

Theories Of Personality: A Literature Review

Donika Tahirsylaj Alidemi^{1,2}, Feride Fejza^{* 3}

¹ International Vision University – Gostivar, North Macedonia

² Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje, Skopje, North Macedonia

³ University and Clinical Center of Kosova, Prishtina,



Abstract – Personality can be defined as relatively stable and distinctive styles of thought, behavior, and emotional responses that characterize a person's adaptations to surrounding circumstances. Thus, the concept of personality has been used to explain what causes people to behave differently in the same situation and to explain an individual's consistency in responding across situations. Personality results from the interplay of biological and environmental factors. Different personality theorists emphasize different aspects of personality and its development. These approaches include: the psychoanalytic approach (emphasizing the role of early childhood experience and the unconscious in determining adult personality), trait theory (emphasizing characteristics of human behavior that distinguish a person and can be objectively measured), the social cognitive approach (emphasizing how the principles of learning and information processing influence personality), the humanistic approach (emphasizing one's subjective experiences and the potential for human growth, creativity, and spontaneity), and the evolutionary/biological approach (emphasizing behavior patterns that may result from physiology, genetic inheritance, and adaptive pressures from humans' evolutionary past).

Keywords – Personality, Theories, Psychoanalytic.

I. CONCEPT I: PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES

Sigmund Freud was the founder of the psychoanalytic approach to personality, although other theorists have modified and expanded his concepts. All such theorists believe that powerful unconscious motives exist and that conflict between motives produces anxiety and defense mechanisms.

According to Freud, the unconscious is the major motivating force in human behavior. Although we cannot directly experience the contents of the unconscious, the contents can reveal themselves in unguarded moments through slips of the tongue, accidents, and revealing jokes.

Freud divided the human psyche into three separates but interacting motivational forces: id, ego, and superego. The unconscious id contains the psychic energy and biological drives. The id operates according to the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification and reduction of tension, regardless of circumstances. The ego begins developing soon after birth and helps the innate id to reduce tension realistically. The ego is present in the conscious mind and functions according to the reality principle, seeking rational solutions to satisfy the id's demands. The superego (or conscience) develops in childhood and represents the moral standards of society as conveyed to the person by his or her parents. The superego functions to prohibit the expression of the id's instinctive drives. Thus, the id and superego are often in conflict, and it is the ego's task to mediate this conflict.

When the ego is losing its struggle to reconcile the demands of id, superego, and reality, anxiety develops. Anxiety is a state of psychic distress and its presence signals that an overwhelming id impulse will lead to some kind of harm. When the ego inhibits the id's harmful demands, the resulting inner conflict is this anxiety.

Anxiety can be reduced by using defense mechanisms. A defense mechanism is a mental strategy that blocks the harmful id impulse while reducing anxiety. Repression is the most basic defense mechanism; it operates by pushing unacceptable id impulses back into the unconscious. All other defense mechanisms involve repression. Denial is the refusal to acknowledge some threat. Regression reduces anxiety by allowing the person to behave as he or she did at an earlier, less conflict-oriented stage of life. In reaction formation, a person replaces an anxiety-producing impulse or feeling (e.g., hate) with its opposite (e.g., love). Projection occurs when a person unknowingly attaches his or her own objectionable attributes to other people. Displacement is the transfer of unacceptable feelings from their appropriate target to a much safer object; and sublimation is a kind of displacement in which forbidden impulses are diverted toward socially desirable goals. Rationalization involves attempting to explain failure or shortcomings in nonthreatening ways. When used in moderation, defense mechanisms can have positive outcomes. They are especially useful in dealing with short-term crisis situations. If they endure, however, they may become the person's only way of handling anxiety and may prevent the development of healthy relationships, thus causing more problems than they solved.

Since Freud believed that early life experiences laid the groundwork for adult personality, he developed an elaborate theory of personality development. Freud argued that, at different stages in a child's life, the id's drive for sexual pleasure centers around different body parts, and that adult personality is shaped by the way the child resolves the conflicts between these early sexual urges and the restrictions imposed by society. Failure to resolve a conflict results in fixation, characterized by the symbolic expression of the conflict throughout life.

