Long before entering the University of Vienna in 1873, young Freud showed signs of independence and brilliance. He so loved reading plays, poetry, and philosophy that he once ran up a bookstore debt beyond his means. As a teen he often took his evening meal in his tiny bedroom in order to lose time from his studies. After medical school he set up a private practice specializing in nervous disorders. Before long, however, he faced patients whose disorders made no neurological sense. For example, a patient might have lost all feeling in a hand—yet there is no sensory nerve that, if damaged, would numb the entire hand and nothing else. Freud’s search for a cause for such disorders set his mind running in a direction destined to change human self-understanding.

Might some neurological disorders have psychological causes? Observing patients led Freud to his “discovery” of the unconscious. He speculated that lost feeling in one’s hand might be caused by a fear of touching one’s genitals that unexplained blindness or deafness might be caused by not wanting to see or hear something that aroused intense anxiety. After some early unsuccessful trials with hypnosis, Freud turned to free association, in which he told the patient to relax and say whatever came to mind, no matter how embarrassing or trivial. He assumed that a line of mental dominoes had fallen from his patients’ distant past to their troubled present. Free association, he believed, would allow him to retrieve that line, following a chain of thought leading into the patient’s unconscious, where painful unconscious memories, often from childhood, could be retrieved and released. Freud called his theory of personality and the associated treatment techniques psychoanalysis.

Basic to Freud’s theory was his belief that the mind is mostly hidden. Our conscious awareness is like the part of an iceberg that浮s above the surface. Beneath our awareness is the larger unconscious mind with its thoughts, wishes, feelings, and memories. Some of these thoughts we store temporarily in a preconscious area, from which we can retrieve them into conscious awareness. Of greater interest to Freud was the mass of unacceptable passions and thoughts that he believed he repressed, or forcibly block from our consciousness because they would be too unsettling to acknowledge. Freud believed that without our awareness, these troublesome feelings and ideas powerfully influence us, sometimes gaining expression in disguised forms—the work we choose, the beliefs we hold, our daily habits, our troubling symptoms.

Psychoanalytic Theory’s Core Ideas

How did Sigmund Freud’s treatment of psychological disorders lead to his view of the unconscious mind?

Ask 100 people on the street to name a notable deceased psychologist, suggested Keith Stanovich (1996, p. 1), and “Freud would be the winner hands down.” In the popular mind, he is to psychology’s history what Elvis Presley is to rock music’s history. Freud’s influence not only lingers in psychiatry and clinical psychology, but also in literary and film interpretation. Almost 9 in 10 American college courses that reference psychoanalysis are outside of psychology departments (Cothen, 2007). His early twentieth-century concepts penetrate our twenty-first-century language. Without realizing their source, we may speak of ego, repression, projection, sibling rivalry, Freudian slips, and so on. Who was Freud, and what did he teach?

Like all of us, Sigmund Freud was a product of his times. His Victorian era was a time of tremendous discovery and scientific advancement, but it is also known today as a time of sexual repression and male dominance. Men’s and women’s roles were clearly defined, with male superiority assumed and only male sexuality generally acknowledged (discreetly).
For Freud the determinist, nothing was ever accidental. He believed he could glimpse the unconscious seeping not only into people’s free associations, beliefs, habits, and symptoms but also into slips of the tongue and pen. He illustrated with a financially stressed patient who, not wanting any large pills, said, “I please do not give me any bills, because I cannot swallow them.” Similarly, Freud viewed jokes as expressions of repressed sexual and aggressive tendencies, and dreams as the “royal road to the unconscious.” The remembered content of dreams (their manifest content) he believed to be a censored expression of the dreamer’s unconscious wishes (the dream’s latent content). In his dream analyses, Freud searched for patients’ inner conflicts.

Personality Structure

What was Freud’s view of personality?

In Freud’s view, human personality—including its emotions and strivings—arises from a conflict between impulse and restraint—between our aggressive, pleasure-seeking biological urges and our internalized social controls over these urges. Freud believed personality arises from our efforts to resolve this basic conflict—to express these impulses in ways that bring satisfaction without also bringing guilt or punishment. To understand the mind’s dynamics during this conflict, Freud proposed three intersecting systems: the id, ego, and superego (Figure 55.1).

