

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SIGMUND FREUD'S THEORY ON EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In simple terms, Freud's theory suggests that human behavior is influenced by unconscious memories, thoughts, and urges. This theory also proposes that the psyche comprises three aspects: the id, ego, and superego. The id is entirely unconscious, while the ego operates in the conscious mind. The superego operates both unconsciously and consciously.

Background

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was a Viennese doctor who was trained in neurology and asked to work with patients suffering from hysteria, a condition marked by uncontrollable emotional outbursts, fears, and anxiety that had puzzled physicians for centuries. He was also asked to work with women who suffered from physical symptoms and forms of paralysis which had no organic causes. During that time, many people believed that certain individuals were genetically inferior and thus more susceptible to mental illness. Women were thought to be genetically inferior and thus prone to illnesses such as hysteria, which had previously been attributed to a detached womb traveling around in the body (the word "hyster" means "uterus" in Greek).

However, after World War I, many soldiers came home with problems similar to hysteria. This called into question the idea of genetic inferiority as a cause of mental illness. Freud began working with hysterical patients and discovered that when they began to talk about some of their life experiences, particularly those that took place in early childhood, their symptoms disappeared. This led him to suggest the first purely psychological explanation for physical problems and mental illness. What he proposed was that unconscious motives, desires, fears, and anxieties drive our actions. When upsetting memories or thoughts begin to find their way into our consciousness, we develop defenses to shield us from these painful realities, called defense mechanisms. Freud believed that many mental illnesses are a result of a person's inability to accept reality.

Freud emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping our personality and behavior. In our natural state, we are biological beings. We are driven primarily by instincts. During childhood, however, we begin to become social beings as we learn how to manage our instincts and transform them into socially acceptable behaviors. The type of parenting the child receives has a very powerful impact on the child's personality development. We will explore this idea further in our discussion of psychosexual development, but first, we must identify the parts of the "self" in Freud's model, or in other words, what constitutes a person's personality and makes us who we are.

Theory of Personality/Self

According to Freud's model of the psyche, the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the superego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the superego.

As adults, our personality or self consists of three main parts: the **id**, the **ego**, and the **superego**. The id, the basic, primal part of the personality, is the part of the self with which we are born. It consists of the biologically-driven self and includes our instincts and drives. It is the part of us that wants immediate gratification. Later in life, it comes to house our deepest, often unacceptable desires, such as sex and aggression. It operates under the pleasure principle which means that the criteria for determining whether something is good or bad is whether it feels good or bad. An infant is all id.

Next, the ego begins to develop during the first three years of a child's life. The last component of personality to develop, the superego, starts to emerge around the age of five when a child interacts more and more with others, learning the social rules for right and wrong. The superego acts as our conscience; it is our moral compass that tells us how we should behave. It strives for perfection and judges our behavior, leading to feelings of pride or—when we fall short of the ideal—feelings of guilt.

In contrast to the instinctual id and the rule-based superego, the ego is the rational part of our personality. It's what Freud considered to be the self, and it is the part of our personality that is seen by others. Its job is to balance the demands of the id and superego in the context of reality; thus, it operates on what Freud called the "reality principle." The ego helps the id satisfy its desires in a realistic way.

The id and superego are in constant conflict because the id wants instant gratification regardless of the consequences, but the superego tells us that we must behave in socially acceptable ways. Thus, the ego's job is to find the middle ground. It helps satisfy the id's desires in a rational way that will not lead us to feelings of guilt. According to Freud, a person who has a strong ego, which can balance the demands of the id and the superego, has a healthy personality. Freud maintained that imbalances in the system can lead to neurosis (a tendency to experience negative emotions), anxiety disorders, or unhealthy behaviors. For example, a person who is dominated by their id might be narcissistic and impulsive. A person with a dominant superego might be controlled by feelings of guilt and deny themselves even socially acceptable pleasures; conversely, if the superego is weak or absent, a person might become a psychopath. An overly dominant superego might be seen in an over-controlled individual whose rational grasp on reality is so strong that they are unaware of their emotional needs, or, in a neurotic who is overly defensive (overusing ego defense mechanisms).

