

Phobias - the Psychodynamic View



This activity will help you to:

- Understand and recall the psychodynamic theory of phobia
- Apply psychodynamic concepts to examples of phobic behaviour
- Evaluate the psychodynamic account of phobia

Phobias & Symbolism

In the psychodynamic view, a phobia is the surface manifestation of a fear buried in the unconscious. The conscious mind is unable to confront the real nature of the fear because to do so would force it to acknowledge unacceptable motives, conflicts or memories (e.g. the Oedipus complex or an early sexual trauma). The ego protects the conscious from this material by using a **defence mechanism** and displacing the fear onto an innocuous object. So whilst the person may ostensibly be afraid of spiders, dogs or lifts, these objects are symbolic of deeper fears that they can't acknowledge. What might the fears below symbolise?

Ian is phobic about sharp instruments. He panics at the sight of knives and cannot bear to be in the same room as a pair of scissors.

Janet has a morbid fear of snakes. She cannot stand the sight of them and won't even let herself think about them, let alone visit anywhere there may be any.

Questions to help you evaluate the theory...

- How does Freud's analysis of 'Little Hans' support the psychodynamic account of phobias?
- Are there any problems with the validity of the 'Hans' case study that would detract from its support of Freud's theory?
- Why might it be problematic that the psychodynamic view of phobia relies heavily on the need to interpret the symbolic nature of phobic symptoms?
- Do other perspectives give a more plausible and/or better supported account of the causes of phobia?