

Gender: psychodynamic theory

How does psychodynamic theory explain gender development?

The psychodynamic theory of gender development suggests that gender identity and role are acquired during the third stage of psychosexual development, the **phallic stage**. Before this, in the oral and anal stages, the child does not have a gender identity and its sexual drives are directed indiscriminately. As the child enters the phallic stage, the focus of its **libido** moves to the genitals and the development of girls and boys diverges.

Boys enter the **Oedipus complex**. They start to sexually desire their mothers. They realize that their father stands in the way of the satisfaction of their desire and this frustration of the id's desires results in aggressive feelings, which are directed towards the father. At the same time, the boy realizes that his father is more powerful than he is and starts to fear that if the father finds out about the boy's desire for his mother he will castrate him (**castration anxiety**). The boy deals with the conflict this causes by starting to **identify** with the father and wanting to be like him. This leads to him **internalizing** his father, essentially, incorporating his father into his own psyche. This becomes his **superego** and, in taking on his father as part of himself the boy takes on the **male gender identity**. He deals with his desire for his mother by **displacing** it onto other women.

Girls enter the **Elektra complex**. This starts with the realization that they have no penis. This leads them to believe that they have been castrated, something for which they blame their mother. Because she has no penis the girl sees herself as powerless, and wishes that she had one (**penis envy**). She starts to desire her father, because he has one and becomes jealous and hostile towards her mother, mirroring the Oedipus complex in boys. Eventually, she starts to **identify** with and to **internalize** her mother, developing a superego and a **female gender identity**. At this point she represses her desire for a penis and **substitutes** it for the desire for a baby.

How have psychodynamic psychologists studied gender development?

Psychodynamic psychologists have tended to base their theories on case studies of people who were undergoing treatment for psychological problems. Their case study method relies on gathering material from the person being treated and analyzing it to identify the latent (hidden) meanings in the things the person thinks, says or does.

An example of this approach is **Freud's (1909)** case study of 'Little Hans', a five year-old boy with a phobia of horses. Hans became scared of horses after seeing a horse collapse in the street. He was particularly afraid of horses that wore blinkers and he expressed the fear that the horse might bite him. Freud's interpretation was that Hans' unconscious mind was using the horse to symbolize his father. Seeing the horse collapse (apparently dead) had reminded Hans of his Oedipal death wish against his father. This had brought back his castration anxiety and to protect himself, Hans had displaced this onto horses. His fear of being bitten actually symbolized his fear of castration by his father. Freud's analysis showed how children deal with the conflicts raised by their desires during the Oedipus complex.

Evaluation of the psychodynamic theory of gender development

Critics of the psychodynamic approach point to cases like Little Hans to demonstrate the weaknesses of its theories. They would argue that, rather than showing empirically the existence of processes like the Oedipus complex, Freud and others would interpret anything they find in ways that made it consistent with theories they already held. For example, whilst it was true that Hans

expressed a fear of castration, Freud chose largely to ignore the fact that his *mother* would routinely threaten him with castration (“if you don’t stop touching that, I’ll send for the doctor to cut it off”) in order to support his claim that it is the father who threatens castration. It is a far more plausible explanation that Hans was scared by the horse collapsing and his phobia developed directly from that.

The psychodynamic theory implies that a child must grow up in a conventional nuclear family, with mother and father figures, in order to develop a ‘normal’ gender identity. This is not true. **Green (1978)** studied 37 children growing up in non-traditional nuclear families (with gay or transsexual parents). In all cases but one the children developed typical gender identities and role behaviours.

Further criticism of the psychodynamic approach would include that it suggests that the child’s gender identity is absent before the age of about three and not fully formed until the age of about five or six. However, children start to show gender-based preferences for toys as early as one year old, and usually have clear ideas about their own gender identity by the age of three, which obviously conflicts with Freud’s theory.

It could also be pointed out that Freud’s theories reflect the prevailing views of the time in which they were developed. For example, the notion of penis envy implies that women are inferior to men, which is not an idea with which many people would now agree. Furthermore, the whole theory relies heavily on constructs whose existence is difficult or impossible to test directly (the unconscious mind, defence mechanisms etc.). Many would argue that this makes the theory **unscientific**, as it is impossible to obtain evidence that could directly test it.