

Sigmund Freud

Biography

Sigmund Freud was born May 6, 1856, in Moravia. His family moved to Vienna when he was four or five, and he lived there for most of his life. A brilliant child, he went to medical school and studied under physiology a professor named Ernst Brücke. Brücke believed in reductionism, the idea that personality could be "reduced" to neurology. Freud was to abandon this idea later in life.

Freud was highly controversial. His books and lectures brought him both fame and ostracism from the mainstream medical community. He drew around him a number of bright sympathizers who became the core of the psychoanalytic movement, but he tended to reject people who did not totally agree with him. Many separated from him and went on to found competing schools of thought.

Freud emigrated to England before World War II when Vienna became an increasingly dangerous place for Jews, especially ones as famous as Freud. Not long afterward, he died there of cancer.

Freud's Theory

Freud didn't invent the idea of the conscious versus unconscious mind, but he made it popular. According to him, the conscious mind is what you are aware of at any particular moment, your present perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings. Working closely with the conscious mind is what Freud called the *preconscious*, anything that can easily be made conscious, such as memories you're not thinking about at the moment, but can readily be brought to mind. Freud suggested that these are the smallest parts!

Freud suggested that the largest part of the mind is the unconscious. It includes all the things that are not easily available to awareness, including many things that have their origins there, such as our drives or instincts, and things that are put there because we can't bear to look at them, such as the memories and emotions associated with trauma.

According to Freud, the unconscious is the source of our motivations, whether they be simple desires for food or sex, neurotic compulsions, or the motivation of an artist or scientist. Freud suggested that we often resist becoming conscious of these motives, and they are usually available to us only in disguised form.

The Id, the Ego, and the Superego

For Freud, the "organism" occupies a special place in the world. It is special in that it acts to survive and reproduce, and it is guided toward those goals by its needs—hunger, thirst, pain avoidance, and sex.

The nervous system is an essential part of the organism. At birth, the human nervous system is little more than that of any other animal, an "it" or id. The "id" translates the organism's needs into instincts or drives that Freud also called wishes.

The id works with the *pleasure principle*, which is a demand to take care of needs immediately, such as a hungry infant crying. It isn't aware of what it wants, in an adult sense; it just wants it and it wants it now. The infant, in the Freudian view, is essentially pure id.

Although a wish for food might satisfy the id, it isn't enough to satisfy the organism. Needs get stronger, and wishes increase. For example, if some need isn't satisfied, such as the need for food, it demands more and more of your attention, until there comes a point where you can't think of anything else. This is the wish breaking into consciousness.

Luckily for the organism, the small portion of the mind, the conscious, is hooked to the world through the senses. Around this little bit of consciousness, during the first year of a child's life, some of the some of the id becomes "I" or ego. The ego relates the organism to reality through its consciousness, and it searches for objects to satisfy the wishes that id creates to represent the organisms needs.

The ego, unlike the id, functions according to the reality principle, which says "take care of a need as soon as an appropriate object is found." It represents reality and, to a considerable extent, reason.

The ego struggles to keep the id, and ultimately the organism, happy as it encounters obstacles in the world. And, it occasionally meets with objects that assist it in attaining its goals, and it keeps a record of these obstacles and aides. In particular, it records rewards and punishments presented by the mother and father, two of the most influential objects in a child's world. This record of things to avoid and strategies to take becomes the *superego*. It isn't complete until about age seven, and in some people, it is never completed.

There are two aspects to the superego. One is the conscience, which is an internalization of punishments and warnings, and, and the other is called the *ego ideal*, which evolves from rewards and positive role models. The conscience and ego ideal communicate their requirements to the ego with feelings like pride, shame, and guilt.

So, in childhood, a new set of needs and wishes that derive from social origins arises. However, these wishes often conflict with those from the id. The superego represents society, and society may want you to never satisfy your needs.

Life and Death Instincts

Freud saw all human behavior as motivated by drives or instincts, which are neurological representations of physical needs. These instincts perpetuate the lives of individuals by motivating them to seek food and water, and it perpetuates the lives of species, by motivating members of the species to have sex. Freud called the motivational energy of these life instincts the libido, which means "I desire" in Latin.

Freud's clinical experience led him to view sex as more important in the dynamics of the psyche than other needs. Humans are social creatures, and sex is the most social of needs. And, for Freud, sex involved much more than sexual intercourse. So, libido is the sex drive.

Libido is the *pleasure principle* keeps us in constant motion. However, the goal of this motion is to be at peace, to have no more needs. Therefore, the ultimate goal of life is death. Freud began to believe that every person has an unconscious wish to die.

This idea was rejected by many of his students, but it has some basis in experience. For many people in the world, life is painful and exhausting, and death is a release from the struggle.