The id’s unconscious psychic energy constantly strives to satisfy basic drives to survive, reproduce, and aggress. The id operates on the pleasure principle. It seeks immediate gratification. To envision an id-dominated person, think of a newborn infant crying out for satisfaction, caring nothing for the outside world’s conditions and demands. Or think of people with a present rather than future time perspective—who those who abuse tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and would sooner party now than sacrifice today’s pleasure for future success and happiness (Kernberg et al., 1999).

As the ego develops, the young child responds to the real world. The ego, operating on the reality principle, seeks to gratify the id’s impulses in realistic ways that will bring long-term pleasure. (Imagine what would happen if, lacking an ego, we expressed all our unexamined sexual or aggressive impulses.) The ego contains our partly conscious perceptions, thoughts, judgments, and memories.

Around age 4 or 5, Freud theorized, a child’s ego recognizes the demands of the newly emerging superego, the voice of our moral compass (conscience) that forces the ego to consider not only the real but the ideal. The superego focuses on how we ought to behave. It strives for perfection, judging actions and producing positive feelings of pride or negative feelings of guilt. Someone with an exceptionally strong superego may be virtuous yet guilt-ridden; another with a weak superego may be wantonly self-indulgent and remorseless.

Because the superego’s demands often oppose the id’s, the ego struggles to reconcile the two. It is the personality’s “executive,” mediating among the impulsive demands of the id, the restraining demands of the superego, and the real-life demands of the external world. If Jane feels sexually attracted to John, she may satisfy both id and superego by joining a volunteer organization that John attends regularly.

Personality Development

What developmental stages did Freud propose?

Analysis of his patients’ histories convinced Freud that personality forms during life’s first few years. He concluded that children pass through a series of psychosexual stages, during which the id’s pleasure-seeking energies focus on distinct pleasure-sensitive areas of the body (called erogenous zones (Table 55.1)). Each stage offers its own challenges, which Freud saw as conflicting tendencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 55.1 Freud’s Psychosexual Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral (0–18 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal (18–36 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phallic (3–6 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latency (6–10 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genital (puberty on)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Freud believed that during the phallic stage, for example, boys seek genital stimulation, and they develop both unconscious sexual desires for their mother and jealousy and hatred for their father, whom they consider a rival. Given these feelings, he thought boys also experience guilt and a lurking fear of punishment, perhaps by castration, from their father. Freud called this collection of feelings the Oedipus complex after the Greek legend of Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Some psychoanalysts in Freud’s era believed that girls experienced a parallel Electra complex.

Children eventually cope with the threatening feelings, said Freud, by repressing them and by identifying with (trying to become like) the rival parent. It’s as though something inside the child decides, “If you can’t beat ’em [the parent of the same sex], join ’em.” Through this identification process, children’s superegos gain strength as they incorporate many of their parents’ values.

Freud believed that identification with the same-sex parent provides what psychologists now call our gender identity—our sense of being male or female.

Identification: I want to be like Dad.
Freud presumed that our early childhood relations—especially with our parents and caregivers—influence our developing identity, personality, and sexuality. In Freud's view, conflicts unresolved during earlier psychosocial stages could surface as maladaptive behavior in the adult years. At any point in the oral, anal, or phallic stages, strong conflict could lead, or fixate, the person's pleasure-seeking energies in that stage. A person who had been either orally overindulged or deprived (perhaps by being given too much, or too little) might fixate at the oral stage. This orally fixated adult could exhibit either passive dependence (like that of a nursing infant) or an exaggerated denial of this dependence (by acting tough or uttering biting sarcasm). Or the person might continue to seek oral gratification by smoking or excessive eating. In such ways, Freud suggested, the twig of personality is bent at an early age.

