



## Discuss and evaluate Freud's view that the study of the unconscious leads to a better understanding of human behaviour

Sigmund Freud's effect on the European society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could be compared to that of a perception-altering drug – he turned society and its ideas on its head, and resulted in a hang-over that has endured until our days, despite the onslaughts of time and criticism.

European society at the time was dominated by strict social hierarchy, whose survival was ensured by the riches milked from colonialism; Europe was, intellectually and politically, at the centre of the world. Societal roles for men, women (and children) were well-established and not transgressed, particularly in the higher spheres of society where behaviour was always under close scrutiny.

Freud's work with hysteria<sup>1</sup> patients combined with the prevailing theories of the time<sup>2</sup> led to the construction of Freud's theory of the unconscious, namely that: *a)* our behaviour is motivated by innate biological drives that operate below our conscious awareness, and *b)* that our minds are *psychodynamic* systems of 'psychic energy', divided among mental processes that are constantly in conflict (and hence dynamic) over the limited resource represented by that energy [Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, p 97].

Freud argued that as humans, we are unconsciously motivated by powerful, innate drives. Of these, he identified the *libido* or sexual drive as being the most significant. Over the course of his life however, his definition of drives developed [Glassman, *Approaches to Psychology*, p 191] and gave way to two drives: a positive, creative force whose ultimate manifestation was

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1 Unexplained physiological symptoms in otherwise healthy patients - thought by the enlightened of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to exclusively a female condition!

2 Notably Darwin's work on evolution and advances in physics such as the conservation of energy principle i.e. energy cannot be created or destroyed, the total amount of energy in a system is constant.

procreation – *Eros*, after the Greek goddess of Love; and *Thanatos* – the Greek representation of Death - seeking aggression and the destruction of others, and ultimately of oneself. Controversially Freud argued that these drives were present from birth. He highlighted the existence of infantile sexuality – a recognition that our behaviour, particularly in our first 5-6 years of existence, is largely driven by the drive to seek sexual – in Freud's terms, sexual is not limited to intercourse but covers any form of pleasure derived from the body – satisfaction. This has given source to much criticism of an over-emphasis on sex as a drive – although this can be seen as a reaction to Freud's contravention of the powerful social taboo that dissociates any sexual activity from children.

The focus of Freud's approach, then, was on the mental processes that operate below our consciousness, which in his model is divided in two levels: the *conscious* (feelings that we knowingly experience<sup>3</sup>) and the *subconscious* – that which is below our consciousness, some of which can be conjured to mind (the *preconscious*), but most of which consists of material that has been *repressed*<sup>4</sup> as it could have dangerous consequences for our psychic integrity.

In Freud's model of the mind there are three distinct mental processes: the *Id* – embodiment of *Eros* and *Tanathos*; the *ego*, which operates on the *reality principle* – the recognition that the environment places equally strong demands on behaviour<sup>5</sup>. In many ways the development of a healthy personality hinges on the development of a strong *ego*, capable of negotiating between the irrational demands of the *Id* and the idealistic (and hence *unrealistic*) constraints of the *superego* – the moral and social judge attempting to repress the *Id*'s demands.

Freud constructed a psychosexual model of personality development, divided into three *pregenital* stages and two later stages<sup>6</sup>. The three early stages, the *oral*, *anal* and *phallic* stages can each be roughly aligned with the birth of each of the mental processes respectively, as a result of the conflicts between the child and the world it is beginning to discover. These conflicts and their resolution are largely unconscious, in fact it could be argued that consciousness develops as personality and the mental processes develop.

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3 e.g. recognising the person that greets us across the street.

4 Pushed into the unconscious.

5 i.e. our physical reality - the *Id* may be motivated by the desire to jump off a very high bridge, yet the *ego* will check this by noting the pain - or death - that would most likely occur

6 The latency and genital stages.

Arguably the most important of these conflicts is the *Oedipal* conflict<sup>7</sup>, which affects children of both sex, albeit differently.

The psychosexual model, and the Oedipal conflict in particular, have attracted ferocious criticism. For some it is an incomplete theory, as it barely touches on adolescence, which is widely recognised as a source of intense internal conflict. Erikson (1963) addressed this criticism by developing a *psychosocial* model that runs alongside Freud's original stages, and seeks to explain how our personality develops as a result of social factors; the model extends the development stages to address challenges faced during adult life and old age. The Oedipal conflict has been criticised due to its inherent male bias; the female Oedipal conflict<sup>8</sup> is defined as a guilt complex arising in the girl due to her *penis envy* – feelings of devastation and loss at having been castrated. Later (female) analysts like Karen Horney sought to provide a satisfactory explanation for female motivation, drawing attention to social, rather than biological factors [*Glassman, Approaches to Psychology, p 221*].