The stages in normal development are: the oral stage (where anxiety can result from withholding food when hungry), the anal stage (where anxiety can result from inappropriate toilet training), the phallic stage (in which pleasure focuses on masturbation and conflict comes from inadequate resolution of the Oedipus conflict), the latency stage (in which the sexual impulses remain in the background), and finally the genital stage (in which mature love relationships are possible and sexual intercourse provides pleasure). For Freud, adequate personality development might not result in happiness, but would allow the ability to form relationships and be productive. Although society was shocked at Freud's suggestion of childhood sexuality, Freud believed that sex was one of the most powerful impulses that shaped personality.

Post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorists have tended to give increased emphasis to the ego rather than the id. They have also tended to emphasize the process of social integration in explaining personality development. Other theorists, such as Erikson, have argued for the extension of critical developmental stages throughout life.

Both Carl Jung and Alfred Adler broke with Freud over disagreements about psychoanalytic theory. Jung objected to Freud's pessimistic view of the unconscious. To Jung, the unconscious was the source of creativity. He argued that our unconscious also contains the collected memories of the human race, which are reflected in the same way across cultures--in their myths, religion, art, and dreams. Jung saw personality development as a life-long process of striving to reconcile opposing urges. Adler believed that the great human motivation is striving for superiority. Because children are powerless, they experience the inferiority complex. Hence, early social relationships are of primary importance in Adler's theory.

Karen Horney believed that children feel basic anxiety when their parents are indifferent to them. The basic hostility, or resentment, that develops is repressed and later expresses itself in one of three modes of social interaction: moving toward others (looking for approval), moving against others (finding security in dominating others), or moving away from others (becoming withdrawn). All these self-protective modes produce interpersonal problems.

Erik Erikson agreed with Freud that childhood conflicts and their resolutions are important determinants of later behavior, but he thought the conflicts were social, not sexual, in nature. He also believed that development proceeds throughout adolescence and adulthood, with different fundamental challenges being encountered at each new stage of life.

Ego psychology, a psychoanalytic approach emphasizing the role of the ego and represented by the work of Heinz Hartmann, focuses on the ego's own autonomy and independence. Object relations theory merges this ego emphasis and the emphasis on social interaction in focusing upon the infant's social attachments. For example, Margaret Mahler believed that the *separation-individuation* process that children experience as they separate from their mothers will be repeated throughout life. Heinz Kohut emphasized the child's development of a sense of vigor and his or her sense of being in control as two critical determinants of personality development.

Freud's theory has been criticized on several grounds. First, the theory is based on a small atypical sample. Samples have been largely White, upper middle-class, and affluent. Second, the theory may be untestable, since almost any behavior could be taken as support for the theory. Third, Freud's theory shows a strong gender bias.

This bias is illustrated in how Freud theorized about the Oedipal conflict. According to Freud, boys undergo a more intense Oedipal conflict than girls do because only boys experience castration anxiety (fear of castration for one's Oedipal impulses). Consequently, boys develop a stronger identification with their same-sex parent than girls do. Hence, Freud reasoned boys would develop a stronger superego. Other psychoanalytic theorists, most notably Karen Horney, have objected to this conclusion. Nevertheless, Freud's theory of personality has been quite influential.

II. PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY: SIGMUND FREUD

Sigmund Freud was a young physician, building a medical practice in Vienna in the late 1800's. He was particularly interested in treating patients with emotional problems but felt frustrated by the lack of knowledge that existed at that time. Although he had devoted many years of study, in Austria and France, to the disorders of the brain and nerves, Freud found that what he had learned was of little help to his patients. Thus, being a man of considerable confidence and intelligence, Sigmund Freud set out to develop his own methods of treatment. In the course of his development of treatment methods, Freud also developed a general theory of personality, an explanation for why people develop their unique patterns of typical behavior. His view is known today as psychoanalytic theory.

Freud's theory of personality began with a very limited question. He wanted to understand the condition known today as conversion disorder. In this condition, the individual appears to have a serious medical problem such as paralysis or deafness for which there is no medical cause. Freud was interested in a woman named Anna O. who suffered from conversion disorder. Freud was fascinated by this case and wanted to know how and why the mind could create such discomfort for the individual.

