

The Psychodynamic Perspective 1: How Well Do We Know Ourselves?



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

Sigmund Freud and Psychodynamic Psychology

Freud is one of the most influential psychologists ever. His theories radically altered the way that people understand the mind and behaviour, and the therapy he developed for psychological problems was the first to be based on the idea that you could help people just by talking. Although his ideas have fallen from favour since the mid-20th century, there is still much in them that is worthwhile examining, and his impact on the fields of psychology and psychiatry can not be ignored.

Freud's Main Ideas

Main Idea	What's This?
The unconscious mind	Freud believed that we are aware of very little that goes on in our minds. Most of our thoughts, feelings and many of our memories are locked away in the unconscious . We don't know they are there, but nonetheless they have a huge impact on what we say and do. In other words, any of our actions may have hidden purposes and meanings.
The psyche	This term is often used interchangeably with 'personality' but really is closer in spirit to 'soul'. Freud believed that the psyche contained several parts that are continually at war with each other. The conflict that arises between the id , ego and superego is what drives our behaviour.
Childhood influences	Freud thought that the first few years of our lives were crucial to our future development. The relationships we establish, the way we are treated by our parents and many of our other experiences have a huge impact to the structure of our psyche and the personality and behaviour we display as adults.
Stages of development	Freud thought that childhood development went in stages . At each stage, different parts of the psyche are developed and different influences become important. The stages go in a fixed order, and a relatively fixed time scale. Problems in adulthood can usually be traced back to issues that first arose during a particular stage of development.
Symbolism	Although the contents of our unconscious are locked away from us, we can understand people if we try, because the unconscious still influences them. Unconscious thoughts and motives may appear in a disguised form in all sorts of ways – how a person acts, the mistakes they make, and the content of their dreams can all be decoded.
Instincts and drives	Although we may behave in complex and sophisticated ways, Freud believed that we are still animals, and consequently that our behaviour is governed by the same drives as any other animal. Therefore, at the roots of our behaviour are drives like hunger , thirst , aggression and sex . Sexual motives he considered especially important.

The Psyche

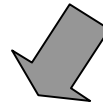
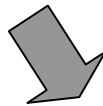
We tend to act as if our personality was an integrated, unified whole. Freud thought that this was not the case. Rather, he suggested that our psyche consists of three distinct components. Each of these has different motives and priorities so they find themselves in conflict with each other. One of the tasks we face is to behave in ways that will satisfy the different demands of these components of the psyche by compromising between their priorities. This conflict takes place in the unconscious, so we don't generally realise it's going on (although we may feel its effects as, for example, anxiety, depression or peculiar dreams).



The id. This is the animal part of the psyche and is governed by instinctual drives like food, drink and sex. Its general motive is the satisfaction of these desires. If frustrated it becomes aggressive.



The superego. This is the moral part of the psyche and is governed by the need to behave in ways our parents would approve of. When we don't, it punishes us with anxiety and guilt.



The ego. This is the part of the psyche concerned with reality. It tries to balance out the demands of the id with the constraints of the superego in a way that is realistically possible

Looked at in this way, all aspects of a person's behaviour become very complex as they typically involve three sets of driving forces:

- Which **instinctual drive** was being satisfied?
- Under which **moral constraint** was it forced to operate?
- What was **realistically possible** for the person at the time?

To these, we can potentially add a fourth question: how did the person cover their 'mental tracks' and keep themselves unaware of the conflict occurring in their unconscious?

For some examples of behaviour this is all relatively straightforward. Suppose a person gets hungry. The id is saying, 'feed me!'. The superego is saying, 'OK, but you mustn't be greedy, and can't take food you don't own.' The ego says something like, 'OK, id – we'll go off and find some food so you'll have to wait a little while, and superego – I'll make sure we pay for it, and we won't eat too much of it.' Everyone ends up relatively happy. But what if the person has no money? As time goes on, the id's demands get stronger and it threatens to become aggressive. The superego won't shift on the moral constraints. The ego starts to think about alternative means of obtaining food, perhaps stealing some. This would keep the id happy and under control but the thought of stealing makes the person feel uneasy and **anxious** – which comes from the superego. If the situation did not improve, the ego would probably decide that it was better to steal the food. If this happened they would probably feel **guilty** for some time afterwards – the superego again.

Not all motives and behaviours are as simple as getting hungry and eating, and this is where things start getting complex. Suppose the person wanted sex. Something like the following exchange might take place:

Want **sex**.
Now.

Ugh. How dirty.
Well, OK, but only
with your partner.

Guys, we
don't have a
partner.

Want sex. Now!
Getting **angry**!

Well, you can't
have any sex.
Tough. And
you're not to hit
anyone!

This situation is
getting a bit out of
control!

Ok guys. I've got an idea. Let's
play football instead. That should
keep you happy id, because you
can really **kill** the opposition, and
you can also **penetrate** their
defence. Sex and aggression all in
one!

And it should be OK with you,
superego, because in football we
won't **really** kill or have sex with
anyone. It's **socially acceptable**.
How does that sound?

