conclusion, Freud's psychoanalytic theory has had an overall impact on today's thoughts and methods of psychology. He brought us psychotherapy which could be used on the mentally ill. They could be helped and treated not just ignored and locked up. He demonstrated that hysteria was an illness without any physical causes and the mind could determine symptoms (psychosomatic). He also brought us the theory of ambivalence, and the idea that unconscious processes play a role in our behaviour. Also defence mechanisms, the technique of free association and that child development and its stages have an effect on our behaviour as we grow up and become an adult. His theories of personality and development were also very important.

Although his ideas were very influential, his thoughts have also been criticised and his methods of gathering data were concluded unscientific. Grunbawn (1984) believed a scientific theory Freud's concepts were ambiguous and difficult to define and measure objectively. When Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) tested a theory they found very mixed results which leads to an open conclusion. An example of a tested theory of the Oedipal complex was tested by Bronislaw Malinowski (1927). He read Freud's account of how boys dream about their fathers being killed which reveals the Oedipal hostility they have towards their fathers. Malinowski decided to test adolescent boys from the Trobriand Islands, where their uncles are responsible for their discipline instead of their fathers. His results showed that the boys did not have any dreams of their fathers suffering but several with their uncles. This implied that it is discipline not the Oedipal rivalry that creates hostility. Freud may have come back with the answer that Malinowski had tested the boys too late as they had already passed through their developing stages and had overcome their complexes with their fathers.

He believed that behaviour is based on emotional responses and the unconscious mind but there is little recognition of conscious processes, learning or biological factors. Other psychologists thought that his theories were too vague and untestable.