

### **IP1/E3/1 Should Freudian theory be abandoned?**

Sigmund Freud was a Viennese psychiatrist who collected a body of data from his patients about their feelings and emotional experiences, especially relating to their childhood. He then developed his ideas to explain human behaviour into a theory: Psychoanalytic Theory, and a form of therapy: Psychoanalysis. His psychoanalytic theory is the best-known psychodynamic approach today. He believed that unconscious internal forces controlled an individual's behaviour.

Psychoanalytic theory seeks to explain human development and behaviour in terms of an interaction between innate drives (such as the desire for pleasure) and early experiences (the extent to which early desires were gratified)(Eysenck & Flanagan, 2000). Freud assumed that the mind is made up of three parts. All three parts are used for most behavioural decisions. First, there is the id. The id is made up of natural biological instincts and urges. These instincts and urges lie in the unconscious and are thought to be sexual and aggressive. They are all self-serving, impulsive, and irrational. The id runs according to the pleasure principle, with the emphasis being on immediate satisfaction. Second, there is the ego. This develops during the first two years of life and is the rational and conscious part of the mind. The ego works on the reality principle, taking account of what is happening in the environment around, i.e., the reality. Third, there is the superego. This develops at about the age of 5 years and represents the child's conscience and the sense of right and wrong. Freud suggested that this is formed in replication of the values of the same sexed parent, also known as the process of identification. Freud suggested that these three parts of the mind are frequently at conflict with one another. Conflicts occur most often between the id and the superego, because the id wants instant gratification, whereas the superego takes account of moral standards and decorum.

Since, conflicts cause anxiety, the ego defends itself against anxiety by using several defence mechanisms to prevent traumatic thoughts and feelings reaching consciousness. One of the major defence mechanisms is repression, which forces memories of conflicts and traumas out of consciousness and into the unconscious mind. Other defence mechanisms may include resistance, displacement and projection. Resistance is also another term to represent the process whereby thoughts and memories that are in the unconscious mind are prevented from reaching the conscious mind. Also within psychoanalysis, the term is used to refer to the way in which the person being analysed, offers resistance to the interpretations offered by the analyst (Cardwell, 1996, 2000). Displacement occurs when aggressive or other intense impulses are transferred away from a threatening person to someone or something non-threatening. Projection occurs when someone who possesses an undesirable characteristic or attitude, attributes it to other people. For example, someone who is very hostile may claim that other people are hostile to him or her (Eysenck & Flanagan, 2000).

According to Freud, psychological disorders can arise when an individual has unresolved conflicts and traumas from childhood. Defence mechanisms, such as the before mentioned, may be used to reduce anxiety caused by such unresolved conflicts, however, all they do is hide the conflict rather than resolve it. Considering the concept of repression, one may find it hard to test the theory, and therefore hard to prove the validity of the concept of repressed memories.

Through his research of dream psychology, **Freud** also assumed that there were three levels of the mind: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious contains those thoughts which are currently the focus of attention or knowledge at the awareness level. Information and knowledge that is stored in the preconscious is that can be retrieved easily from memory and brought into consciousness. However, information and knowledge that is stored in the unconscious is either very hard or almost impossible to bring into conscious awareness and generally requires extra effort (i.e.; hypnosis) to retrieve (Muus, p. 22-23). Although, Freud's explanations for the working of the mind are not biologically sound, they are revolutionary nonetheless. He was able to develop a theory about the working of the intangible human mind in quite simplistic models of explanation.