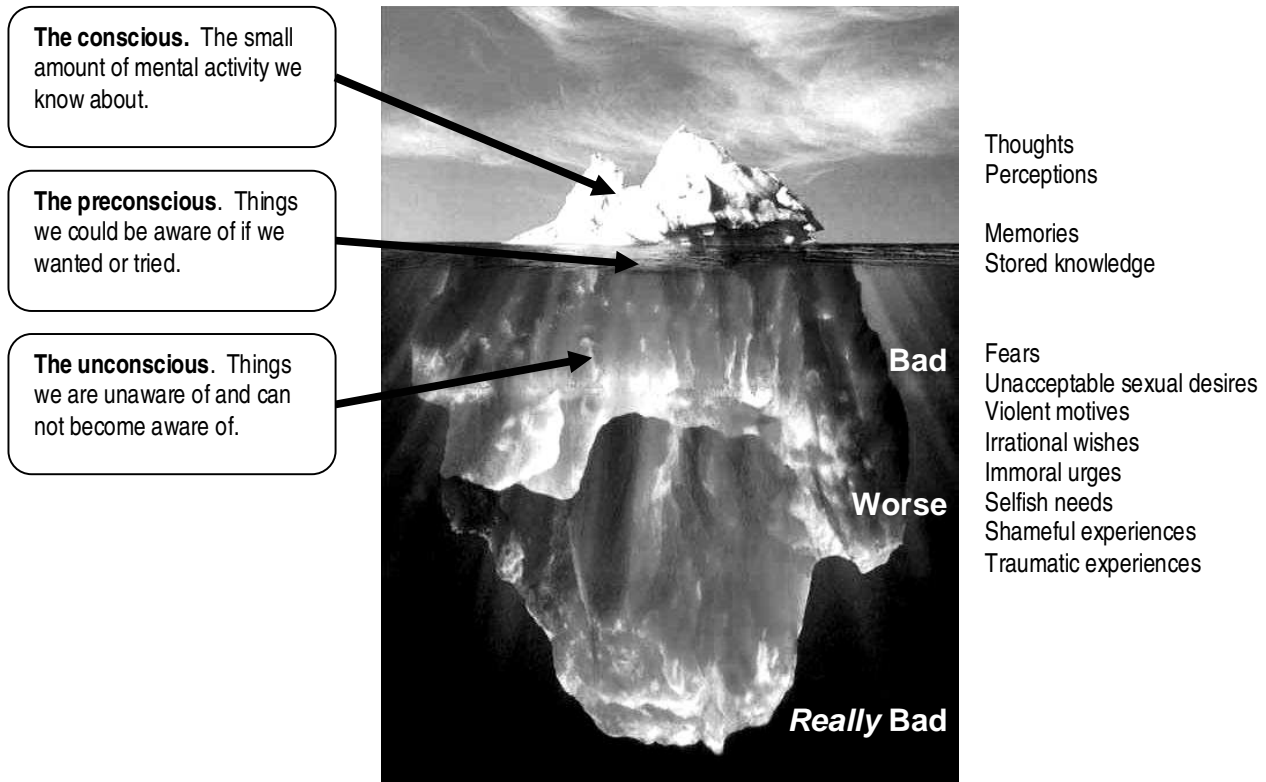
Huh. OK, I
suppose.

Hmmm. All
right then.

Note that in the above example, neither id nor superego gets exactly what it wants. The id is given a way to let out its sexual and aggressive impulses, but in a disguised or substitute form. The superego has to put up with the id getting what it wants – which it doesn't like – but has to put up with this because it's done in a socially acceptable way. The ego has brokered a compromise that has allowed id and superego to coexist for a while, but only until the next argument arises. So we can see that in the Freudian view, even an apparently straightforward activity like playing football can have hidden motives behind it – of which the person is completely unaware because all of this is hidden in their unconscious. If we asked them why they decided to play football they would probably say, 'I just fancied a game'.

The Unconscious: Manifest and Latent Motives

It should be clear by now that, in the Freudian view, apparently simple behaviour can have complex, hidden causes. Why are these causes hidden and where do they go? To understand this aspect of Freud's theory, you have to think of the mind as being a bit like an iceberg. Most of it is hidden beneath the surface.



Things end up in the unconscious when they threaten us. They might be mentally painful or unacceptable because they provoke anxiety and guilt from our superego. We protect ourselves from these things by forcing them out of the conscious mind and into the unconscious. This process is called repression. The trouble is, nothing stays hidden for ever, and the disturbing stuff in the unconscious is always trying to escape.

In a way, the unconscious is like a pressure cooker. Pressure builds up over time and the lid stops it from escaping. However, if this went on long enough the whole thing would explode, so it needs a safety valve so it can 'let off steam'. In an analogous way, the ego invents ways that we can ease the pressure in our unconscious mind. This is done through **defence mechanisms**. These are mechanisms that translate one type of impulse into another. In the example above, sexual and aggressive impulses were translated into the desire to play football. Similarly, fears may be projected away from their original objects onto innocuous ones, as in a phobia. Or a person may try to deal with things they find unacceptable in themselves by seeking them out in other people ('it's not my problem, it's theirs!')

To put it another way, for every **manifest** thought, feeling, hope, fear or motive that appears in the conscious mind, there is a corresponding **latent** thought, feeling, hope, fear or motive that we have locked away. We don't really know ourselves at all. All we know are the lies we tell ourselves to keep ourselves from going mad.

Scary thought, isn't it?