Freud's Theory of Personality

According to Freud's theory, there are a few different factors that affect personality. They include cathexis and anticathexis, along with life and death instincts.

Cathexis and Anticathexis

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, all psychic energy is generated by libido. Freud suggested that our mental states were influenced by two competing forces: cathexis and anticathexis.

- **Cathexis** was described as an investment of mental energy in a person, idea, or object.
- **Anticathexis** involves the ego blocking the socially unacceptable needs of the id. Repressing urges and desires is one common form of anticathexis, but this involves a significant investment of energy.

If you are hungry, for example, you might create a mental image of a delicious meal that you have been craving. In other cases, the ego might harness some energy from the id (the

primitive mind) to seek out activities related to the desire in order to disperse excess energy from the id.

Sticking with the same example, if you can't actually seek out food to appease your hunger, you might instead thumb through a cookbook or browse through your favorite recipe blog. According to Freud's theory, there is only so much libidinal energy available. When a lot of energy is devoted to suppressing urges via anticathexis, there is less energy for other processes.

Life Instincts and Death Instincts

Freud also believed that much of human behavior was motivated by two driving instincts: life instincts and death instincts.

- **Life instincts** (Eros) are those that relate to a basic need for survival, reproduction, and pleasure. They include such things as the need for food, shelter, love, and sex.
- **Death instincts** (Thanatos) are the result of an unconscious wish for death, which Freud believed all humans have. Self-destructive behavior was one expression of the death drive, according to Freud. However, he believed that these death instincts were largely tempered by life instincts.

Sigmund Freud's Theory of Talk Therapy

One of Freud's greatest contributions to psychology was talk therapy, the notion that simply talking about problems can help alleviate them. It was through his association with his close friend and colleague Josef Breuer that Freud became aware of a woman known in the case history as Anna O.

The young woman's real name was Bertha Pappenheim. She became a patient of Breuer's after suffering a bout of what was then known as hysteria. Symptoms included blurred vision, hallucinations, and partial paralysis.

Breuer observed that discussing her experiences provided some relief from her symptoms. It was Pappenheim herself who began referring to the treatment as the "talking cure."

While Anna O. is often described as one of Freud's patients, the two never actually met. Freud often discussed her case with Breuer, however, and the two collaborated on an 1895 book based on her treatment titled *Studies in Hysteria*.

Freud concluded that her hysteria was the result of childhood sexual abuse, a view that ended up leading to a rift in Freud and Breuer's professional and personal relationship. Anna O. may not have actually been Freud's patient, but her case informed much of Freud's work and later theories on therapy and psychoanalysis.

Sigmund Freud's Theory of the Psyche

In Freudian theory, the human mind is structured into two main parts: the conscious and unconscious mind.

- The **conscious mind** includes all the things we are aware of or can easily bring into awareness.
- The **unconscious mind**, on the other hand, includes all of the things outside of our awareness—all of the wishes, desires, hopes, urges, and memories that we aren't aware of yet continue to influence behavior.

Freudian psychology compares the mind to an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg that is actually visible above the water represents just a tiny portion of the mind. On the other hand, the huge expanse of ice hidden underneath the water represents the much larger unconscious.

There is some question as to whether the iceberg metaphor came from Freud himself or one of his biographers, as some researchers indicate that there was no mention of an iceberg in Freud's writings.

In addition to these two main components of the mind, Freudian theory also divides human personality into three major components: the id, ego, and superego.

- **The id** is the most primitive part of the personality that is the source of all our most basic urges. The id is entirely unconscious and serves as the source of all libidinal energy.
- **The ego** is the component of personality that deals with reality and helps ensure that the demands of the id are satisfied in ways that are realistic, safe, and socially acceptable.
- **The superego** is the part of the personality that holds all of the internalized morals and standards that we acquire from our parents, family, and society at large.

Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development

Freudian theory suggests that as children develop, they progress through a series of psychosexual stages. At each stage, the libido's pleasure-seeking energy is focused on a different part of the body.

The five stages of psychosexual development are:

Lantz S, Ray S. Freud developmental theory. In: *StatPearls* [Internet]. StatPearls Publishing.

1. **The oral stage:** The libidinal energies are focused on the mouth.
2. **The anal stage:** The libidinal energies are focused on the anus.
3. **The phallic stage:** The libidinal energies are focused on the penis or clitoris.
4. **The latent stage:** A period of calm in which little libidinal interest is present.
5. **The genital stage:** The libidinal energies are focused on the genitals.

The successful completion of each stage leads to a healthy personality as an adult. If, however, a conflict remains unresolved at any particular stage, the individual might remain fixated or stuck at that particular point of development.

A fixation can involve an over-dependence or obsession with something related to that phase of development. For example, a person with an "oral fixation" is believed to be stuck at the oral stage of development. Signs of an oral fixation might include excessive reliance on oral behaviors such as smoking, biting fingernails, or eating.

Theory of Psychosexual Development

Freud believed that personality develops during early childhood and that childhood experiences shape our personalities as well as our behavior as adults. He asserted that we develop via a series of stages during childhood. Each of us must pass through these childhood stages, and if we do not have the proper nurturing and parenting during a stage, we will be stuck, or fixated, in that stage even as adults.

In each **psychosexual stage** of development, the child's pleasure-seeking urges, coming from the id, are focused on a different area of the body, called an erogenous zone. The stages are oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital (Table 1).

Table 1. Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development

Stage	Age (years)	Erogenous Zone	Major Conflict	Adult Fixation Example
Oral	0–1	Mouth	Weaning off breast or bottle	Smoking, overeating
Anal	1–3	Anus	Toilet training	Neatness, messiness
Phallic	3–6	Genitals	Oedipus/Electra complex	Vanity, overambition
Latency	6–12	None	None	None
Genital	12+	Genitals	None	None

For about the first year of life, the infant is in the **oral stage** of psychosexual development. The infant meets needs primarily through oral gratification. A baby wishes to suck or chew on any object that comes close to the mouth. Babies explore the world through the mouth and find comfort and stimulation as well. Psychologically, the infant is all id. The infant seeks immediate gratification of needs such as comfort, warmth, food, and stimulation. If the caregiver meets oral needs consistently, the child will move away from this stage and progress further. However, if the caregiver is inconsistent or neglectful, the person may stay stuck in the oral stage. As an adult, the person might not feel good unless involved in some oral activity such as eating, drinking, smoking, nail-biting, or compulsive talking. These actions bring comfort and security when the person feels insecure, afraid, or bored.

During the **anal stage**, which coincides with toddlerhood and potty-training, the child is taught that some urges must be contained and some actions postponed. There are rules about certain functions and when and where they are to be carried out. The child is learning a sense of self-control. The ego is being developed. If the caregiver is extremely controlling about potty training (stands over the child waiting for the smallest indication that the child might need to go to the potty and immediately scoops the child up and places him on the potty chair, for example), the child may grow up fearing losing control. He may become fixated in this stage or "anally retentive"—fearful of letting go. Such a person might be extremely neat and clean, organized, reliable, and controlling of others. If the caregiver neglects to teach the child to control urges, he may grow up to be "anal expulsive" or an adult who is messy, irresponsible, and disorganized.

The **phallic stage** occurs during the preschool years (ages 3-5) when the child has a new biological challenge to face. The child will experience the Oedipus complex which refers to a child's unconscious sexual desire for the opposite-sex parent and hatred for the same-sex parent. For example, boys experiencing the Oedipus complex will unconsciously want to replace their father as a companion to their mother but then realize that the father is much more powerful. For a while, the boy fears that if he pursues his mother, his father may castrate him (castration anxiety). So rather than risk losing his penis, he gives up his

affections for his mother and instead learns to become more like his father, imitating his actions and mannerisms, thereby learning the role of males in his society. From this experience, the boy learns a sense of masculinity. He also learns what society thinks he should do and experiences guilt if he does not comply. In this way, the superego develops. If he does not resolve this successfully, he may become a "phallic male" or a man who constantly tries to prove his masculinity (about which he is insecure), by seducing women and beating up men.

