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Introduction to Counselling

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How can Freud's Psychodynamic model help me to understand and change my life?

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the father of psychodynamic therapy. His work built upon what had been done by Brewster before him. One of his patients Anna O labelled his method as being 'the talking cure'*. During this essay I shall briefly explain Freud's main theories on the human personality and then examine how these can help me to understand and change my life.

* An Introduction To Counselling. P80

Freud believed the human psyche is divided into three areas the conscious, preconscious and unconscious*. In the unconscious exists the Id. This is the instinctual life force within us. Two forces are at work within the Id, Eros a drive for love and Thanatos a drive for destruction**. In our day-to-day lives we are unaware of the effects our Id has upon us, Freud argues that hidden forces from the Id govern most of the things we want to do. The Id has no time dimension and memories trapped within it remain emotionally charged***.

* Teach Yourself Counselling. P121 ** Teach Yourself Counselling. P121 *** Mastering Psychology. P242

The Ego helps to mediate between the Id and the outside world, known as the 'reality principle'*. It is the part of ourselves, which enables us to fit into society. It takes on board social norms and lets the Id have its way when it will be practically possible and allowable by society.

* Mastering Psychology. P242

From society and our parents we develop the Superego. This provides us with a 'moral principle'*. It is basically the internalisation of parental and societal rules. The Superego is largely unconscious though we do become aware of certain things when they move into the preconscious.

* Mastering Psychology. P243

Through psychodynamic therapy I discovered that I had repressed many memories. I believe these were being stored in my unconscious. These memories were having a profound effect upon my life although I did not realise this at the time. I went through almost seven years of bullying when I was at school. When I left school and continued with my life I was always aware of this fact but I had lost many of the details over time and could not recall much about it.

When I reached twenty years of age I developed clinical depression and had panic attacks. I was forced to leave university with only six months left to completion. My home became my sanctuary and for a period of three months I did not leave it. Through many years of differing therapy I have begun to understand more about what happened within my mind to bring me to that point.

The memories I had stored in my unconscious, though I was largely unaware of them, were distorting my view of the world. It was "frightening outside"; I could "get hurt if I left home". These were not a realistic feeling about my current circumstances but were a reflection of the fears I had held during the time of my bullying.

I was extremely depressed because I felt "useless", "ugly" and that my life was "pointless". Again I now feel that these thoughts grew from trapped memories. I had been called many names whilst at school; I had been treated very badly facing physical harm on a daily basis. I

was treated as an outcast by nearly everyone; I was spat at, ignored, teased and put down.

During therapy I began to see in my mind a monster. It was black with red eyes. I had often had nightmares involving such a creature. Freud regarded dreams as “the royal road to the unconscious”*. He placed great emphasis upon analysing them, and along with free association dreams became the centre of his psychoanalysis methods. Freud believed that dreams were a sign of the unconscious mind at work and proof that his theories were correct.

* Freud – A Beginners Guide p25 & p57

Over time I realised that this monster contained all of the negative emotions other people had placed onto me. Even seven years after the bullying stopped this monster was still telling me I was useless and ugly and deserved no more than to be beaten up.

Through therapy memories slowly began to emerge from out of the unconscious. It was very painful at first as the strength of feeling contained in the memories was so strong. Overtime these feelings have weakened, I still believe there are some buried memories but many have now risen out of my Id and have been largely dealt with in my conscious. I don't believe the monster has gone but I seem to have taken much of its power away.

I believe my Ego is caught up in this tangled web as well. I feel that while I was at school I may have internalised some of the negative messages into my Ego. In some ways my Ego stopped looking after me. Through psychodynamic therapy I have begun to rebuild my Ego almost teaching it that the things that happened to me were not my fault and that I do deserve to be looked after by myself, through my Ego.

Freud divided a child's life into a number of differing developmental stages. Stage one is the oral phase*. Normally occurring between being born and around two years of age. It involves a discovery of your world and surroundings through the use of your mouth. Sucking to feed provides both nutrients and closeness with mother. Any available object will be tested by being placed in the mouth and explored that way.

Mastering Psychology. P247, Teach Yourself Counselling. P123, An Introduction To Counselling. P81

Personally I have no memories of this period in my own life. It is thought though that people sometimes fall back into child like behaviour to receive comfort from these things. I smoke and therefore enjoy the aspect of putting a cigarette in my mouth and sucking it tending to do this most when stressed. Some people argue this is regressive behaviour and links back into my oral stage.

