

SIGMUND FREUD AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGY: REVISITING HIS THEORIES AND LEGACY

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Abstract: Sigmund Freud, often regarded as the father of psychoanalysis, introduced revolutionary ideas about the unconscious mind, personality structure, defense mechanisms, and dream interpretation. This paper revisits Freud's key theories and evaluates their influence on modern psychology. While his work laid the foundation for depth psychology and therapeutic practices, it has also faced criticism for its lack of empirical support and cultural bias. Through a review of primary and secondary literature, this study highlights both the contributions and controversies surrounding Freud's legacy. Despite evolving scientific standards, Freud's impact on psychological theory and practice remains significant.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, unconscious mind, defense mechanisms, personality theory.

Introduction

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist whose pioneering work in psychoanalysis transformed the understanding of human behavior and mental processes [1]. At a time when mental illness was largely misunderstood or mistreated through institutionalization, Freud proposed that psychological distress could stem from internal conflicts rooted in early life experiences [2].

His theories introduced concepts such as the unconscious mind, the tripartite structure of personality (id, ego, superego), and defense mechanisms—ideas that have had a lasting impact on psychology, psychiatry, and related disciplines [3]. Although many of Freud's ideas have been challenged or revised over time, his foundational role in shaping modern psychological thought cannot be overstated [4]. This paper aims to examine Freud's major theoretical contributions, assess their relevance in contemporary psychology, and explore the criticisms that have emerged since their inception.

Methods

A qualitative literature review was conducted using academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PsycINFO. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles, books, and historical documents related to Sigmund Freud's theoretical contributions and critiques of his work. Key search terms included "Freud," "psychoanalysis," "unconscious mind," "defense mechanisms," and "personality theory." A total of 14 relevant sources were selected based on their authority, relevance, and contribution to the topic. These sources formed the basis for summarizing Freud's core theories and evaluating their reception in modern psychology.

Results

At the heart of Freud's psychoanalytic theory lies the concept of the **unconscious mind**, which he described as a reservoir of thoughts, feelings, memories, and desires that are not directly accessible to conscious awareness but exert a powerful influence on behavior [5]. Freud believed that much of what drives human action occurs beneath the surface of consciousness, shaped by repressed memories and unresolved emotional conflicts.

He famously likened the human mind to an iceberg, where only a small portion—the conscious mind—is visible above the water, while the larger part—the unconscious—remains submerged and inaccessible without specific techniques like free association or dream analysis [6]. The unconscious, according to Freud, contains material that has been repressed because it is painful, unacceptable, or socially inappropriate. For example, traumatic childhood experiences, forbidden sexual desires, or aggressive impulses may be pushed into the unconscious to protect the individual from anxiety or guilt [7]. However, these repressed elements do not disappear; instead, they can manifest indirectly through dreams, slips of the tongue ("Freudian slips"), or symptoms of psychological distress such as anxiety or phobias.

Freud's emphasis on the unconscious challenged prevailing views of rational self-awareness and introduced the idea that people are often unaware of the true motivations behind their actions. This insight laid the groundwork for later developments in depth psychology, psychodynamic therapy, and even cognitive psychology, which explores how unconscious biases and heuristics shape decision-making [8].

Structure of Personality: Id, Ego, Superego

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud proposed a structural model of personality composed of three interacting systems: the **id**, the **ego**, and the **superego** [9]. Each plays a distinct role in shaping human behavior and maintaining psychological balance.

- **Id:** The id is the most primitive and instinctual component of personality, present from birth. It operates on the **pleasure principle**, seeking immediate gratification of basic biological and psychological needs, particularly those related to sex and aggression. The id is irrational and impulsive, demanding instant satisfaction without regard for reality or social norms.
- **Ego:** The ego develops during early childhood and serves as the rational mediator between the id's desires, the superego's moral demands, and the external world. It operates on the **reality principle**, striving to satisfy the id's urges in ways that are socially acceptable and practically feasible. The ego uses perception, reasoning, and problem-solving to navigate complex situations.
- **Superego:** The superego represents internalized moral standards and ideals absorbed from parents, teachers, and society. It functions as the conscience, judging actions as right or wrong and striving for perfection rather than pleasure. The superego can generate feelings of pride when one acts morally or guilt when one violates internalized values.

According to Freud, psychological health depends on a dynamic equilibrium among these three components. Imbalances or excessive conflict can lead to various forms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and neurotic behaviors [10].

For instance, if the id dominates, a person may act impulsively and disregard societal rules. If the superego is overly harsh, a person may experience chronic guilt or self-criticism. A strong, well-developed ego helps maintain harmony by finding realistic compromises between conflicting demands. This structural model provided a new way to understand personality dynamics and became foundational in clinical psychology, influencing subsequent theories of personality development and therapeutic interventions [11].

To cope with internal conflicts and reduce anxiety, Freud identified several **defense mechanisms**, many of which were further elaborated by his daughter Anna Freud [12]. These

unconscious strategies help individuals manage stress and maintain a sense of psychological stability.

