

Critically consider one psychodynamic explanation of personality development

'Psychodynamic' refers to the active forces within the personality that motivate behaviour, as well as the inner causes of behaviour, in particular the unconscious conflict between the various personality structures. Freud's was the original psychodynamic theory, and all those theories based on his ideas (such as Erikson's) are also psychodynamic. Freud's theory of personality development is closely related to other aspects of his psychoanalytic theory. Especially important are his accounts of the structure of the personality (comprising the id, the ego, and the superego) and motivation. Although these personality structures develop in this order, this isn't strictly part of Freud's developmental theory. According to his theory of infantile sexuality, sexuality isn't confined to physically mature adults, but is evident from birth, with different parts of the body (erogenous zones) becoming the focus of sexual pleasure – and frustration – at different times. This refers to the psychosexual stages, oral (0–1), anal (1–3), phallic (3–5/6), latency (5/6–puberty) and genital (puberty–maturity). Both excessive gratification and frustration can result in the individual becoming fixated at the particular stage (or sub-stage) at which this occurs. In turn, this fixation can result in associated adult personality traits, such as anal expulsive or anal retentive. In this way, Freud was able to explain how individual differences arise from common developmental patterns.

Probably the most important psychosexual stage is the phallic, during which the Oedipus complex arises. The small boy's fear of castration/castration anxiety leads him to repress his desire for the mother and hostile feelings for the father, and to identify with the father. Through this identification with the aggressor, boys acquire their superego and the male sex role. For girls, the Oedipus (or Electra) complex begins with the belief that she's already been castrated. She blames her mother for this and experiences penis envy. For girls to develop their superego and female sex role, they need to identify with the mother. But the girl's motivation for giving up her father as a love-object in order to move back to her mother is much less obvious than the boy's for identifying with his father. As a consequence, girls' identification with their mothers is less complete than boys' with their fathers. In turn, this makes the female superego weaker and their identity as separate, independent persons is less well developed.

Freud believed that the Oedipus complex was 'the central phenomenon of the sexual period of early childhood'. But there's little evidence to support his claim regarding sex differences in morality (as a result of the female's weaker superego). For example, as measured by children's ability to resist temptation, girls, if anything, are stronger than boys (Hoffman, 1974). According to Horney (1924) and Thompson (1943), rather than girls wanting a penis, what they really envy is males' superior social status. Freud assumed that the Oedipus complex is a universal phenomenon, but Malinowski's (1929) study of the Trobriand Islanders showed that where the father is the mother's lover but not the son's disciplinarian (i.e. an avuncular society), the father-son relationship was very good. It seems that Freud over-emphasised the role of sexual jealousy. But this is still only one study, and more societies, both Western and avuncular, need to be examined (Segall et al., 1990). Also, other psychodynamic theorists, such as Erikson (1950) believed that Freud exaggerated the influence of instincts, particularly the sexual instinct, in his account of personality development. Erikson tried to correct this by describing stages of psychosocial development, reflecting the influence of social, cultural and historical factors, but without denying the role of biology.

Another major criticism of Freud's Oedipal theory is that it was based almost entirely on the case of Little Hans (1909). In fact, Freud's Oedipal theory had already been proposed in 1905, and Little Hans was simply presented as a 'little Oedipus'. Given that this was

the only child patient that Freud reported on, and that any theory of development must involve the study of children, Little Hans is a crucially important case study. But it was extremely biased, with Hans's father (a supporter of Freud's theories) doing most of the psychoanalysis, and Freud simply seeing Hans as confirming his Oedipal theory. Quite apart from criticism of the reliability and objectivity of the case study method in general, other psychodynamic theorists have offered alternative interpretations of Hans's horse phobia. These include Bowlby's (1973) re-interpretation in terms of attachment theory. However, Bee (2000) believes that attachment research provides considerable support for the basic psychoanalytic hypothesis that the quality of the child's earliest relationships affects the whole course of later development. Both Bowlby (1973) and Erikson (1963) see early relationships as prototypes of later relationships. Belief in the impact of early experience is a lasting legacy of Freud's developmental theory.