

**Evaluate how useful Freud's psychoanalytic theory is to understand  
personality**

The aim of this essay is to understand how useful Freud's theory to understand personality is. This shall be achieved by firstly understanding the structural components of personality namely psychic energy, structure of the human brain, systems of personality and defence mechanisms against anxiety. Secondly the application of these components in Freud's psychosexual development theory will be analysed.

Personality is the set of psychological traits and mechanisms within the individual that are organized and relatively enduring and that influence his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the intrapsychic, physical, and social environments. (Larsen & Buss, 2005)

The starting point of Freud's psychoanalytic theory is that psychic energy is the motivation factor of all human activity. It follows the principle of law of conservation of energy. The psychic energy people possess remains constant and redirection of this energy causes personality change. Psychic energy arose from strong innate forces known as instincts. Freud's classified instincts broadly in two categories: sexual and self preservation. He later then modified it into life and death instinct which were known as libido and thanatos respectively. Libido was a broad term for any life-sustaining, pleasure gaining activity. Similarly

thanatos was a broad term for any urge to harm or any aggressive activity.  
(Larsen & Buss, 2005)

Freud's theory suggests that the human mind comprises of three parts namely: conscious, preconscious and unconscious. The conscious part comprises a very small fraction of the human brain. It contains all presently perceiving feelings, emotions, thoughts and perceptions. All memories, thoughts and dreams that exist in the brain which the human is not presently aware of but which can be easily retrieved exist in the preconscious mind. The largest part of the human brain is the unconscious part. This part consists of thoughts and emotions that are too distressing to feel and hence are hidden away. Much of this is unacceptable if society or may cause a great deal of anxiety and hence remains concealed. (Larsen& Buss, 2005)

Personality is made up of three systems: id, ego and superego. Behaviour is a result of interaction between these three systems. The id is the original aspect of personality. It is rooted in the biology of the human i.e. everything that is inherited and is present at birth. It consists of powerful and primitive desires like unconscious sexual and aggressive needs. This part of personality is not concerned with conventions of society or workings. The id cannot endure high levels of tension caused by non-conventional emotions, hence when the tension reaches its peak (by internal/external stimulation) these emotions come out in form of actions in order to release this tension. The sole purpose of the id is to

fulfil the pleasure principle i.e. to maximise pleasure and minimize pain. The id comprises of reflex actions and primary processes which help to attain the pleasure principle. Reflex actions are automatic actions like scratching, breathing which are inbred. These are performed in order to reduce tension. Primary processes achieve the same but by adopting a more complex methodology. It relieves tension by creating an image which will fulfil the desire. One of the best examples supporting this is dreams. Dreams are considered a representation of desires which are not attained. Since this alone cannot complete the task of reducing tension a second system plays a role known as ego. (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

The ego helps provide a realistic direction for the person's impulses. The ego converts the mental image into perceptions and helps attain it. It is the link between the image and existence of objects in the real world. The ego runs by the reality principle, which temporarily suspends the pleasure principle, finds an object to fulfil it and hence relieves the person of tension. Cognitive and intellectual processes come under ego and help to achieve its aim. The ego cannot exist on its own, its only purpose is to recognize the wants of the id, look for objects in external reality that can fulfil it and provide id with it. (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

The superego is the moral wing of personality. It withholds the ideals and values which are instilled in the child by surroundings using means of rewards and punishment. Unlike the id and ego it aims for the perfection not pleasure and ideal not real respectively. Freud suggests that the formation of the superego is very closely linked to the child's identification with his parents. It is what helps us judge our actions as being right or wrong and make us feel guilty of pride. Our internal standards are set in accordance with the development of our superego. The higher developed superego the higher will be our standards. A person with a low superego will feel less guilty on committing crime, and a person with a high superego might set unrealistic targets and on not being able to achieve them will feel shame.

As mentioned before behaviour is a result of interaction between the above mentioned three systems. The role of the ego is to listen to the ideals of the superego, know the reality and incorporate it to meet the needs of the id. When the ego is in a state of dilemma i.e. unable to strike a balance between the three forces mentioned it causes anxiety. Freud has divided anxiety into three broad categories: objective, neurotic and moral anxiety. Objective anxiety is caused when a realistic external threat is present e.g. fire Neurotic anxiety is caused when there is a direct conflict between the id and the ego. The id wants to react on the basis of impulse and the ego tries to stop it on the basis of reality. Moral anxiety is caused by a conflict between id and superego. The superego imposes the ethics and causes guilt when the id wants to conduct actions on the basis of

its immoral impulses. The later two are internal conflicts and objective anxiety is an external conflict. (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

The anxiety caused is to be defended by the ego, which is done by using several defence mechanisms. The most fundamental of all defences is repression. When stressful unconscious thoughts wish to enter the id the ego tries to find substitute acceptable actions and represses the unacceptable thoughts back into unconscious. The next defence is suppression in which the person tries to ignore, not think about thoughts that cause anxiety. Efforts are made to keep such anxiety provoking thoughts in preconscious. In denial defence the person decides not to perceive the stressful thought. In displacement mechanism the thoughts that cause stress are experienced but the energy release is done in a direction different from the original. This is done since the original direction is not available and in most cases it will help relieve it. In sublimation the emotion is taken out but in a constructive way which does well and is accepted by society. Regression copes with painful emotions by temporarily moving from a mature attitude to an immature attitude. (Libert & Libert, 1998)