Freud's ideas of sexuality were controversial in his own time. "Freud was called a dirty-minded pansexualist and Viennese libertine," notes historian of psychology Morton Hunt (2007, p. 211). Today his ideas of genital conflict and castration anxiety are disputed even by later psychodynamic theorists and therapists (see Module 56) (Shedler, 2010b). Yet we still teach them as part of the history of Western ideas.

### Defending Mechanisms

#### 55.4 How did Freud think people defend against anxiety?

Anxiety, said Freud, is the price we pay for civilization. As members of social groups, we must control our sexual and aggressive impulses, not act them out. But sometimes the ego fears losing control of this inner war between the id and superego. The presumed result is a dark cloud of unfocused anxiety that leaves us feeling unsettled but unsure why.

Freud proposed that the ego protects itself with defense mechanisms—tactics that reduce or redirect anxiety by distorting reality. Defense mechanisms protect our self-understanding. For Freud, all defense mechanisms function indirectly and unconsciously. Just as the body unconsciously defends itself against disease, so also does the ego unconsciously defend itself against anxiety. For example, repression banishes anxiety-arousing wishes and feelings from consciousness. According to Freud, repression underlies all the other defense mechanisms. However, because repression is often incomplete, repressed urges may appear as symbols in dreams or as slips of the tongue in casual conversation. **Table 55.2** describes a sampling of seven other well-known defense mechanisms.

#### Regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reverting to a more infantile psychosexual stage, where some psychic energy remains fixed.</td>
<td>A little boy reverts to the oral comfort of thumb sucking in the car on the way to his first day of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing unacceptable impulses by attributing them to others.</td>
<td>Repressing angry feelings, a person displays exaggerated friendliness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disguising one's own threatening impulses by offering self-justifying explanations in place of the real, more threatening unconscious reasons for one's actions.</td>
<td>&quot;The thief thinks everyone else is a thief&quot; (an El Salvadoran saying).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting sexual or aggressive impulses toward a more acceptable or less threatening object or person.</td>
<td>A habitual drinker says she drinks with her friends &quot;just to be sociable.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferring of unacceptable impulses into socially valued motives.</td>
<td>A man with aggressive urges becomes a surgeon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to believe or even perceive painful realities.</td>
<td>A partner denies evidence of his loved one's affair.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Evaluating Freud's Psychoanalytic Perspective

#### 55.5 How do contemporary psychologists view Freud's psychoanalysis?

Modern Research Contradicts Many of Freud's Ideas

We critique Freud from an early twenty-first-century perspective, a perspective that itself will be subject to revision. Freud did not have access to neurotransmitter or DNA studies, or to all that we have since learned about human development, thinking, and emotion. To criticize his theory by comparing it with today's thinking, some say, is like criticizing Henry Ford's Model T by comparing it with today's hybrid cars. (How tempting it always is to judge people in the past from our perspective in the present.)

But both Freud's admirers and his critics agree that recent research contradicts many of his specific ideas. Today's developmental psychologists see our development as lifelong, not fixed in childhood. They doubt that infants' neural networks are mature enough to sustain as much emotional trauma as Freud assumed. Some think Freud overestimated parental influence and underestimated peer influence. They also doubt that conscience and gender identity form as the child resolves the Oedipus complex at age 5 or 6. We gain our gender identity earlier and become strongly masculine or feminine even without a same-sex parent present. And they note that Freud's ideas about childhood sexuality arose from his skepticism of stories of childhood sexual abuse told by his female patients—stories that some scholars believe be attributed to their own childhood sexual wishes and conflicts (Eisenstein, 2001; Powell & Boer, 1994).

---

*"Many aspects of Freudian theory are no longer treated as dogma, and they should be."* -Psychologist Drew Westerm (1998)

*"Many aspects of Freudian theory are still taken as dogma, and they should be."* -Psychologist Drew Westerm (1998)
As we saw in Module 24, new ideas about why we dream dispute Freud's belief that dreams disguise and fulfill wishes. And slips of the tongue can be explained as competition between verbal choices in our memory network. Someone who says "I don't want to do that—it's a lot of bother" may simply be blending "bother" and "trouble" (Foss & Hakes, 1978). Researchers find little support for Freud's idea that defense mechanisms disguise sexual and aggressive impulses (though our cognitive gymnastics do indeed work to protect our self-esteem). History has also failed to support another of Freud's ideas—that suppressed sexuality causes psychological disorders. From Freud's time to ours, sexual inhibition has diminished, and psychological disorders have not.

