

Sigmund Freud

Who was Sigmund Freud and how did his theories become so influential in psychology?

Perhaps the most significant contribution Freud has made to modern thought is his conception of the unconscious. During the 19th century the dominant trend in Western thought was positivism, the claim that people could accumulate real knowledge about themselves and their world, and exercise rational control over both. Freud, however, suggested that these claims were in fact delusions; that we are not entirely aware of what we even think, and often act for reasons that have nothing to do with our conscious thoughts. The concept of the unconscious was groundbreaking in that he proposed that awareness existed in layers and there were thoughts occurring "below the surface." Dreams, called the "royal road to the unconscious" provided the best examples of our unconscious life, and in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud both developed the argument that the unconscious exists, and developed a method for gaining access to it.

The Preconscious was described as a layer between conscious and unconscious thought - that which we could access with a little effort. (The term "subconscious" while popularly used, is not actually part of psychoanalytical terminology.) Although there are still many adherents to a purely positivist and rationalist view, most people, including many who reject other elements of Freud's work, accept the claim that part of the mind is unconscious, and that people often act for reasons of which they are not conscious.

Crucial to the operation of the unconscious is "repression." According to Freud, people often experience thoughts and feelings that are so painful that people cannot bear them. Such thoughts and feelings - and associated memories - could not, Freud argued, be banished from the mind, but could be banished from consciousness.

He also observed that individual patients repress different things. Moreover, Freud observed that the process of repression is itself a non-conscious act (in other words, it did not occur through people willing away certain thoughts or feelings). Freud supposed that what people repressed was in part determined by their unconscious. In other words, the unconscious was for Freud both a cause and effect of repression.

Freud sought to explain how the unconscious operates by proposing that it has a particular structure. He proposed that the unconscious was divided into three parts: Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id (Latin, = "it" = es in the original German) represented primary process thinking - our most primitive need gratification type thoughts. The Superego represented our conscience and counteracted the Id with moral and

ethical thoughts. The Ego stands in between both to balance our primitive needs and our moral/ethical beliefs. A healthy ego provides the ability to adapt to reality and interact with the outside world in a way that accommodates both Id and Superego. The general claim that the mind is not a monolithic or homogeneous thing continues to have an enormous influence on people outside of psychology. Many, however, have questioned or rejected the specific claim that the mind is divided into these three components.

Freud was especially concerned with the dynamic relationship between these three parts of the mind. Freud argued that the dynamic is driven by innate drives. But he also argued that the dynamic changes in the context of changing social relationships. Some have criticized Freud for giving too much importance to one or the other of these factors; similarly, many of Freud's followers have focused on one or the other.

Freud developed the concept of overdetermination to account for the multiple determining causes in the interpretation of dreams rather than rely on a simple model of one-to-one correspondence between causes and effects.

Freud believed that humans were driven by two instinctive drives, libidinal energy/Eros and the death instinct/thanatos. Freud's description of Eros/Libido included all creative, life-producing instincts. The Death Instinct represented an instinctive drive to return to a state of calm, or non-existence and was based on his studies of protozoa. (See: Beyond the Pleasure Principle). Many have challenged the scientific basis for this claim.

Freud also believed that the libido developed in individuals by changing its object. He argued that humans are born "polymorphously perverse," meaning that any number of objects could be a source of pleasure. He further argued that as humans developed they fixated on different, and specific, objects - first oral (exemplified by an infant's pleasure in nursing), then anal (exemplified by a toddler's pleasure in controlling his or her bowels), then phallic. Freud argued that children then passed through a stage where they fixated on the parent of the opposite sex. Freud sought to anchor this pattern of development in the dynamics of the mind. Each stage is a progression into adult sexual maturity, characterized by a strong ego and the ability to delay need gratification. (see Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.)

Freud's model of psycho-sexual development has been criticized from different perspectives. Some have attacked Freud's claim that infants are sexual beings (and, implicitly, Freud's expanded notion of

sexuality). Others have accepted Freud's expanded notion of sexuality, but have argued that this pattern of development is not universal, nor necessary for the development of a healthy adult. Instead, they have emphasized the social and environmental sources of patterns of development. Moreover, they call attention to social dynamics Freud de-emphasized or ignored (such as class relations).

Freud hoped to prove that his model, based primarily on observations of middle-class Viennese, was universally valid. He thus turned to ancient mythology and contemporary ethnography for comparative material. Freud used the Greek tragedy by Sophocles Oedipus Rex to point out how much we (specifically, young boys) desire incest, and must repress that desire.

In classic psychoanalysis, unconscious thoughts and feelings are brought to consciousness by encouraging the patient to talk in "free-association" and to talk about dreams. Another important element of psychoanalysis is a relative lack of direct involvement on the part of the analyst, which is meant to encourage the patient to project thoughts and feelings onto the analyst. Through this process, called "transference," the patient can reenact and resolve repressed conflicts, especially childhood conflicts with (or about) parents.

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