The second stage occurs between the ages of two to four. Called the Anal Stage* it is the period when a child discovers that he/she produces faeces. Apparently the child then experiments with control. Being able to both let go and hold on to the faeces. Freud argued that if parents handle this stage of development badly a child could become afraid of letting go of things as they grew older or overly controlling.

Teach Yourself Counselling. P123, Mastering Psychology. P247

The phallic stage* develops between the ages of four to seven. Freud argued that the genitals become the main interest or focus to the child during this period. It is also during this time that the Superego develops. This is the time when Freud's infamous Oedipus* and Electra Complexes* are said to occur.

Teach Yourself Counselling. P124. Mastering Psychology. P247

Little boys will fall in love with their mother and girls with their father. Girls will develop penis envy and hate their mother for not giving them

one. Boys will hate their father believing that he wishes to castrate them and stop them being with their mother.

After this latency will set in, this period is believed to be the best time for children to learn. Then puberty starts and Freud believed that the whole process repeats itself thus enabling any damage incurred during the first time round to be repaired.

I can imagine that during puberty these processes had a difficult time repairing any damage to me, as it was during this time that I was being bullied. I can't directly link any of this to the three stages but from experience I know that damage done during this time is far more difficult to deal with than damage done later in life when the personality is fully formed.

In this final stage of the essay I shall examine four of Freud's ideas on how the mind copes with experiences it does not want to deal with, these are called defences. Freud listed over twenty -five differing defences created by the mind to protect itself. The first one I shall look at is repression. Repression is when memories are hidden in the unconscious. The Ego may not have been able to cope with the events attached to the memory and so stored them away where the person could not access them.

* Teach Yourself Counselling. P183/184. Mastering Psychology. P245.

This is sometimes known as Ego Censorship*. Personally this is one defence I feel I have had a lot of experience with. Most of my time at school was somehow lost. My two best friends, who were at school with me, would talk about fellow students, teaches and events involving the three of us and I would have no recollection what so ever of what they were talking about.

* Counselling course class notes

Many of the things that happened to me I only began to remember after they spoke about them. It was very strange, almost as if they were talking about people and places I had never been. It was quite a disconcerting experience. The experience would come into my conscious at sometimes though. Through dreams certain memories would come alive. If I was extremely depressed suddenly a dam would break and a flood of bad memories would pour on top of me and yet the next day I would not be able to recall what they were.

Another defence is regression*. This is the idea that people sometimes return to behaviour linked with the developmental stages. This can involve many things including crying, taking to ones bed or comfort eating. As I said earlier smoking is also connected with this as it is seen as an oral behaviour. It is noticeable that many people including myself smoke far more when stressed.

* An Introduction To Counselling. P84. Teach Yourself Counselling. P183.

I do recall, at the time of my worst depression that I took to my bed, often lying in the foetal position and crying. It was comforting in some way. As if I was safer lying in my bed than having to be in the world outside. It reminds me of the time when at night I suddenly feel scared in the dark on the way back from the bathroom but I know when I get into bed and covered up again I will be quite safe.

It is also quite possible from personal experience to deny painful events. Denial* is a term, which has become very mainstream; he or she is in denial. Looking back on my life I can see a number of times when I was living in denial. One of my partners who I was with for about six months was patently not for me. I knew this deep down but did not want to be alone and so I denied it.

* Teach Yourself Counselling. P179.

I continued in the relationship feeling more and more unhappy though not allowing myself to see the real reason, which I did actually know.

Eventually the other person ended it and I was forced to deal with life without that partner. It did not take long to realise that I was much happier without them than I was with them but I had not allowed myself to see any possibility of a happy life without them in it.

I think everyone has been guilty of displacement at one time in his or her life. Displacement* is when a person replaces the true object of their emotions with another. If someone is angry they may kick a door instead of kicking the person they are angry with. In a sense this defence can be seen as a very positive thing. The Ego allowing aggression out where it will do less harm all round.

* Teach Yourself Counselling. P179/180

So during this essay I have briefly examined some of Freud's theories on human development and growth and thought about how these theories can help me to see my life in a different way. In some cases they already have as I have done psychodynamic therapy for some time now. Other areas of his theories leave me slightly baffled and cold, as they strike no resonance with me, though it may be argued that that's because I don't want them to .

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