Psychologists also criticize Freud's theory for its scientific shortcomings. Recall from Module 5 that good scientific theories explain observations and offer testable hypotheses. Freud's theory rests on few objective observations, and parts of it offer few testable hypotheses. (For Freud, his own recollections and interpretations of patients' free associations, dreams, and slips were evidence enough.)

What is the most serious problem with Freud's theory? It offers after-the-fact explanations of any characteristic (of one person's smoking, another's fear of horses, another's sexual orientation) yet fails to predict such behaviors and traits. If you feel angry at your mother's death, you illustrate his theory because "your unresolved childhood dependency needs are threatened." If you do not feel angry, you again illustrate his theory because "you are repressing your anger." That said, Calvin Hall and Gardner Lindzey (1976, p. 68) "are like betting on a horse after the race has been run." A good theory makes testable predictions.

So, should psychology post an "Allow Natural Death" order on this old theory? Freud's supporters object. To criticize Freudian theory for not making testable predictions is, they say, like criticizing baseball for not being an aerobic exercise, something it was never intended to be. Freud never claimed that psychoanalysis was predictive science. He merely claimed that, looking back, psychoanalysis could find meaning in their clients' state of mind (Bettel, 1979).

Supporters also note that some of Freud's ideas are enduring. It was Freud who drew our attention to the unconscious and the irrational, to our self-protective defenses, to the importance of human sexuality, and to the tension between our biological impulses and our social well-being. It was Freud who challenged our self-righteousness, punctured our pretensions, and reminded us of our potential for evil.

Modern Research Challenges the Idea of Repression

Psychoanalytic theory rests on the assumption that the human mind often represses offending wishes, banishing them into the unconscious until they resurface, like long-lost books in a dusty attic. Recover and resolve childhood's conflicted wishes, and emotional healing should follow. Repression became a widely accepted concept, used to explain hysterical phenomena and psychological disorders. Some of Freud's followers extended repression to explain apparently lost and recovered memories of childhood trauma (Boag, 2006; Cheit, 1998; Erdelyi).

Before You Move On

ASK YOURSELF

Which of Freud's presumed defense mechanisms have you found yourself employing?

TEST YOURSELF

How does today's psychological science assess Freud's theory?

Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.

Module 55 Review

55-1 Personality is an individual's characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting.

55-2 Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is not the most important theory in psychology; but his famous work is historically and culturally significant.

55-3 How did Sigmund Freud's treatment of psychological disorders lead to his view of the unconscious mind?

55-4 In treating patients whose disorders had no clear physical explanation, Freud concluded that these problems reflected unacceptable thoughts and feelings, hidden away in the unconscious mind.

55-5 To explore this hidden part of a patient's mind, Freud used free association and dream analysis.

55-6 What development stages did Freud propose?

55-7 Freud believed children pass through five psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital).

55-8 Unresolved conflicts at any stage can leave a person's pleasure-seeking impulses frustrated (stalled) at that stage.

"The overall findings... seriously challenge the classical psychoanalytic notion of repression..." - psycho-logist Yovel Pniel, "Does Repression Ever?" 2008

"During the Holocaust, many children... were used to endure the unspeakable. For those who continue to suffer [parents] is still present, many years later, as real as it was on the day it occurred." - Eric Zolov, Mary Hennessey, Brian Hallacy, and Robert Ancell, The Quest for the Nazi Personality. 1995
How did Freud think people defend themselves against anxiety?

- For Freud, anxiety was the product of tensions between the demands of the id and superego. The ego copes by using unconscious defense mechanisms, such as repression, which he viewed as the basic mechanism underlying and enabling all the others.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Free association is
   a. a method of exploring the unconscious.
   b. another name for hypnosis.
   c. the major function of the superego.
   d. an ego defense mechanism.
   e. a method of dream analysis.