Throughout our development and later on life, as the different mental processes make demands on our psyche, the *ego* is instrumental in ensuring our mental survival. It has a variety of defences at its disposal, which are based on varying degrees of self-deceit and construction of reality in order to protect our conscious mind from feelings, desires or attitudes that might challenge our notion of who we are or who we would *like* to be. Although these defences are largely unconscious, they can have a direct influence on our behaviour. An example of this is *displacement*. We may feel aggressive due to the Tube running late in the morning, yet our *ego* points out that we obviously cannot take out our rage on the Tube train, or our fellow passengers. Such actions would definitely lead to our being arrested for assault. Furthermore, the *superego* would say that this is morally wrong, for obvious reasons. So caught between the bubbling anger that the *Id* desperately wants to let out, and the self-condemnation and shame that the *superego* would instil, we make a point of cutting in front of the old lady at the ticket gates who could not get her ticket out in time.

Freud's theories offer a comprehensive explanation of the unconscious aspects of behaviour, and how they determine a very large part of our conscious behaviour. However the scientific

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<sup>7</sup> The essence of the conflict is the discovery of sexual feelings for the parent of the opposite sex, which leads to a conflict with the same-sex parent. If resolved correctly, Freud believed it lay the foundations for a healthy *ego* and *superego* as a result of identification with the same-sex parent – that is, adopting their beliefs and values, and *repression* by the *ego* of the sexual and aggressive feelings arising during the conflict.

<sup>8</sup> later named by Jung as Electra complex – a term Freud disliked –  
[<http://www.personalityresearch.org/papers/beystehner.html>]

validity of his observations has been heavily criticised, mainly from the point of view of falsifiability – for a theory to be valid, it must be possible to produce at least one instance which refutes it. Psychoanalysis is seen as covering its tracks very well – anything can be expressed in terms of regression, projection or denial – even a critic's opinion! It has been argued that the fact that other approaches have proved more useful in therapeutic settings are proof of the falsifiability of psychoanalysis.

[<http://www.personalityresearch.org/papers/beystehner.html>].

Despite attempting to provide causal explanations for behaviour, of the kind  $X \rightarrow Y$ , Freud has been criticised for observing Y, and assuming that X *must be true*

[<http://www.iep.utm.edu/f/freud.htm#H5>, section 6b]. This is completely contrary to the tenets of behaviourism, which lay down that both X and Y must be observable. In Freud's case, X is criticised as consisting of obscure mental processes without proof. However, there are cases when the unconscious material embodying X slips through the defensive mechanisms of the ego – examples are the appropriately named Freudian slips or parapraxes, where a slip of the tongue or the pen betrays the real feelings of the speaker/writer.

Freud's theories have questionable validity when applied across cultures<sup>9</sup>, or even when applied to modern society. What would Freud think if he witnessed a gay marriage, or even adoption by gay couples? Would he see this as a way of propagating 'inadequate gender roles'? I would venture to suggest that Freud would probably have seen this as a product of social evolution – but with a continuity in the underlying processes. In other words, the conflicts would be the same, even given different factors – a girl growing up with two fathers might still experience the same dynamics as in a heterosexual marriage.

Sound theoretical basis or not, it is indisputable that Psychoanalysis has influenced psychology, and even popular culture to a very important degree – testament to this is the way that Freudian ideas such as the 'slip of the tongue', or describing people as being 'anally retentive' have become almost stereotypical! Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear someone being described as 'neurotic', or expressing feelings of anxiety. Theories that have extended or developed further his ideas have become successful and influential, perhaps even to a

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<sup>9</sup> Freud did attempt to address cross-cultural validity of his theory, but only insofar as analysing the significance of totems (symbolic statues) in what he deemed 'primitive' peoples ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totem\\_and\\_Taboo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totem_and_Taboo)) – reflecting the prevalent view at the time that European societies were at a higher level of intellectual, social and mental development. Even if this work is not significant by today's standards, it's testament to Freud's broad variety of knowledge, and the way his theory offers explanations across disciplines.

larger extent than Psychoanalysis itself<sup>10</sup>.

Another common criticism is that Psychoanalysis is a deterministic, arbitrary and prescriptive theory, reducing woman, man (and society<sup>11</sup>!) to an eternal conflict between what we *wish* to do and what we *should* do. I believe that its mechanisms and principles are actually quite human; Freud gave names to feelings and little 'tricks' which we play on ourselves, and described the notion we all share that there are things in our behaviour that we don't - and perhaps can't - understand. Psychoanalysis is aimed ultimately at empowerment: to be able to heal, reconstruct, progress in life, you have to *understand* the reasons for your behaviour – that is, “make the unconscious conscious” . Whatever Freud's own motivations (conscious or unconscious), his work laid down a theoretical and therapeutic framework that has withstood harsh criticism, yet continues to influence the theory and practice of behaviour.

## Bibliography

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- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization\\_and\\_Its\\_Discontents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_and_Its_Discontents)

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**10** A good example is Object Relations theory as set out by Klein and Mahler, which have extended Freud's original belief that the first years in life are crucial but extended it to explain how we unconsciously relate to people throughout our life as we have to 'significant others' when we were children.

**11** In his book “Civilization and its Discontents” Freud paints a view of society as being a great source of anxiety – in order to live in society we have to repress both our sexual and destructive impulses. Freud painted a bleak view of the future (unsurprising considering the dangerous situation in Europe at the time) where the positive, creative impulses (i.e. Love) were being repressed by society, whereas violent, hateful impulses were being fostered.