

Evaluation of the psychodynamic approach



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Psychoanalysis is the study of the forces that produce human behaviour through various parts of the psyche. It considers that mental forces are split into two portions that affect behavior and mental states; the motivational and emotional forces and the inner unconscious forces (Atkinson, 1990). It asserts that the personality has a finite psychic energy supply that must be distributed amongst the id, ego and superego. It also ascertains how these relate to the early childhood development of a person and tries to explain these developments.

Sigmund Freud was the first psychoanalyst, an innovator in his time. While psychodynamic theory is a broad therapeutic orientation, psychoanalysis was his movement towards understanding and treatment using a patient's pathological defences and analyzing these to help understand and change these behaviours.

Freud believed that the mind consists of three levels of consciousness and that they are allotted varying levels of a person's mental capacity. According to Freud the mind consists of the following:

Conscious

The portion of the mind that consists of your awareness, it is easy to process this information logically and verbalize your experiences of this level to explain the world around you. He believed this was the smallest part and could be represented by the tip of the iceberg in his model (Hayes, 2000).

Preconscious

Considered to be recollective memory, things within this section may not exist within the conscious mind but can be accessed. This was a larger portion of the mind than the conscious level but still vastly smaller than the unconscious.

Unconscious

The largest portion of the mind that consists of the urges, and ideas that are not accessible to the mind and are tied to pain, anxieties and internal conflicts (Atkinson, 1990). He asserts that they hold influence over an individual's actions and their conscious awareness and that this is the main battleground of the Id, Ego, and Superego.

Freud uses the Id, Ego, and Superego to describe the motivations and self control mechanisms of the mind. These three elements work together to create the complexity of human behavior.

The id is instinctive and primitive in its interaction with our behaviours. It is driven by its fight for immediate fulfilment of all desires (Hayes, 2000). If not met the result is anxiety or tension. In infancy the id is important to survival of the individual e. g a baby's cry for hunger or comfort.

Dealing with reality is the responsibility of the ego, handling the impulses of the id while complying with social norms. The ego is subject to the reality principle wherein the nature of a request from the id is weighed against the consequences and a decision can be made. In many cases the id will attempt to delay satiation. The ego functions in both the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind (Atkinson, 1990).

The superego could be considered the moral compass. Freud deduced that the superego starts to become active around the age of five and is developed from both society at large and our parents and holds our framework for making morality based decisions. The superego is present in the conscious, preconscious and unconscious. He proposed that the superego was constituent of the ego ideal, allowing it to consider both the potential consequences and feelings of guilt, alongside any potential positive reinforcements.

The competition amongst these forces can be a disturbing force in a subject's mind and Freud described ego strength as a person's capacity to adequately manage these contesting demands. He considered someone with strong ego strength to be much more capable of this balancing act and inferred that this would result in a healthier, more balanced mind (Hayes, 2000).

Freud deduced that personality is entrenched by the age of five and that the experiences within this period are the main factor in the development of this personality. His theory says that this development takes part in a series of stages, each focussing on an erogenous zone. If a person is to complete these stages successfully they will be able to progress to a healthy development but if one of the stages is unfinished, then the individual would be unable to progress to the next stage. He believed this caused fixations on that erogenous zone that would affect their fulfillment of desire in later life (Gross, 2010).

The Oral Stage

Lasting from birth to the age of one year this stage asserts that the infants primary source of interaction is via the mouth through the suckling and rooting reflex. The oral stimulation and satisfaction is entirely dependent on the mother and conflict can arise from the weaning process. Freud believed that failure to complete this stage could lead to an oral fixation that may result in issues with nail biting, eating and smoking.

The Anal Stage

Developing from the age of one and lasting through to three, the libido now focusses on controlling the bowel movements. The major conflict at this stage is toilet training. He claimed that a relaxed attitude towards this could cause a child to develop an anal-expulsive personality in adulthood that would denote a messy and destructive personality. A stricter attitude could lead to an anally retentive personality and become stringent and obsessive (Hayes, 2000).

The Phallic Stage

The phallic stage focusses on the genitals and the differences between the sexes. This lasts from around the age of three to six. This development can cause a rivalry with boy's fathers for their mother's affections and the Oedipus complex is described as a feeling of wanting to possess the mother and replace the father. The child may also fear punishment by the father for these feelings and this is referred to as castration anxiety (Hayes, 2000). The Electra complex is the comparative set of emotions felt by females. However, this is deemed to be due to envy (Gross, 2010).

The Latent Period

From age six until puberty, the sexual feelings are inactive and the libido is suppressed by the development of the ego and superego. This stage is around the time children become predisposed with social activities and platonic relationships.

The Genital Stage

From puberty and throughout the rest of adult life, sexual interest takes focus. This stage is also associated with increased awareness in the welfare of the partner and should an individual complete all the preceding stages Freud says that they should be of well-balanced and nurturing character (Hayes, 2000).

When the Ego can no longer fully cope with the demands of the id, anxiety arises. These anxieties are used to signal to the ego that there is a problem. The ego has developed a number of defence mechanisms to help alleviate the anxieties. These defences work within the unconscious mind to warp the perception of reality in the hope of enabling normal function. Defence mechanisms while useful can also prevent dealing with unhealthy issues properly.

Though Freud's theories have been held up as a great advancement they are not without their critics. These critiques can be seen to fit into three groups. One of the first things we consider is the lack of empirical evidence Freud puts forward as he mainly relied on therapeutic data and the little clinical data he did provide is inaccurate, flawed and selective. Furthermore, a

number of theorists claim that psychoanalysis is merely pseudoscience and core ideas upon which it is based are fallible.

Critics often point to the lack of importance that psychoanalysis places on common sense and that because it focuses mainly on the unconscious motives, it dismisses the personal sense of self.

It could be said that Freud was more interested in finding ways to illustrate his theoretical points than in the outcomes of his treatments. Freud only ever formally presented twelve cases but mentioned over a hundred more. Freud never used control groups and only sporadically recorded his observations. His access to individuals was also limited and consisted mainly of middle aged women from Vienna (Louw, 1998).

By its very nature psychoanalysis is not falsifiable and it cannot make predictions of certifiable behavior. This creates an inability to test and verify results. In addition to this there are no clearly defined lines of reasoning or rules to follow and while one analysis may interpret a neurosis in one way, another may observe the same case in a completely contradictory way meaning that we must conclude that these interpretations are unstable.

I concur with the critics of Freud's theory, this is largely due to the lack of empirical data he put forward and the generalisations made within the theory seemingly fallible to multiple interpretations. I also contend that because the theory is not inclusively falsifiable, this was used to prop up irrelevant and broken assumptions. I do though believe that some aspects of psychoanalysis have strength and that so many tenets of the subject entering the modern lexicon may be testament to the fact that they seem to

ring true to the plight of many people. The worth of psychoanalysis as a stepping stone to more effective methods within psychology cannot be understated and though it may now be considered obsolete its legacy has outlasted its usefulness.