Girls experience a comparable conflict in the phallic stage—the Electra complex. The Electra complex, while often attributed to Freud, was actually proposed by Freud's contemporary, Carl Jung (Jung & Kerenyi, 1963). A little girl experiences the Electra complex in which she develops an attraction for her father but realizes that she cannot compete with her mother and so gives up that affection and learns to become more like her mother. This is not without some regret, however. Freud believed that the girl feels inferior because she does not have a penis (experiences "penis envy"). But she must resign herself to the fact that she is female and will just have to learn her inferior role in society as a female. However, if she does not resolve this conflict successfully, she may have a weak sense of femininity and grow up to be a "castrating female" who tries to compete with men in the workplace or in other areas of life. The formation of the superego takes place during the dissolution of the Oedipus and Electra complex.

During middle childhood (6-11), the child enters the **latency stage**, focusing their attention outside the family and toward friendships. The biological drives are temporarily quieted (latent) and the child can direct attention to a larger world of friends. If the child is able to make friends, they will gain a sense of confidence. If not, the child may continue to be a loner or shy away from others, even as an adult.

The final stage of psychosexual development is referred to as the **genital stage**. From adolescence throughout adulthood, a person is preoccupied with sex and reproduction. The adolescent experiences rising hormone levels and the sex drive and hunger drives become very strong. Ideally, the adolescent will rely on the ego to help think logically through these urges without taking actions that might be damaging. An adolescent might learn to redirect their sexual urges into a safer activity such as running, for example. Quieting the id with the superego can lead to feeling overly self-conscious and guilty about these urges. Hopefully, it is the ego that is strengthened during this stage and the adolescent uses reason to manage urges.

Freud's psychosexual development theory is quite controversial. To understand the origins of the theory, it is helpful to be familiar with the political, social, and cultural influences of Freud's day in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century. During this era, a climate of sexual repression, combined with limited understanding and education surrounding human sexuality heavily influenced Freud's perspective. Given that sex was a taboo topic, Freud assumed that negative emotional states (neuroses) stemmed from the suppression of unconscious sexual and aggressive urges. For Freud, his own recollections and interpretations of patients' experiences and dreams were sufficient proof that psychosexual stages were universal events in early childhood.

Defense mechanisms

Freud believed that feelings of anxiety result from the ego's inability to mediate the conflict between the id and superego. When this happens, Freud believed that the ego seeks to restore balance through various protective measures known as defense mechanisms. When

certain events, feelings, or yearnings cause anxiety, the individual wishes to reduce that anxiety. To do that, the individual's unconscious mind uses ego defense mechanisms, unconscious protective behaviors that aim to reduce anxiety. The ego, usually conscious, resorts to unconscious strivings to protect the ego from being overwhelmed by anxiety. When we use defense mechanisms, we are unaware that we are using them. Further, they operate in various ways that distort reality. According to Freud, we all use ego defense mechanisms.

Defense mechanisms emerge to help a person distort reality so that the truth is less painful. Defense mechanisms may include:

Denial: not accepting the truth or lying to oneself. Thoughts such as "it won't happen to me" or "you're not leaving" or "I don't have a problem with alcohol" are examples.

Displacement: taking out frustrations on a safer target. A person who is angry at a boss may take out their frustration at others when driving home or at a spouse upon arrival.

Projection: a defense mechanism in which a person attributes their unacceptable thoughts onto others. If someone is frightened, for example, they accuse someone else of being afraid.

Rationalization: a defense mechanism proposed by Anna Freud (Freud's daughter who continued in her father's path of psychoanalysis). Rationalization involves a cognitive distortion of "the facts" to make an event or an impulse less threatening. We often do it on a fairly conscious level when we provide ourselves with excuses.

