

Freuds concepts and their value for contemporary psychology



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Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is well known as the founder of psychoanalysis in psychiatry and is thought of by many as a key figure in psychology.

Throughout his work Freud came up with numerous concepts and theories, many of which still cause a lot of debate amongst psychologists.

In this essay I will discuss some of Freud's key concepts including; development of personality, personality structures and defence mechanisms. After which I will attempt to assess their significance in modern psychology and conclude whether or not I believe Freud's concepts are of value to contemporary psychology and if we should continue to look into his work.

One key concept developed by Freud is the development of personality. He came up with five distinct stages, known as the psychosexual stage, to describe how our personalities develop from birth to about 18 years of age. He places particular emphasis on the development of sexual drives and how this shapes our personalities. Furthermore, each stage has a region, known as the erogenous zone, where the libidinal energy is focused. The five stages are: Oral stage (birth - one year old), in this stage Freud (1901) suggests that events around feeding are the focal point of pleasure for the infant, the erogenous zone includes the lips, mouth and tongue (Maltby, Day and Macaskill; 2007).

Anal stage (1year -2 years), Freud believed that bowel movement gives the baby sensual pleasure, also at this stage the child is rewarded for bladder and bowel control (Maltby et al., 2007). The anal region becomes the new erogenous zone.

Phallic stage (3 years -5 years), at this stage the child starts to mature physiologically and the libidinal energy is transferred to genital region (new erogenous zone). At this stage gratification is gained from masturbation (Maltby et al., 2007). Freud thought that girls experienced what he called 'penis envy' as they become aware that boys have penises and they do not. In addition, boys become sexually aware of their mother and start to view their father as a sexual rival (and experience castration anxiety – fear of losing their penis), this is known as the Oedipal complex.

Latency stage (5 years -12 years) can be seen as a resting period of the psychosexual stage. Social interactions are most important in this stage, children develop friendships with same sexed peers, as well as, identifying with the same sexed parent (Maltby et al., 2007) resulting in socialisation of gender roles.

Genital stage (12 years +) – as this stage puberty begins, which reawakens the libidinal energy, resulting in a more mature sexual attachment, in 'normal' development the main sexual objects are members of the opposite sex (Maltby et al., 2007).

Freud also developed the idea of personality structures. He identifies three personality structures that develop in every person, these are the; ID (present from birth), EGO and superEGO (these two form later on in development). The ID is the primitive, pleasure seeking part of the personality, it strives for immediate gratification (i. e. I want X and I want it now!). The EGO plays an important role as the mediator and is the rational aspect of our personalities (i. e. You will find a way to get X, just be patient).

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Finally the superEGO is the moral, guilt driven side of the personality which then becomes our conscience (i. e. You can't have X because its wrong).

And finally I will talk about defence mechanisms, a well-known concept developed by Freud. Defence mechanisms can be described as the minds way of protecting itself from unacceptable or painful thoughts, as well as, conflict from the three personality structures. Freud mentions eleven defence mechanisms: Repression, denial, projection, reaction formation, rationalisation, conversion reaction, phobic avoidance, displacement, regression, isolation and undoing.

The two most known defences are: repression - the idea that we push undesirable thoughts, feelings and impulses from our conscious mind into our unconscious in order to shield ourselves from pain and protect our self-esteem. In other words Freud saw repression as the Ego and superEGO's way of supressing the ID. Denial - is simply when we refuse to face certain situations or realities as we do not find them acceptable. Cramer (1991) states that the boundaries between these two defence mechanisms are often hard to distinguish between (cited in Baumeister, Dale and Sommer Freudian Defence mechanisms and empirical findings in modern social psychology; 1998).

The next part of the essay will aim to assess the value of some of Freud's work in contemporary psychology.

The concept of personality development is solely based on how libidinal instincts shape us. Maltby, Day and Macaskill (2007), state that Freud does not meet the parsimony criteria in his explanation of the motivational basis <https://assignbuster.com/freuds-concepts-and-their-value-for-contemporary-psychology/>

of behaviour, Freud implies that sexual and aggressive instincts are the only motivators of human behaviour (Maltby et al., 2007). The psychosexual stages, do not fully explain human behaviour as they are highly reductionist and ignore the complexity of the human mind, as well as, being bias in only emphasising one aspect as the basis of all behaviour, therefore, it can be said that they are of little value to contemporary psychology.

Freud also identified problems that may occur as a result of fixation in anyone of the five psychosexual stages. He then developed treatment, known as free association, which would allow the patients to resolve their emotional conflicts, which involved catharsis, where the patients discharged their emotions by speaking freely about anything they want, leading to resolution of these issues. This method has been widely reviewed and is still used in contemporary psychology. “ Greenberg (2002) concluded that emotional arousal and processing within a supportive therapeutic relationship is the core element for positive change in therapy. He emphasized the cognitive aspect of catharsis and the need to understand and make sense of emotions.” (Esta Powell; 2007). Free association is replicable making it reliable and has many applications to contemporary psychology making it valid.

Conversely, much of Freud’s work on the psychosexual stages was largely based on his interpretations of observations of young children or self-reports of dreams and thoughts. Freud used ‘ Little Hans’ primarily to support his theory of the Oedipus complex (Jennifer Stuart; 2007). “ Critics contend that Freud’s theory is lacking in empirical evidence and relies too heavily on therapeutic achievements, whereas others assert that even Freud’s clinical

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data are flawed, inaccurate, and selective at best” (Beystehner; 1998). Thus, the validity of his work is very much in question. As these concepts, such as the psychosexual stages, cannot be operationalized and tested they are not falsifiable and are of little relevance to contemporary research.

Many of Freud’s theories are simple in a way that they are not comprised of many concepts, for example, his theory on personality structure consists of three clearly definable structures. In this sense his work can be said to be parsimonious and has formed a basis for further research.

According to Dangleish and Power (1999) the personality structure proposed by Freud has face validity as we are all aware of anxiety and conflicts in everyday life decision making (as cited in Maltby, Day and Macaskill, Personality, Individual Differences and Intelligence; 2007: 34). Face validity implies that there is support for his theory on personality structures, and so this theory can be operationalized and tested to see how personalities coexist within us and data from these tests can have practical applications.

Furthermore, Freud’s work on defence mechanisms was widely accepted and leads to follow up research, such as that by Brewin and Andrews. After reviewing this area of psychology, Brewin and Andrews (1998) concluded that 20% to 60% of therapy patients who had been victims of sexual abuse in their childhood reported not being able to recall being abused for large periods of time in their lives (cited in Maltby et al., Personality, Individual Differences and Intelligence; 2007: 36, 37). This shows us that the mind does use methods, such as repression, to protect itself from indecent memories.

This shows falsifiability as it is replicable and has practical applications in life which can be used and developed in contemporary psychology.

Freud's work is very controversial and has provoked enormous debate, much of which has led to the development of novel ideas in psychology. Not only has his work been expanded upon and developed (e. g. to better treatment of mental patients) but many breakthroughs have been made in trying to disprove his theories. Although many of Freud's theories are subjective and based on his interpretation of dreams and thoughts which cannot be empirically tested, he has made many valuable contributions to psychology. These include the use of defence mechanisms and the idea of personality structures, both of which have supporting evidence from contemporary psychologists, e. g. Brewin and Andrews (1998) work supports the concept of defence mechanisms. As well as this he created clinical practice of psychoanalysis for treating psychopathology, developed therapeutic techniques such as the use of free association and concluded dreams are the primary insight into the unconscious mind. All of these have had practical applications and have formed the foundation of contemporary psychology. Thus, I believe that it is potent that Freud's theories and concepts continue to be revised.

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