

Sigmund freud's theories in modern psychology



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Freud's theory has a special place in the Psychology discipline. Most mainstream contemporary psychologists tend to shy away from his theory and is looked upon as equivalent as the flat earth theory in its irrelevancy (Kline, 1984, p. 47) yet his theory still continues to be studied. Before proceeding with evaluating the theory, it is appropriate to outline the basic ideas of Freudian theory itself. Then, arguments for and against the relevancy of Freudian concepts in contemporary times will be highlighted.

This evaluation will be divided into two areas: the scientific aspect of Freudian theory and general impact of Freud's theory. Therefore, the main questions that will be tackled in this essay will be whether Freudian theory is scientific or not and to what extent Freud changed our everyday perception respectively. Hopefully, both of these questions will assist in explaining how the works of Sigmund Freud are both relevant and irrelevant in present times.

Freud's theoretical paradigm is known as psychoanalysis. The central idea of the theory is that the mind is divided into two: the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious part of the mind is the one we always use while the unconscious is part of our mind in which we are not aware of yet it is also the one that drives our behaviour. More specifically, the mind is driven by the conflicting interplay between the Id, Ego and the Superego. The Id is driven by the primary processes (Storr, 1989) or biological needs of humans therefore it strives for immediate satisfaction. Meanwhile, the superego is the opposite of the Id in that it represents the norms and morality that have been internalized (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008) by the individual due to, generally but not necessarily, parental control. The Ego acts on secondary process or reality principle (Appignanesi & Zarate, 1992) in which reason is

applied to regulate the conflict between the id, superego and the outside world (Storr, 1989).

The interplay between the id, ego and superego is manifested in various aspects of human behaviours such as reaction-formation, a defence mechanism where an individual act the opposite of what he/she is denying to reveal (Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007); dreaming, manifesting a desire which cannot find expression in waking life (Kline, 1984, p. 30) and personality. An example of the latter is that an individual that strives on cleanliness in his adult life can trace back his personality from his childhood, namely his resistance of defecating during toilet training (Abraham, 1927; S. Freud, 1908, as cited in Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007).

One of the main arguments against Freuds psychoanalysis theory is the idea that the theory itself is unscientific and should not be taken seriously by the scientific community. Ironically, Freud was a believer in determinism. Just like how natural sciences uncover the natural laws that govern the physical world, Freud wanted to discover the law that governs the human mind and behaviour. However, Eysenck and Wilson (as cited in Kline, 1984) have pointed out several aspects of Freuds work that does not follow the basic tenet of scientific methodology. One notable flaw that was highlighted by them was the lack of data among Freuds writing. The only data being reported are the patients account to which Freud and other psychoanalysts try to interpret. Furthermore, Freud wrote his report after dinner instead of during his appointment with the patient (Kline, 1984). Therefore, Freuds writing can be said to unreliable because his writings depended on Freuds memory.

Furthermore, the lack of data in Freuds writings leads to revelation of another scientific flaw in Freuds method which is the inadequacy of quantitative data. Therefore, it is impossible to statistically analyse and create a concrete correlational data from Freuds research. Furthermore, a theory lacking in correlational data is bound to fail in making predictions.

However, Kline (1984) is more sympathetic to Freuds theory and outlined several arguments to counter Eysencks criticism on Freuds psychoanalysis theory. Although Kline agreed with Eysencks position regarding the unscientific nature of Freuds theory, he is not willing to quickly dismiss Freuds theory. He emphasised on the uniqueness of Freuds theory that may possibly be the main explanation for why many are fascinated by his theory. Specifically, he noted how Freud tries to cover all aspects of human behaviour under one paradigm while other theories seem to limit itself on a particular area of human behaviour. In summary, he believes that the fact that no other theory can match its scope is a good enough reason to give Freudian theory a second chance. Conant (as cited in Kline, 1984) also supported the idea that a feasible alternative to Freuds theory is almost non-existent which makes the theory hard to be rejected.

Furthermore, Farrell (1981) was also willing to give Freud a chance by arguing that the theory should be seen not as one whole hypothesis but as a collection of hypotheses (Kline, 1984, p. 48). Therefore, if one aspect of Freuds hypothesis is proven wrong then it does not mean the whole theory be dismissed entirely. For example, dismissing the hypothesis regarding the psychosexual stages (oral, anal and phallic) in childhood does not mean that the psychoanalytic view of dreams as a way of expressing unfulfilled wish be

rejected. Kline (1984) used this argument to propose a new way to examine Freud which involves testing each hypothesis or aspect of Psychoanalysis one by one through empirical means. This will involve, he argued, restating some of Freud's hypothesis into a type that can be tested. Thus this reverses Eysenck's picture of Freudian theory as unscientific.

While Kline and Farrell focused on arguing for psychoanalysis as an empirical scientific discipline, Ricoeur (as cited in Kline, 1984) tried to defend Freud by disassociating it from natural sciences and its principles such as objectivity, positivism and empiricism. He argued that Freud's theory takes a more subjective and interpretive approach therefore should be looked upon differently. In summary, Freud's work is generally relegated to irrelevancy by psychologists such as Eysenck among others. However, some have tried to inject new insight in handling Freud's work into a more scientific way and have upheld its relevancy.

Aside from the empirical and scientific aspect of the theory, Freud has also been attacked in other areas by different approach such as feminism and even sociological. Feminist camp is clearly upset with the phallogocentricity of the theory. With the idea called penis envy, Freud theorizes that girls were unconsciously jealous of boys because they did not have a penis. This implies that male genital is naturally and psychologically superior thus it is considered as a sexist concept for the feminist.

Freud's theory have also been criticised from a sociological perspective as well. This is particularly targeted at the Oedipal complex, a theory that Freud proposed concerning boys competing with their fathers for the affection of

his mother and the subsequent unconscious fear of castration by the father. Malinowski (as cited in Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007) noted that the people in the Pacific island of Trobriand do not have a Western type of nuclear family. The mother's brother is the head of the household and the authority figure of the family unit instead of the father. This overrides the idea that the son has hatred for their biological father and instead it is directed to the uncle.

However, despite the ample amount of criticism towards Freud's theory, it cannot be denied that his work was highly influential. The most notable mark that Freud left behind on psychology is the idea of the unconscious mind and the importance of it towards defining our personality. Freud may not be the first one to come to the conclusion regarding the existence of an unconscious part of our mind but he was the one who popularized the idea and changed the way people look at the human mind (Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007).

Furthermore, Freud acknowledged the complexity of the human mind and was one of the few who dare to examine its complexities in its different ranges from personality to religion and to some extent linguistic (e.g., Freudian slip). As mentioned previously, the scope of Freud's theory is almost unmatched and ambitious in the way it tries to encompass both rational thought and emotional urges (Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007, p. 581) of humans.

In conclusion, Freud is both relevant and irrelevant in modern times. Some aspects of the theory are considered out-dated (e.g. the superiority of the

penis and the closed system analogy) while some are still relevant and has become an essential component in the study of mind and personality (e. g. the unconscious mind and hidden thought processes). There are also some aspects that are still debated such as the question of whether Freudian theory can be considered as a science.