

OUTLINE AND DISCUSS THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGY

I knew very little about Sigmund Freud and his approach to psychology before I began this essay, but after researching his many theories it struck me that here was a man who in his life, and even after his death in 1939 became someone who was either highly thought of, or very highly criticised. I am going to explain why he was seen in this way, and the way in which he ignored the sexual repression of his era, and became the “Father of Psychology”

Imagine life in the Victorian era. Men were seen as the superior figure, the women as care givers and provider of all their husbands needs, and children were seen and not heard. Now imagine a bright Jewish boy who went to medical school in Vienna, which in its self was one of the few viable options open to him at that time, and then going onto set up a neuropsychiatry practice with the help of a man named Joseph Breuer. Not that unusual up to this point, but as Sigmund Freud’s career progressed towards becoming what he is now termed as being, “the Father of Psychology” many people found him to be either very controversial and slightly mad, or the most influential and complex man you were ever likely to meet.

Freud’s psychodynamic approach to psychology was initially not well received, it wasn’t the fact that this approach looked at the emotional and motivational forces that effect behaviour and mental states, but more so the emphasis he placed on sexuality. Part of Freud’s theory required people to acknowledge their sexuality and their aggressive urges rather than denying their existence, which in the Victorian era was seen as a very taboo subject. The thought that we had urges within us, that were being denied, was an impossible concept for most people to accept. In response to this Freud tried to explain that the mind is a very complex thing, and along with the conscious part of our mind that allows us to be aware of our thoughts, memories, fantasies, and feelings, there is a much larger part that is the unconscious mind. According to Freud the unconscious is the source of our motivations, drives and instincts, whether they be simple desires for food or sex, or denying something which we can’t bear to look at, such as a traumatic incident. In order to pursue our everyday tasks then, our conscious and unconscious mind

either work together or fight with one another to assume control of our thoughts and feelings. For Sigmund Freud this was to become one of the many strengths of his psychodynamic approach, because when something is in your unconscious it can neither be proved nor disproved!

As well as the mind having these conscious and unconscious parts, Freud to make matters more complicated for people, also suggested that these derived from three more basic mechanisms, which make up the structure of our personality. The id, the ego and the super ego. Firstly the id, which he believed to contain the innate sexual instincts and aggressive instincts. Located in the unconscious mind, the id works alongside the pleasure principle, which emphasizes the need for immediate satisfaction, whether it is the need to satisfy hunger, thirst or sensual arousal. It seeks to reduce tension, avoid pain, and obtain pleasure without the consideration for other people or for society's rules. In short the id is the selfish, self-centred part of our personality, stopping at nothing to obtain its need.

Secondly comes the ego, this is the conscious rational part of our mind, and is developed during the first 2 years of our life. The ego works alongside the reality principle, taking into account what is practical and possible as well as what is urged. Freud said, "the ego represents reason and good sense" (1923). It allows the id satisfaction to the extent it considers reasonable, but when the id's demands threaten to get us rejected by society, it makes us feel anxious and threatened, and may use psychological weapons to prevent the id's instincts from taking over. So if you've ever wrestled with yourself over a decision you have had to make, this was probably your ego trying to reason with you!

The super ego is the last part of the personality to emerge and happens around the age of 5. It is mainly unconscious and represents the demands of society and parents, and of right and wrong. "It observes the ego, gives it orders, judges it and threatens it with punishment, exactly like the parents whose place it has taken" (Freud 1933). As mentioned above conflicts between the id, and super ego, sometimes cause the ego to use psychological weapons to protect itself, these are known as defence mechanisms. All defence mechanisms have two things in common, they distort or deny reality and they are unconscious.

These structures have been used after Freud's recognition of them, in the work of Jung and Adler, and are still used to some extent in the modern world of psychology. They are seen as one of Freud's many (or few) strengths depending on your own point of view.

As I mentioned in the beginning it was the emphasis Freud put on the sexual content of his theory, that the people of the Victorian era found controversial, so when he went on to describe another aspect of the personality structure the “psychosexual stages” you can imagine the criticism he came across. Freud believed that sexual drive controlled most, if not all, human functions. Not just in adults but in infants too! He went on to suggest that it was the primary force behind most thoughts, actions and deeds. Freud noted that at different stages of our lives right from birth, we gained a pleasurable feeling from our skin and other body parts.

From around 18 months old Freud found that infants were receiving great pleasure from sucking, especially at the breast. (Oral stage). After 18 months to three or four years, the focus of pleasure was the anus, according to Freud holding it in and letting it go was greatly enjoyed. For most children this was the age their parents started potty training, (the anal stage). Then the young child develops an interest in its sexual organs as a site of pleasure, (the phallic stage). In 1909 Freud published “the analysis of a phobia in a five year old boy” this became more commonly known as the case of Little Hans. In its time this analysis of the boy who at the age of 3 showed “a quite peculiar interest in his penis” was seen as a remarkable achievement. This pleasure then turns into a deep sexual attraction for the opposite sex, given the name “Oedipus complex” by Freud. This came about from the first love object for all of us being our mother. We want her attention and affection, we want her caresses, and we want her. Is what Freud believed, in a broadly sexual way. The son however according to Freud has a rival for his mother's affections, his father! After a while of pining for his mother's charms he starts to notice the sexual differences between a boy and a girl. From his naïve prospective, the difference being he has a penis and girls do not. At this point it seems to him that having something (his penis) is better than having nothing at all, and so this pleases him for a short time.

What became a pleasing thought for a while soon turns into a question of where is the girl's penis? Perhaps he thought, she has lost it, or it was cut off. Or worse still this could happen to me! This is the beginning of castration anxiety, a slight fear of losing one's penis. This engages his ego defences, he displaces his sexual impulses for his mother to girls and later, to women. He starts to identify with his father, and attempts to become more and more like him. The girl also begins her life in love with her mother, in order to switch her affections towards her father before the Oedipal process kicks in, Freud describes what he believes girls to have

for this reason as penis envy. The young girl has also noticed the difference between boys and girls, and feels that she some how doesn't measure up. She would like to have a penis too, and all the power associated with it. At the very least, she would like a penis substitute, such as a baby. As every child knows, you need a father as well a mother to have a baby, so the young girl, sets her sights on her father. He of course is already taken, so she moves from him to young boys, and later men. Only then does she start to identify with her mother, the women who got the man she really wanted. This could be seen as a weakness or limitation in Freud's work, due to the fact that children of the ages he describes cannot voice or agree with his opinion.

The latency stage from 6 years to puberty is a time that boys and girls spend little time together. Lastly the genital stage, which lasts from puberty and continues throughout adult life, during this stage the main source of pleasure, is in the genitals. Freud seemed to think that everything good and bad had to stem from the expression or repression of the sex drive, and was based on the intense avoidance of sexuality. In Freud's credit though he managed to rise above his culture's repressed attitude towards sex, to give the psychologists of the future a base to work from.

In conclusion then, was Freud himself, by talking so openly about sexuality in others, displacing his own unconscious thoughts about sex onto society? As Freud found out in his many case studies, including dream therapy, hypnosis, and talking therapy, this is something we will probably never know, as the unconscious mind is a difficult thing to access, prove or disprove!