Freud's theory of psychosexual development is on the basis of the structural components of personality as mentioned before. There are five stages to Freud's psychosexual theory. The first stage is the oral stage in which the source of pleasure is the mouth. The infant at this stage is unable to distinguish between self and environment. Parental overindulgence or under indulgence in the infant's

needs will determine the personal difficulty level in the child's later life. Oral aggression during this period may lead to sarcasm in adult life. During this stage feelings of dependency arise which are permanent. (Ryckman, 2004)

Over indulgence of parents at this stage causes the person to always look for someone to depend on and seeks constant gratification. Since they are in constant need for dependency it's very easy for them to trust people. This dependency makes them admire leaderships skills and strengths in others which they do not possess and do not make an attempt to gain them either. Under indulgence will result into the formation of an envious person who will resort to manipulative techniques to attain dominance. (Ryckman, 2004)

During the anal stage pleasure is obtained by anal activities like expulsion of faeces. The ego is differentiated from the id. The process of decision making is no longer under the influence of rational thinking. During this stage the attitude of the parent towards anal activities will help decide traits that the child will attain. Very strict and repressive method will lead the child to either suppress his faeces inside or expel it at in appropriate times. This will result into formation of traits of either being stingy or destructive, disorderliness respectively. Obstinance in anal characteristics will lead into the person becoming stubborn and very independent. (Ryckman, 2004)

During the phallic stage the son grows a sexual desire for his mother. He is aware that the father will not appreciate this and fears of being castrated. Hence he identifies with his father and his sexual desires are fulfilled in a more socially acceptable method. This is known as the Oedipus complex. Girls undergo an Electra complex in which they wish to have a penis. They grow a hatred for their mother since they brought them into the world without a penis but eventually identify with her so that they can have a male child. The male child will bring the longed for penis. Freud said that since the girl's desire is never really fulfilled females tend to have an inadequate superego. (Ryckman, 2004) (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

Cases in which the Oedipus complex is not resolved adequately show traits of being reckless. Overvaluing of the penis results into men being into vanity, the desire to conquer several women. Unresolved Electra complex results into women wanting constant control over men. (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

In the Latency stage is from the sixth year until puberty where sexual development is assumed to be at standstill. The last stage is the genital stage where the aim is to mate with an appropriate sex object. This stage changes the person from pleasure seeking to reality oriented. The psychological aspects gained till now would help the person provide oneself with stability and security. During this stage the person will look for a heterosexual partner. Though according to him happiness is gained from sexual attachment he also suggests

that this libidal energy can be concentrated on intellectual and creative tasks to attain happiness. (Ryckman, 2004) (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

The results of Tribich & Messer's 'Blacky Pictures' study supports the findings of the oral stage. In their study they asked college men to look at pictures of a cartoon dog named Blacky and tell a story regarding that. Their level of orality was determined by experts. Participants were then taken into a dark room and were shown a moving light. The experimenter (authoritative figure) gave them an estimate of the distance the light was moving at. The participants were then asked to give their estimates. Participants with a high level of orality showed more agreement with the experimenter than the ones with lower levels of orality. Hence confirming Freud's hypothesis that during the oral stage over indulgence will result into higher dependency. Their study also confirmed that the participants higher in anality were more resistant to influence than the ones with lower anality. No study has been found that supports the phallic and the genital stages. There are also criticisms on the nature of evidence. All of his study is based on case study method which in itself is not absolute. (Ryckman, 2004) (Campbell & Hall, 1998)

To evaluate personality theories the following five scientific standards are considered:

Comprehensiveness: Freud's theory explains all the components of personality and stages of development in detail. Heuristic value: Various studies show that though Freud's theory is disagreed by many it has had a major influence on the further development of personality psychology and has made vast contributions to clinical psychology. Testibility: All of Freud's theory cannot be empirically tested and hence it can be stated to be a poor theory. Parsimony: Freud's theory does have many premises but since it covers such a vast area it is impossible to maintain parsimony. Compatibility and integration across domains and levels: Freud unlike most personality psychologists has not been able to achieve these criteria. (Larsen & Buss, 2005)

Though Freud's theory does not meet all of the criteria and strict terms it will be graded as a poor theory it has played a major role in psychology. His theory of psychosexual development plays an important role in developmental psychology. The psychotherapy techniques he suggested are still practiced though modified. It can be said that his theory is the most comprehensive personality psychology theory and though it has not been accepted as whole parts of it have been the basis of many other personality theories. The graph of the validity of Freud's theory is ever increasing and hence it can be said that this theory has played a vital role in understanding personality. (Larsen & Buss, 2005)

Aditi Handa

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