Some of the most notable defense mechanisms include:

- **Repression:** Excluding distressing thoughts or memories from conscious awareness.
- **Denial:** Refusing to accept reality or facts that cause discomfort.
- **Projection:** Attributing one's own unacceptable feelings or traits to others.
- **Displacement:** Redirecting emotions from a threatening target to a safer substitute.
- **Sublimation:** Channeling unacceptable impulses into socially acceptable activities.

While some defenses, like sublimation, are considered adaptive and mature, others, such as denial or projection, can be maladaptive if overused [13]. Freud believed that excessive reliance on immature defense mechanisms could contribute to psychopathology. Modern psychology has expanded on Freud's original list, identifying additional mechanisms such as rationalization, reaction formation, and intellectualization. Contemporary research in psychodynamic therapy continues to emphasize the role of defense mechanisms in shaping behavior and emotional regulation [14].

Freud regarded dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious," believing they revealed hidden wishes and unresolved conflicts [12]. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he argued that dreams consist of two levels:

- **Manifest content:** The literal storyline of the dream.
- **Latent content:** The underlying, symbolic meaning derived from unconscious desires.

Through dream analysis, Freud sought to uncover the latent content by interpreting symbols, often related to sexual or aggressive impulses. For example, elongated objects like sticks or umbrellas might symbolize the penis, while enclosed spaces could represent the female genitalia [13].

Freud also introduced the concept of dream work, the process by which the unconscious transforms latent thoughts into manifest dreams. This includes condensation (combining multiple ideas into a single image), displacement (shifting emotional significance from one object to another), and symbolism (representing abstract ideas through concrete images).

Although modern neuroscience offers alternative explanations for dreaming—such as memory consolidation and emotional processing—Freud's emphasis on the psychological significance of dreams contributed to the development of depth psychology and therapeutic approaches that value symbolic interpretation.

Discussion

Freud's theories laid the groundwork for depth psychology and influenced subsequent schools of thought, including Jungian psychology, object relations theory, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. His focus on early childhood experiences, unconscious motivations, and interpersonal dynamics remains relevant in clinical settings.

Moreover, Freud popularized the idea that talking about one's problems could lead to healing—a principle central to modern psychotherapy. His method of free association, in which patients express whatever comes to mind without censorship, paved the way for open-ended therapeutic dialogue. Freud's structural model of personality (id, ego, superego) also provided a framework for understanding internal conflicts and personality development. Many contemporary psychologists acknowledge that while Freud's terminology may be outdated, the

underlying principles of inner conflict and self-regulation remain useful in explaining human behavior.

Additionally, his insights into defense mechanisms have found renewed interest in modern clinical psychology, especially in the context of trauma, addiction, and personality disorders. Researchers continue to explore how unconscious processes influence cognition, emotion, and behavior, validating aspects of Freud's work through empirical methods.

Despite his influence, Freud's work has faced substantial criticism. One major critique is the lack of empirical validation for many of his theories. Concepts like the Oedipus complex and penis envy are difficult to test scientifically, leading some scholars to question their validity.

Furthermore, Freud's methodology relied heavily on case studies and subjective interpretation rather than controlled experimentation. Critics argue that this makes psychoanalysis more akin to storytelling than science. Another significant point of contention is Freud's gender bias. His theory of "penis envy" suggests that women feel inferior due to anatomical differences, a notion that feminist scholars have widely criticized. Karen Horney, for example, countered with the concept of "womb envy," suggesting that men may feel inadequate due to their inability to bear children.

Additionally, Freud's observations were primarily based on middle-class Viennese patients, raising concerns about the cultural specificity of his findings [26]. Cross-cultural psychology has shown that developmental patterns and family dynamics vary widely across societies, undermining claims of universal applicability.

While many aspects of Freud's theories have been revised or rejected, his impact endures in areas such as dream interpretation, therapeutic dialogue, and the exploration of unconscious processes. Modern psychology integrates his insights into broader frameworks, combining them with empirical research and neuroscience.

For example, contemporary psychodynamic therapy retains the core principles of exploring unconscious motivations and early life experiences, though it has evolved to incorporate evidence-based practices. Cognitive-behavioral therapists also recognize the importance of automatic thoughts and unconscious beliefs in shaping behavior and mood.

Moreover, advances in brain imaging and neuropsychology have begun to validate some of Freud's intuitions about the unconscious. Research on implicit memory, emotional processing, and non-conscious decision-making aligns with Freud's view that much of our mental life occurs outside conscious awareness.

Thus, while Freud's original formulations may no longer be fully accepted, his contributions to understanding the complexity of the human mind remain foundational in the history of psychology.

Conclusion

Sigmund Freud's contributions to psychology remain significant despite the evolution of scientific standards and therapeutic practices. His theories on the unconscious mind, personality structure, and defense mechanisms provided a framework for understanding human behavior that continues to influence clinical and theoretical psychology today. While his work has been critiqued for its lack of empirical rigor and cultural limitations, Freud's legacy endures as a foundational figure in the history of psychological thought. As psychology continues to evolve, integrating Freud's insights with contemporary research ensures that his contributions remain part of the ongoing dialogue in the field.

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