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Levels of Consciousness and Personality

Theory by Sigmund Freud

Levels of Consciousness

According to Sigmund Freud, human behaviors is influenced by three levels of consciousness: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind.

The Conscious Mind: This involves everything we are aware of at a given moment—our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. Example: When I am attending a psychology lecture and paying attention to the lecturer's words, I am using my conscious mind.

The Preconscious Mind: This holds information that is not currently in awareness but can be easily recalled. Example: If someone asks me where I sat my Senior Four exams, I can remember it quickly because it is stored in my preconscious mind.

The Unconscious Mind: This contains hidden memories, fears, and desires that we are not aware of but that still influence our behaviour. Example: A child who was once bitten by a dog may grow up fearing dogs without remembering that early experience.

Freud believed that many of our behaviours and emotions are controlled by the unconscious level of the mind.

The Personality Structure

Freud described personality as made up of three interacting parts: the Id, Ego, and Superego.

The Id: This is the primitive part of personality present from birth. It seeks immediate pleasure and avoids pain, without concern for right or wrong. Example: When a baby cries loudly for milk, it shows the Id demanding instant satisfaction.

The Ego: This develops as a person grows and learns to deal with reality. It tries to satisfy the Id's desires in acceptable and realistic ways. Example: A student may want to leave class early (Id) but waits until the lecture ends (Ego) because it is the proper thing to do.

The Superego: This represents morals, values, and a sense of right and wrong, developed through parental guidance, culture, and religion. Example: A person who finds money on the road and decides to return it to the owner is being guided by the Superego.

A healthy personality, according to Freud, is one that balances the Id, Ego, and Superego.

When one part dominates, behaviour may become problematic.

Stages of Personality Development (Psychosexual Stages)

Freud proposed that personality develops through five psychosexual stages, each focusing on pleasure in different body parts. How conflicts are resolved in each stage affects later personality.

Oral Stage (0–1 year)

Pleasure centres on the mouth through sucking and eating. Example: Babies in Uganda find comfort in breastfeeding or sucking their thumbs. Over-dependence at this stage may cause adults to talk too much or overeat.

Anal Stage (1–3 years)

Focus is on toilet training and control. Example: A child learning to use a potty in a Ugandan home may be praised or punished. Too strict training can create adults who are overly tidy or stubborn.

Phallic Stage (3–6 years)

Children become aware of gender differences and identify with the parent of the same sex.

Example: A boy who imitates his father's way of talking or walking is in this stage.

Latency Stage (6–12 years)

Sexual feelings are repressed, and energy is directed toward learning and social activities.

Example: In primary school, children focus on studying and playing with same-gender friends.

Genital Stage (12 years and above)

Sexual desires reawaken, and individuals begin seeking mature relationships. Example:

Teenagers start developing romantic interests and learning to form meaningful friendships. Freud believed that problems in any stage could affect adult behaviour.

Defence Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms are unconscious strategies the Ego uses to protect us from anxiety or unpleasant thoughts. Freud and his daughter Anna Freud identified several of them:

Repression: Pushing painful memories out of awareness. Example: Someone who survived a car accident may not remember the details because the mind blocks them out.

Denial: Refusing to accept reality. Example: A student who fails an exam but insists they passed because 'the results must be wrong.'

Projection: Attributing one's own feelings to others. Example: A jealous person accusing their friend of being jealous.

Displacement: Shifting feelings from the real source to a safer target. Example: A worker angry at their boss may go home and shout at their children.

Regression: Returning to childish behaviour when under stress. Example: An adult crying after losing a job behaves like a frustrated child.

Rationalization: Making excuses to justify behaviour. Example: A student saying 'everyone cheats' after being caught copying during an exam.

These mechanisms help reduce emotional pain but can become unhealthy if overused.

Conclusion

Freud's theory offers a deep understanding of how personality develops and why people behave differently. It shows that childhood experiences, unconscious motives, and internal conflicts shape who we become. In the Ugandan context, culture, family, and moral upbringing play vital roles in balancing the Id, Ego, and Superego. Understanding these ideas helps social workers, teachers, and counsellors support people with empathy and awareness of their inner struggles.