

Freud's theory of unconscious in inter group relations



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Freud's contributions to inter group relations

Freud's theories on unconsciousness provided an important perspective that was relevant to the study of inter group relations. Freud believed that groups were composed of the unconscious life of each member. He thought a group couldn't be understood without exploring the unconscious aspects of the individual member. He also was of the opinion that the individual couldn't be separated from the group. In order to understand the mind, Freud believed that attention had to be paid to how the mind of an individual interacts with others (Caper 1999). The basis of Freud's psychoanalytic theory is that all behaviour is both instinctual and biological. Freud's psychoanalytic theory is composed of the ego which works to find a balance between the id and the superego. The superego would be classified as the demands our society places on the individual for acceptable behaviour, and the id comprises instincts, such as sex and aggression (Schultz & Schultz 2005). This aspect of Freud's theory plays an important role in inter group relations. It addresses the unconscious nature of each person in a group environment, as well as the unconscious nature of the entire group (Wrogemann 2003).

Unconscious influences at work in inter group relations are experienced in different ways. One example is when a group is experiencing a failure and in order to protect their ego they engage in defence mechanisms by blaming other groups for their failure. They look outside of themselves for excuses as to why their effort failed, instead of realizing as Freud did, that the anxiety each member experienced was caused by low self-esteem and insecurities (Bodenhausen, Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Moreno 2001; Wrogemann 2003).

Freud's theory of the unconscious and ego protection sheds light on how to

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improve inter group relations and increase success. If a group stopped deflecting from their own shortcomings by looking outside of their own organization they could more effectively correct their problems. If they would attempt to find the roots of their own behaviour they could get to the source of their failure. They would find it didn't come from an outside group, but from within themselves (Wrogemann 2003). Freud's theories, in part, are the basis for Terror Management Theory (TMT), which deals with managing thoughts of death and is important to inter group relations (Navarette, Kirkpatrick, Kurzban & Fessler 2004).

Looking inwardly is a concept that originated with Freud. McCormick and White (2000) reported that this self-analyzing method was an important aspect of psychoanalytic theory. Other scientists picked up on it and applied it to the study of groups (as cited in Wrogemann 2003). Cilliers and Koortzen (1998) report that Freud's theories of psychodynamics contributed to the concept that groups have a life of their own. Not only does a group have a collective consciousness, it also is composed of the collective unconscious nuances of each individual (as cited in Wrogemann 2003). Each member of a group brings to it their own unconscious desires and unmet needs. Their inner conflicts and tensions are played out in the group setting, such as at work. In the work environment, as each person unconsciously attempts to solve their issues, they are met with frustration and disappointment. The work environment cannot meet those needs leading the individual to become aggressive and exhibit other negative behaviours. The end result is that of strained relationships with others. As with other groups experiencing failure, workers have a tendency to blame their frustrations on someone

else. They blame others for their lack of success or their disappointment while at the same time attempting to find security in those very relationships (Wrogemann 2003).

Freud's theory of regression was important to understanding inter group relations.

Freud believed that depersonalization took place in the group causing a shift in inter group relations. The shift occurred when the individual member of a group loses his individuality and those unique qualities that set him apart from others. The process is an unconscious one where the group member takes on the role of child and the leader that of the parent. The result is a type of dependence on the leader that leads to thoughts that the group is not composed of individuals (Freud 1921). The lines become blurred. Bion (1961) had a more positive outlook on the dynamics of inter group relations. He claimed that when individuals came together in a group that they surrender their individuality to the leader and group in order to experience wholeness, oneness, and security. In order for the group to continue to exist it takes on something bigger that is outside of themselves.

Freud's contributions to the study of inter group relations was significant. By focusing on the unconscious he brought attention to the elements of group dynamics that involved unmet needs, unfulfilled desires, and other drives that are hidden, yet influencing factors in group interaction. His theory of the id, ego, and superego help to explain what happens in the mind of the individual and then collectively when part of a group. On his views regarding the importance of the individual in the context of a group, Freud wrote:

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“...only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper or as an opponent...”

(quoted in Caper 1999, pg. 1).

Some of Freud’s theories have not been supported by subsequent testing by others, but a number of them have been shown to be valid. Freud’s theories on the unconscious and its relation to a person’s behaviour, thoughts, and emotions were accurate. Research that was conducted long after the Freud era ended demonstrated that his theory on the role of the unconscious was more extensive than anyone thought possible. Freud had no idea just how far-reaching his theory on the unconscious was (Schultz & Schultz 2005). Research into inter group relations is based partly on the contributions of Sigmund Freud and the benefits derived are substantial.

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