2. According to Freud, which of the following is true of the ego?
   a. It focuses on how we ought to behave.
   b. It is the source of guilt.
   c. It is the part of the personality present at birth.
   d. It strives to satisfy basic drives.
   e. It operates under the reality principle.

3. Which of the following represents Freud's Oedipus complex?
   a. Yetto has begun to suffer from the same recurrent nightmares he had as a child.
   b. Madeline manifests repressed anxiety because of guilt she experienced when she disappointed her parents during toilet training.
   c. Five-year-old Anagha is taking on many of her mother's values through a process of identification.
   d. Four-year-old Carlos is experiencing unconscious sexual desire for his mother and unconscious hatred for his father.
   e. Elle has begun to overeat and smoke cigarettes as a college student, indicating a degree of oral fixation.

4. According to Freud, which of the following defense mechanisms underlies all of the others?
   a. Repression
   b. Reaction formation
   c. Displacement

5. How do contemporary psychologists view Freud's psychoanalysis?
   a. Today's psychologists give Freud credit for drawing attention to the vast unconscious, to the importance of our sexuality, and to the conflict between biological impulses and social restraints.
   b. But Freud's concept of repression, and his view of the unconscious as a collection of repressed and unacceptable thoughts, wishes, feelings, and memories, have not survived scientific scrutiny. Freud offered after-the-fact explanations, which are hard to test scientifically.
   c. Research does not support many of Freud's specific ideas, such as the view that development is fixed in childhood. (We now know it is lifelong.)

Practice FRQs

1. Name what Freud believed to be the three parts of the mind and describe the role of each.

   Answer
   1 point: The conscious mind is what a person is aware of.
   1 point: The preconscious mind is a temporary holding place from which memories and feelings can be easily retrieved.
   1 point: The unconscious mind is the hidden holding place for unacceptable passions and thoughts.

2. Nadja is struggling to decide whether to buy a new sweater that she really cannot afford. What role would each of the three parts of her personality (as theorized by Freud) play in her decision?

   (3 points)

Module 56: Psychodynamic Theories and Modern Views of the Unconscious

Module Learning Objectives

56-1 Identify which of Freud's ideas were accepted or rejected by his followers.

56-2 Describe projective tests and how they are used, and discuss some criticisms of them.

56-3 Describe the modern view of the unconscious.

Psychodynamic theories

Psychodynamic theories of personality view our behavior as emerging from the interaction between the conscious and unconscious mind, including associated motives and conflicts. These theories are descended from Freud's historical psychoanalytic theory, but the modern-day approaches differ in important ways.

The Neo-Freudian and Psychodynamic Theorists

56-1 Which of Freud's ideas did his followers accept or reject?

Freud's writings were controversial, but they soon attracted followers, mostly young, ambitious physicians who formed an inner circle around their strong-minded leader. These pioneering psychoanalysts, when we often call neo-Freudians, accepted Freud's basic ideas: the personality structures of id, ego, and superego; the importance of the unconscious; the shaping of personality in childhood; and the dynamics of anxiety and the defense mechanisms. But they broke off from Freud in two important ways. First, they placed more emphasis on the conscious mind's role in interpreting experience and in coping with the environment. And second, they doubted that sex and aggression were all-consuming motivations. Instead, they tended to emphasize other motives and social interactions.

Alfred Adler and Karen Horney (HORN-eye), for example, agreed with Freud that childhood is important. But they believed that childhood social, not sexual, tensions are crucial for personality formation (Ferguson, 2003). Adler (who had proposed the still-popular idea of the inferiority complex) himself struggled to overcome childhood illnesses and accidents, and believed that much of our behavior is driven by efforts to conquer childhood inferiority feelings that trigger our striving for superiority and power. Horney said childhood anxiety triggers our desire for love and security. She also countered Freud's assumptions, arising as they did in his conservative culture, that women have weak superegos and suffer "penis envy," and she attempted to balance the bias she detected in his masculine view of psychology.