Reaction formation: a defense mechanism in which a person outwardly opposes something they inwardly desire, but that they find unacceptable. An example of this might be someone who dislikes or fears people of another race acting overly nice to people of that race.

Regression: going back to a time when the world felt like a safer place, perhaps reverting to one's childhood behaviors.

Repression: to push the painful thoughts out of consciousness (in other words, think about something else).

Sublimation: transforming unacceptable urges into more socially acceptable behaviors. For example, a teenager who experiences strong sexual urges uses exercise to redirect those urges into more socially acceptable behavior.

Assessing the Psychodynamic Perspective

Originating in the work of Sigmund Freud, the psychodynamic perspective emphasizes unconscious psychological processes (for example, wishes and fears of which we're not fully aware), and contends that childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult personality. When reading Freud's theories, it is important to remember that he was a medical doctor, not a psychologist. There was no such thing as a degree in psychology at the time that he received his education, which can help us understand some of the controversies over his theories today. However, Freud was the first to systematically study and theorize the workings of the unconscious mind in the manner that we associate with modern psychology. The psychodynamic perspective has evolved considerably since Freud's time, encompassing all the theories in psychology that see human functioning based upon the interaction of conscious and unconscious drives and forces within the person, and between the different structures of the personality (id, ego, superego).

Freud's theory has been heavily criticized for several reasons. One is that it is very difficult to test scientifically. How can parenting in infancy be traced to personality in adulthood? Are there other variables that might better explain development? Because psychodynamic

theories are difficult to prove wrong, evaluating those theories, in general, is difficult in that we cannot make definite predictions about a given individual's behavior using the theories. The theory is also considered to be sexist in suggesting that women who do not accept an inferior position in society are somehow psychologically flawed. Freud focused on the darker side of human nature and suggested that much of what determines our actions is unknown to us. Others make the criticism that the psychodynamic approach is too deterministic, relating to the idea that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will, thereby leaving little room for the idea of free will.

Freud's work has been extremely influential, and its impact extends far beyond psychology (several years ago *Time* magazine selected Freud as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century). Freud's work has been not only influential but quite controversial as well. As you might imagine, when Freud suggested in 1900 that much of our behavior is determined by psychological forces of which we're largely unaware—that we literally don't know what's going on in our own minds—people were (to put it mildly) displeased. When he suggested in 1905 that we humans have strong sexual feelings from a very early age and that some of these sexual feelings are directed toward our parents, people were more than displeased—they were outraged. Few theories in psychology have evoked such strong reactions from other professionals and members of the public.

So why do we study Freud? As mentioned above, despite the criticisms, Freud's assumptions about the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping our psychological selves have found their way into child development, education, and parenting practices. Freud's theory has heuristic value in providing a framework from which to elaborate and modify subsequent theories of development. Many later theories, particularly behaviorism and humanism, were challenges to Freud's views. Controversy notwithstanding, no competent psychologist, or student of psychology, can ignore psychodynamic theory. It is simply too important for psychological science and practice and continues to play an important role in a wide variety of disciplines within and outside psychology (for example, developmental psychology, social psychology, sociology, and neuroscience).

Freud's Theory of Dream Analysis

The unconscious mind played a critical role in all of Freud's theories, and he considered dreams to be one of the key ways to take a peek into what lies outside our conscious awareness.

He dubbed dreams "the royal road to the unconscious" and believed that by examining dreams, he could see not only how the unconscious mind works but also what it is trying to hide from conscious awareness.

Freud believed the content of dreams could be broken down into two different types:

- **The manifest content** of a dream included all the actual content of the dream—the events, images, and thoughts contained within the dream. The manifest content is essentially what the dreamer remembers upon waking.
- **The latent content**, on the other hand, is all the hidden and symbolic meanings within the dream. Freud believed that dreams were essentially a form of wish fulfillment. By taking unconscious thoughts, feelings, and desires and transforming them into less threatening forms, people are able to reduce the ego's anxiety.