Evidence of the death instinct is in the desire for peace, for escape from stimulation, attraction to alcohol and narcotics, the penchant for escapist activity, such as losing ourselves in books or movies, our craving for rest and sleep. Sometimes it presents itself openly as suicide and suicidal wishes. And, Freud theorized, sometimes it is directed away from ourselves in the form of aggression, cruelty, murder, and destructiveness.

Defense Mechanisms

The ego deals with the demands of reality, the id, and the superego as well as it can. But when anxiety becomes overwhelming, the ego defends itself. The techniques it uses are called the *ego defense mechanisms*, and Freud, his daughter Anna, and other disciples discovered several.

One is *denial*, which involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it. This is primitive and self-destructive, since no one functions effectively by disregarding reality.

Repression, which is being unable to recall a threatening situation, is a second defense mechanism. Freud's daughter, Anna, called it "motivated forgetting," and it is also an ineffective strategy. Many other examples exist.

Freud's Stages

For Freud, the sex drive is the most important motivating force for both adults and children. Sexuality meant not only intercourse, but all pleasurable sensation from the skin. Everyone—babies, children, and adults—enjoy tactile experiences such as caresses and kisses.

Freud noted that, at different times in our lives, different parts of our skin give us greatest pleasure. Later theorists would call these areas *erogenous zones*. Freud suggested that infants found the greatest pleasure in sucking, especially at the breast, and, in fact, babies have a penchant for bringing nearly everything in their environment into contact with their mouths. Later, the child focuses on the anal pleasures of holding it in and letting go. By three or four, the child may have discovered the pleasure of touching or rubbing against his or her genitalia. Only later, in our sexual maturity, do people find their greatest pleasure in sexual intercourse. These findings evolved into a psychosexual stage theory.

The *oral stage* lasts from birth to about 18 months. The focus of pleasure is, of course, the mouth. Sucking and biting are favorite activities.

The *anal stage* lasts from about 18 months to three or four years old. The focus of pleasure is the anus. Holding it in and letting it go are greatly enjoyed.

The *phallic stage* lasts from three or four to five, six, or seven years old. The focus of pleasure is the genitalia. Masturbation is common.

The *latent stage* lasts from five, six, or seven to puberty. During this stage, Freud believed that the sexual impulse was suppressed in the service of learning. However, while most children seem to be fairly calm, sexually, during their grammar school years, perhaps up to a quarter of them are quite busy masturbating and playing "doctor." In Freud's repressive era, these children were, at least, quieter than their modern counterparts.

The *genital stage* begins at puberty, and represents the resurgence of the sex drive in adolescence, and the more specific focusing of pleasure in sexual intercourse. Freud felt that masturbation, oral sex, homosexuality, and many other things we find acceptable in today's society, were immature.

This is a true stage theory, meaning that Freudians believe that we all go through these stages, in this order, and pretty close to these ages.

The Oedipal Crisis

Each stage has difficult tasks associated with it. For the oral stage, it is weaning. For the anal stage, it's toilet training. For the phallic stage, it is the Oedipal crisis, named after the ancient Greek story of king Oedipus, who inadvertently killed his father and married his mother.

According to Freud's account of the Oedipal crisis, the first love-object for all of us is our mother. We want her attention, affection, and caresses; we want her in a broadly sexual way. For the young boy, however, his father is a rival for his mother's charms. Since his father is bigger, stronger, smarter, and he gets to sleep with mother, he is the enemy.

Putting Freud's Work Into Perspective

As we said at the beginning of this discussion, Freud's work is highly controversial. The Oedipal complex and the associated ideas of castration anxiety and penis envy, as well as Freud's emphasis on sexuality have been sharply criticized. His concept of a death instinct is also controversial.

His emphasis on the unconscious is also controversial. Behaviorists, humanistic psychologists, and existentialists all believe that (a) the motivations and problems that can be attributed to the unconscious are much fewer than Freud thought, and (b) the unconscious is not the great churning cauldron of activity he made it out to be. Most psychologists today see the unconscious as whatever we don't need or don't want to see. Some theorists don't use the concept at all.

On the other hand, many of the activities in our society are motivated, at some level, by sex. Sex is prominent in advertising, movies and television programs often don't sell well if they don't include some titillation, that the fashion industry is based on a continual game of sexual hide-and-seek, and that we all spend a considerable portion of every day in some form of mating rituals.

Also, Freud made us aware of two powerful forces and their demands on us. He showed how much of our behavior was based on biology, and he demonstrated that society has a powerful impact on people's behaviors and attitudes. The id and the superego—the psychic manifestations of biology and society—will always be with us in some form or another.

The idea of ego defenses also has merit. Everyone manipulates reality and our memories to suit their own needs, especially when those needs are strong.

Boeree, G. (1997). *Sigmund Freud*. On-line at <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/freud.html>.