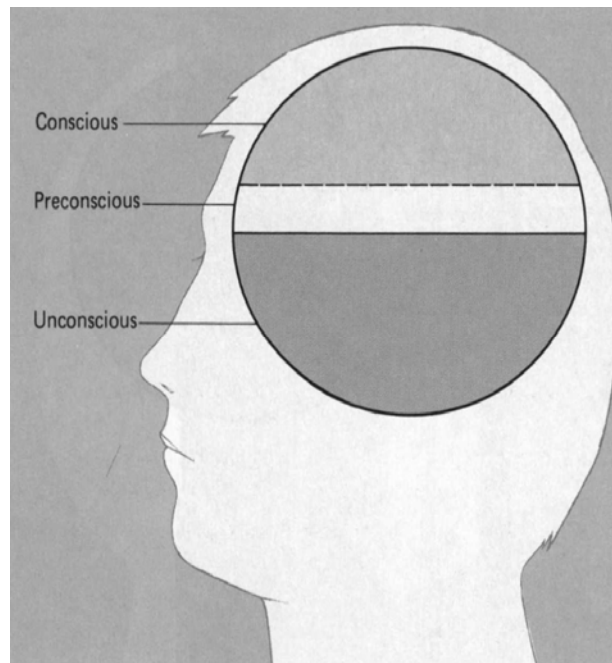
Why, then did they have the symptoms? To explain this paradox, Freud turned to a concept that was at least as old as the writings of Plato. Freud suggested that part of the human mind exists in such a way that the individual is not aware of it. In other words, part of the mind is unconscious. While the concept of the unconscious mind did not originate with Freud, we associate it with him because he gave it such importance in his theory of personality. To Freud, our lives are dominated not by our conscious minds, but by the forces that operate in the unconscious. Freud believed that unconscious sexual motives were at the heart of Anna O.'s problems. As he worked with other patients with conversion disorder, Freud became convinced that all such cases were caused by unexpressed sexual motives. And, in time, unconscious sexual urges became the cornerstone of Freud's general theory of personality.

III. FREUD'S MIND: THREE LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

Freud distinguished three levels of conscious awareness – the conscious mind, the preconscious mind and the unconscious mind. As we walk around, we are presently aware of the contents of the first level of the mind, but temporarily unaware of the contents of the second level and permanently unaware of the contents of the third.

To Freud, the mind is like an iceberg; the conscious mind is merely the tip visible above the surface, whereas the bulk of the important workings of the mind lurk mysteriously beneath the surface. Just below the surface is what Freud called the preconscious mind. It consists of memories that are not presently conscious, but can easily be brought into consciousness. For example, you are not thinking right now about your last meal, or the name of your teacher, or the taste of your favorite drink, but you could quickly bring those items into conscious awareness if you wanted to. The preconscious mind is the vast storehouse of easily accessible memories. The contents of the preconscious were once conscious and can be returned to consciousness when needed.

Further down from the conscious mind lies the unconscious mind. It's the storehouse for primitive instinctual motives plus memories and emotions that are so threatening to the conscious mind that they have been repressed, or unconsciously pushed into the unconscious mind. These contents of the unconscious mind are normally not accessible to consciousness. They can rarely be made fully conscious, and then only with great difficulty.

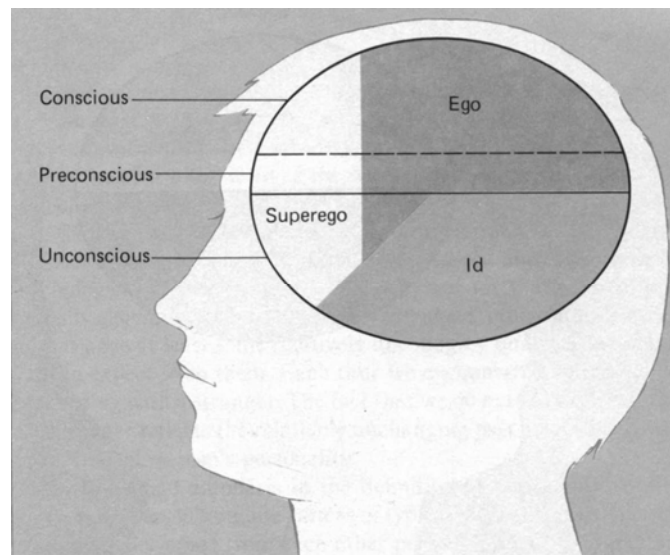


IV. FREUD'S MIND: ID, EGO, AND SUPEREGO

Freud also divided the mind into three parts in a different, but related way. The best-known aspect of Freud's theory of personality is his view that the mind is composed of three parts, each with a very different function: the id, the ego and the superego.