Through his research, **Freud** concluded, "all psychological events are tied to energy, drive, and instincts based on biological characteristics" (Muus, p. 18). When considering the decision-making processes of humans, it would be presumptuous to assume that unconscious thoughts and instincts are the sole source of motivation. Decisions maybe solely based on instincts in emergencies, when a quick, gut reaction is required. Whereas, in everyday decisions, such instinctual reactions play a lesser role of simple aiding an individuals logical reasoning. An average individual takes into account a variety of points prior to making a decision rather than simply relying on instinct. **Freud's** belief that every act or behaviour a human being generates generally originates from the unconscious suggests that human beings are literally incapable of any logical reasoning or thought. Another assumption of Freud that can be criticised is that the unconscious is larger than the conscious. Everyday, every hour that an individual is awake, he/she is functioning in the realm of awareness. This suggests that a vast amount of information is required to function effectively on a daily basis. Thus, it is difficult to believe that the unconscious would contain more information than what is accessible to function daily.

Out of his Id-Ego-Superego theory, **Freud** developed his theory of psychosexual development, which consists of four stages: oral, anal, phallic, and genital. In each stage, he believes that a "child derives pleasure from different body parts" (Muus, p. 27). It has often been argued that **Freud's** theory of developmental stages focuses too much on the sexual aspect of development, which is quite obvious in the names he gave to the different developmental stages. It seems that his own preoccupation with sexuality, perhaps as a result of it being a historical time of great sexual repression (Victorian age and society) made him focus on and seek for sexual connections wherever possible (Banyard & Hayes, 1994). Through further research, psychologists have found that it is undeniable that during the first year of life, infants tend to gain "pleasure" through oral activity. But rather than viewing that as sexually inspired behaviour, perhaps it maybe a result of developing physical senses (like taste and touch) which become tools for them to use to discover the outside world.

Because **Freud** recognized nature or innate features as the leading factors in cognitive development, his psychosexual theory tends to view human development away from the influence of the society or environment. He implies that a child, as if living in a societal vacuum, sees other human beings simply as "objects of affection" rather than

entities which contribute to their cognitive development. As a result, when a child moves from one stage of psychosexual development to another, his/her object of affection changes in order to satisfy a particular instinctive desire. **Freud's** disregard of societal influences, as well as his preoccupation with sexuality, causes many psychologists to question, criticise or blatantly disagree with his theory of development. While instinct and desire do motivate a person's actions to an extent, one cannot deny that social norms play a significant role in the cognitive development of children.

Freud coupled the theory of psychosexual development with a theory of personality. If a child experiences severe problems or displeasure, or excessive pleasure at any point in his life, this leads to fixation, in which the libido (sexual instinct) becomes attached to that point or stage of life for many years. Later in life, adults who experience very stressful situations are likely to show regression, in which their behaviour becomes less mature, and more like that displayed during that particular psychosexual stage or point at which they fixated as a child. According to Freud, these processes of fixation and regression play a great role in determining adult personalities. Again this theory maybe criticised stating the fact that it is predominantly focusing on sexual instincts. The libido does not govern an individuals behaviour entirely and hence its fixation at any point should not lead to regression. And what if an individual never experiences a moment of extreme displeasure or pleasure in his early life? This theory does not go on to eaccount for human behaviour in such a case.

All of Freud's theories can never be proven, because there is no way of using an experimental procedure to test them entirely. Also it has often been suggested that since he is studying so much of the unconscious, it can even be possible that he himself might unconsciously overlook something, or unconsciously focus too much on one particular aspect.

There is also the thought that, since he is studying so much of the unconscious, isn't it true that he might unconsciously overlook something, or unconsciously focus too much on one aspect? After all, he is a human being with a mind just like the human beings in which he studied. Also there are many other theories and explanations of human behaviour which maybe more feasible and more universally acceptable such as Learning Theory developed by the likes of Pavlov (1849-1936), Thorndike (1874-1949), Skinner (1904-1990), Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura (1965), Cognitive or Information Processing theory developed in the 1950s and so on. It is true, however, that Freud's theories do make sense in observation to abandon them completely. Freud himself put a lot of time into all of his studies, and was an observer himself. He inspired many others to follow in his footsteps, elaborate on all his theories, and use his methods even today. Freud also frequently revised his work, and seemed to let every possibility come into perspective. As far as proofs, experiments, or tests, Freud, like any other psychologist, has little strength.

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