Freud often utilized the analysis of dreams as a starting point in his free association technique. When working with a client, he would focus on a particular dream symbol, then

use free association to see what other thoughts and images immediately came to the client's mind.

Freud's Theory of Defense Mechanisms

Even if you've never studied Freud's theories before, you have probably heard the term "defense mechanisms." When someone seems unwilling to face a painful truth, you might accuse them of being "in denial." If they try to look for a logical explanation for unacceptable behavior, you might suggest that they are "rationalizing."

For instance, rationalizations for smoking might include "one cigarette won't hurt me" or "if I quit, I'll just gain weight."

Denial and rationalization represent different types of defense mechanisms, or tactics that the ego uses to protect itself from anxiety. Some of the best-known mechanisms of defense include denial, repression, and regression, but there are many more.

Freud's Theory of Female Psychology

Freud's perspective on women was, and continues to be, one of his most controversial. One of his theories relating to female psychology is known as the Electra complex, also sometimes referred to as penis envy.

According to Freud, females start out close to their mothers. But once they realize they don't have a penis, they start to hate their moms for mutilating them, then become close to their dad. At the same time, females start to imitate their mom because they fear the loss of her affection.

The Electra complex is the opposite of the Oedipus complex, which Freud contended is when a male child develops a sexual attachment to his mother, viewing his father as a sexual rival.

Freud's Theory of Religion

Freud theorized that religious beliefs are essentially delusions, and also that turning away from these types of ideologies is preferable because religion does not lead to happiness and fulfillment; in fact, it is a belief structure not based on evidence.

Freud felt that a person's religious views were, at least in part, a result of their relationship with their father. He believed that people tend to depict their idea of a "God" based on the qualities and traits of the father figure in their life and that these qualities changed as their relationship with their father changed.

It is believed that Freud's theory of religion was influenced by his relationship with his own father. Freud had a Jewish upbringing, which he said he had no desire to change, yet he also stated that he was "completely estranged from the religion of his fathers—as well as from every other religion."

Impact of Freudian Theory on Education

While Freud's theories have been widely criticized, they are still important because his work has made contributions to education as we know it today.

Many contemporary psychologists do not give credence to Freud's ideas, but the theories remain important. And research has validated the effectiveness of various forms of talk therapy, such as one finding that psychodynamic therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy were both effective for treating anxiety in college-age students.

Freud's belief that mental problems could be resolved by actually talking about them helped revolutionize psychotherapy.

Freud's theories have also sparked a major change in how we view mental illness by suggesting that not all psychological problems have physiological causes.

Freud's contributions have also impacted the foundational science of what we know about psychology today. His idea that our thoughts are largely unconscious has withstood scientific scrutiny, for instance, retaining their importance in understanding human development and behavior.

Freud has even influenced thoughts about how society has formed into what it is today. Some believe that his theories help explain some of the successes of modern society while also explaining some of its failures.

To understand where psychology is today, it is essential to take a look at where we've been and how we got here. Freud's work provides insight into an important movement in psychology that helped transform how we think about mental health and how we approach psychological disorders.

By studying Freud's theories and those that came after, you gain a better understanding of psychology's fascinating history. Many terms such as *defense mechanism*, *Freudian slip*, and *anal retentive* have become a part of our everyday language. By learning about his work and theories, you can understand how these ideas and concepts became woven into the fabric of popular culture.

In a nutshell, Freud's theory has helped educationist to understand what goes on in the conscious and unconscious minds of the learner. Through the study of the three components of the personality which are the id, the ego, and the superego, the teacher will be able to help the learner balance these three aspects of personality so that the learner can be useful in the society.

Freud's stages of psychosexual development also help the teacher to understand why the learner behaves in a certain way as a result of the turbulence faced by the learner who is undergoing these stages of development. Thereby helping the teacher to develop behavior modification techniques for those who had fixations earlier in life that translated into adulthood overcome those maladaptive behaviors.

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