Id: The selfish Beast

When the infant is born, the mind has only one part, the id. The id is composed primarily of two sets of instincts, life instincts and death instincts. Freud wrote relatively little about the death instincts, but he believed that aggression and even suicidal urges arose from these instincts. The life instincts give rise to motives that sustain and promote life, such as hunger, self-protections, and sexual desire. To Freud, the sexual and aggressive urges are by far the most important of these motives. As strange as it may seem, sex and aggression are used by Freud to explain a vast range of personality characteristics, from kindness to shyness to cruelty.



Freud's view of the dark side of the human mind is not an easy one for most of us to accept. Freud tells us that their lives within each of us a selfish, cruel beast. The beast ---the id---operates according to the pleasure principle. The id wants to obtain immediate pleasure and avoid pain regardless of how harmful it might be to others.

But a person could not actually survive for long living by the pleasure principle (eventually you would get hurt if you fulfilled every selfish desire without regard for the feelings of others). Fortunately, during infancy, the period of time when we have only an id, we have adults around who see to it that our needs are realistically and safely met. As we grow up, our interactions without parents and other parts of the real world led us to convert part of the id into two other parts of the mind ---the ego and the superego--- that help us cope more effectively with the world.

Ego: The Executive of Personality

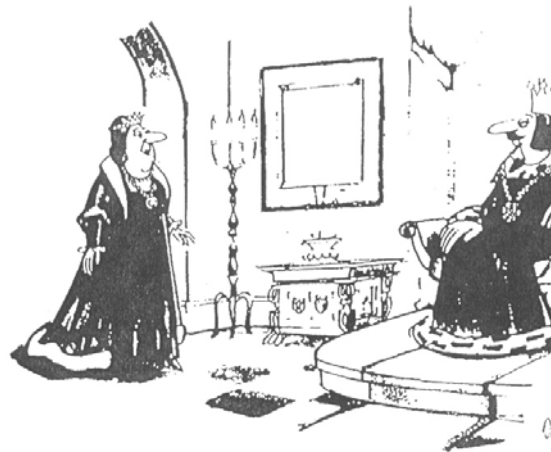
The ego is formed because the id has to find realistic ways of meeting its needs and avoiding trouble caused by selfish and aggressive behavior. The ego operates according to the reality principle. This means that it holds the id in check until a safe a realistic way has been found to satisfy its motives. The id would be happy to form a mental image of a sex object, and when that was not wholly satisfying, it would want to immediately rape the object. The ego, on the other hand, holds the id in check long enough to charm and seduce the sex object. The ego's goal is to help the id fulfill its needs. It only opposes the id's wishes long enough to find a realistic way to satisfy them. The ego can be thought of as the executive of the personality because it uses its cognitive abilities to manage and control the id and balance its desires against the restriction of reality and the superego.

Superego: The Conscience and Ego Ideal

The id and ego have no morals. They seek to satisfy the id's selfish motives without regard for the good of others. The ego tries to be realistic about how those motives are satisfied. But as long as the needs are safely met, it does not care if rules, lies are told, or other people are wronged. While each of us wants our desires to be satisfied immediately, if everyone acted in this manner simultaneously, society would fall into chaos.

Society places restrictions on the actions of the id and ego by creating the superego, the part of the mind that opposes the desires of the id by enforcing moral restrictions and by striving to attain a goal of "ideal" perfection. Parents are the main agents of society in creating the superego. They teach moral principles to their children by punishing transgressions and rewarding proper behavior. These experiences become incorporated into the child's mind as the two parts of the superego. According to Freud, parental punishment creates the set of moral inhibitions known as the conscience, while their rewards set up a stand of perfect conduct in the superego called the ego ideal. These two parts of the superego work together by punishing behaviour that breaks the moral code through guilt and rewarding good behavior through pride. As the superego develops strength, children are able to control themselves and behave in ways that allow society to function smoothly. According to Freud's view, most of us do not steal, murder, and rape

not because we do not want to, or because our egos could not find relatively safe ways to do so, but because our superegos hold these desires in check.



"Good morning, beheaded—uh, I mean b

Drawing by Fradon; ©1983 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

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