

The Psychodynamic Perspective 2: How Do Our Parents Shape Us?



You need to be able to:

- Explain the main ideas developed by Sigmund Freud
- Assess whether evidence supports or challenges Freud's views
- Assess Freud's contribution to Psychology

This Be The Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppo-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Phillip Larkin (1922 – 1985)

Philip Larkin, who, by the way, was a proper poet and therefore authorised to swear in print, was half-jokingly articulating an idea that is distinctly Freudian. Namely, that our parents have an immense impact on how we turn out as adults. Not only do they act as models for our values and morals and the many positive things we may be or do but their actions can also shape our personalities in undesirable ways. So, for a Freudian, a person's immoral or criminal behaviour, their neuroses, fears, anxieties, depression and all sorts of other nasty things can usually be traced back to their parents' behaviour or the way they related to their child. People don't have any control over how they act – it's all down to their parents.

However, both Larkin and Freud make another point, which is often overlooked. Our parents didn't do this because they were bad people. They, in their turn, had no control over how they turned out because it was their parents who shaped them, and these were shaped by their parents and so on, all the way back to the time when we first dropped out of the trees.

So how does this happen, and can we predict what the outcome might be of parental behaviour when the child grows up? Freud spent many years developing a theory of childhood development. It specifies how the child's psyche changes as it grows up and describes the crucial influences on development at different times. You may find some of its aspects rather unsettling, because Freud asks us to believe that right from the word 'go', children are driven by impulses that are sexual in nature.

Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development

At the root of Freud's theory is the idea that all people are driven by an instinctual drive he called libido. This is often regarded as synonymous with 'sex drive' but Freud actually meant something closer to 'life force'. Whilst the libido is manifested in the sexual drives, it can take different forms.

Freud thought that libido originated in the body at different stages of development, the libido moves to a different area of the body, and this determines what the child finds pleasurable. Whatever the child enjoys, it will try to do. The tricky job the parents have is to strike a balance between letting the child over-indulge itself and denying it any pleasure at all.

If the parents get it wrong, the child may remain stuck in one or other of the stages of development, and immature, infantile drives will remain in their psyche and become part of the adult personality. This is called fixation. If the parents get it right, however, the child goes through each stage at the appropriate time and eventually emerges as a mature and well-balanced adult. This almost never happens.

Stage & age	Source of libido & pleasure	Important influences	Consequences of fixation
Oral 0-1	The mouth. The child enjoys feeding, sucking, swallowing, putting things in mouth etc.	The child equates its mother and feeding with love, so deprivation or forceful feeding can lead to later problems. In the latter half of this stage, the child is weaned onto solid food and starts having to wait to be fed. This causes frustration and aggression. In order to deal with these, the child develops an ego , and starts to differentiate itself from the people around it (especially the mother).	Smoking, chewing pens & fingernails etc. Overeating & drinking. Sarcasm and verbal hostility.
Anal 1-3	The anus. The child derives pleasure from expelling or withholding faeces.	Toilet training. The child is expected to expel faeces only at the appropriate times and locations. It realises that its parents' approval/love depends on this, the first sign that love is not unconditional. However, it also realises that it can control its parents by controlling its bowel movements. Toilet training that is too harsh or too lax can lead to problems.	Anal retentive: obsessive tidiness, neatness. Intolerance, meanness and passive aggression. Anal expulsive: sloppiness, disorganization, untidiness. Defiance, recklessness and excessive generosity.
Phallic 3-5	The penis or clitoris. The child derives pleasure from masturbation.	At this point, girls and boys diverge as the Oedipus complex begins (see below). If the Oedipus complex is successfully negotiated, then the child develops a superego by incorporating the morals and values of their same-sex parent.	Men: feelings of anxiety and guilt about sex. Fear of castration. Possibly vanity, self obsession and narcissism. Women: feelings of inferiority and envy.
Latent 5-puberty	Sexual drives are repressed.	During this stage the child represses all of what has happened previously. It focuses on adjusting to its environment and acquiring the knowledge and skills it will need as an adult.	Fixation does not happen in this stage.
Genital Puberty-death	The genitals. The adult derives pleasure from masturbation and sexual intercourse.	At puberty, the sexual drives from the id are re-awoken, and the remainder of adult life is dedicated to the pursuit of sex and sexual relationships.	Fixation at this stage is what should happen, and indicates a well-adjusted adult.

The Oedipus Complex

Freud believed that boys and girls follow the same course of development until the phallic stage, where they diverge. The cause of this divergence is the presence or absence of a penis, and the development of a sexual desire for the opposite-sex parent. Although development diverges the process in girls mirrors that in boys to a certain extent, so it makes sense to describe them side-by-side.

In Boys

The boy starts to develop a sexual desire for his **mother** (who has always been an important source of pleasure for him).



The boy becomes jealous of his father, who sexually possesses his mother. He also fears that his father will **castrate** him if he finds out about his desires.



The boy is in a state of conflict. He deals with this by **internalising** his father, who becomes his **superego**.



The boy **substitutes** his desire for his mother with the desire for other women.

In Girls

The girl realises she has no penis. She blames her mother for this (anger) and starts to sexually desire her father, who has one.



The girl's anger towards her mother is compounded by the **jealousy** she feels because her mother sexually possesses her father.



The girl realises she can have neither her father nor a penis. She deals with this by **internalising** her mother, who becomes her **superego**.



The girl **substitutes** her desire for a penis with a desire for a baby (preferably a boy) and her desire for her father for a desire for other men.

Castration and Morality

One implication of this part of Freud's theory concerns morality in men and women. Both boys and girls develop a superego, and hence a conscience, when they internalize the same-sex parent and the close of the phallic stage. The superego is essentially a replica parent that the adult carries around inside them that praises them when they have been a good boy/girl and threatens to punish them when they have been bad. In boys, the threat is that of castration but in girls no similar threat can exist so it is difficult to understand what keeps the adult woman 'in line'. Freud was notoriously vague on this question, but his theory implies that he thought women were morally weaker than men.

This would have been in line with the assumptions and prejudices about gender differences that existed when Freud started writing, but it's one of the many aspects of Freud's theory we might question today.