

## Issues surrounding Freud's stages of psychosexual development

Freud advanced a theory of personality development that centred on the effects of the sexual pleasure drive on the individual psyche. At particular points in the developmental process, he claimed, a single body part is particularly sensitive to sexual, erotic stimulation. These erogenous zones are the mouth, the anus, and the genital region. The child's libido centres on behaviour affecting the primary erogenous zone of his age; he cannot focus on the primary erogenous zone of the next stage without resolving the developmental conflict of the immediate one.

A child at a given stage of development has certain needs and demands, such as the need of the infant to nurse. Frustration occurs when these needs are not met; overindulgence stems from such an ample meeting of these needs that the child is reluctant to progress beyond the stage. Both frustration and overindulgence permanently lock some amount of the child's libido into the stage in which they occur; both result in a fixation. If a child progresses normally through the stages, resolving each conflict and moving on, then little libido remains invested in each stage of development. But if he fixates at a particular stage, the method of obtaining satisfaction that characterized the stage will dominate and affect his adult personality.

The importance of Freud's theory of psychosexual development is that it provides a single framework within which we can ask a wide range of questions which span physical, emotional, cognitive, social, sexual and personality development.

"It has been found that in early childhood there are signs of bodily activity to which only an ancient prejudice could deny the name of sexual and which are linked to psychical phenomena that we come across later in adult erotic life" (Freud 1940). It is clear that Freud believed that the sensations at each stage of development are sexual but it is important to remember that when using the word 'sexual' he is referring to sensations, pleasures, excitements etc that are not necessarily associated with genital sexuality. However, if being critical, this excuse cannot downgrade the impact of the word, which, with its emotive state to theorists, has the same kind of intensity and significance in children's lives as the psychological states associated with genital sexuality have for adults. Freud is concerned with the psychology of how infants and children experience and deal with the pleasures and frustrations of each psychosexual stage in relation to the people that take care of them. This leads on to the next issue about what exactly the role is of other people in children's experience at each stage. However, concluding the sexual issue, it has to be said that the word carries many connotations such as intense erotic sensation, sensual pleasure or an amalgam of biological functions but that our own observations of or indeed experiences as/with children may not fit in with Freud's statements about children's sexuality; the view is therefore very objective.

The question is asked as to what role other people play in a child's experiences at each stage and although newborn infants at first are thought to possess no awareness of other people as separate beings (these other people are simply seen as an extension of themselves) they soon

become aware that other people are indeed separate and that they provide (or do not) comfort and satisfactions. Many psychoanalysts are concerned with object relations, which mean they have based their work on the developing relation between the ego of the infant and significant other people i.e. the mother. Freud was not so concerned with object relations as he had his instinct based theory but he did highlight that the quality of gratification or frustration (I will talk in more detail about this later), toleration or punishment that infants meet will determine their personality and influence their socialization. This means that the role of other people in the child's experience during the first five years is crucial in determining his or her development.

Added to this role that other people play is the notion that there are meanings behind the pleasures and frustrations at a particular stage. For example when a child is being potty trained, it might refuse to use the potty and therefore experiences such sensations as pleasure and an autoerotic feeling in not using the potty and therefore controlling his own pleasure and experiencing autonomy – this is amplified by the social meaning of this action which is depriving the mother of what she wants: for the child to use the potty. Therefore it is combining pleasurable bodily sensations with its first opportunity to exercise power and withhold love from its mother and indeed still incorporating the feelings that it expresses towards her.

I previously mentioned the fact that Freud highlighted the quality of frustration and gratification. It is now interesting to note what the effect of these two things are on the child's personality at each stage. Freud believed that conflicts which are unresolved at each stage in infancy can lead to anxiety as well as neurotic illness – a fairly bold statement considering there is no overriding evidence for it truth. Conflict arises because of excessive frustration or gratification and both these make it difficult for the child to continue to the next stage. Freud named this fixation and that this accounted for patterns of personality traits in adults. An example is if an infant is weaned too early and would therefore, as an adult, seek oral gratification of some kind e.g. overeating or smoking. However it can be more excessive and lead on to alcoholism or drug abuse.

It is true though that such adult traits can appear in opposite forms. For example fixation in the oral stage can lead to passivity or dependence or oral fixation can lead (as a defensive reaction against longed-for dependency) to exaggerated independent traits. This is an example of reaction formation where the person unconsciously produces the opposite feelings and behaviours to those that might arouse anxiety.

Moving on to the anal stage, fixation here can produce character traits such as orderliness and being obstinate. These traits are seen as products of the child's experience of toilet training (I said earlier how the child is able to make choices that have an important social meaning and impact – it is now able to express its emotions through its behaviour. Freud position on personality was that it is the result of conflict between inherited patterns of instincts, revealed in needs and behaviour, and the environment.

Having looked at these four areas of study it perhaps now appropriate to evaluate Freud's theory in order to establish how valid etc it is and this in turn may produces more issues. Here are some evaluation points:

- Difficult to test, but the evidence that has been gathered is not favourable

- The crucial events (e.g., how the libido is used) are unobservable, and there are no good means to measure them
- There is an awfully long time between the occurrence of the causal stimulus and its presumed effect; relationships between early events and later traits tend to be weak and inconsistent
- This theory of development was conceived without studying children; rather, it was developed from patients' recollections, dreams and free associations

Freud's theory focuses on sex and aggression. During the time period Freud lived in, sex and sexual ideas did not make for socially acceptable topics for dinner conversations, or most any other sort of conversations. Therefore, those ideas were unspoken, because they were socially unacceptable.

Recently, James Pennebaker has done some studies in which people tell negative secrets to the experimenter - in confidence and with confidentiality, in a set similar to a Catholic confessional - and Pennebaker takes various measures of their well being. He finds that a few months later, people who tell the negative secrets have higher levels of well being than people who did not reveal any negative secrets. One measure is the number of trips to the university medical office to be treated for illness.

Let me suggest that Pennebaker's results - that confessing negative secrets leads to higher well being - relates to Freud's work by illustrating that people who release some socially unacceptable thought/belief/action feel better as a result. This suggests that Freud may have been correct about "psychic energy" being tied up in negative things, although the exact content of those things may not be sex and aggression. Thus, Freud may have correctly identified an important aspect of well being - the notion that unspoken thoughts can influence our behaviour - but the identifying the content of the thoughts as exclusively sexual and aggressive may be incorrect.