



Simply Psychology

The Psychodynamic Approach

Saul McLeod, updated 2017

The psychodynamic approach includes all the theories in psychology that see human functioning based upon the interaction of drives and forces within the person, particularly unconscious, and between the different structures of the personality.

Freud's psychoanalysis was the original psychodynamic theory, but the psychodynamic approach as a whole includes all theories that were based on his ideas, e.g., [Jung](#) (1964), Adler (1927) and [Erikson](#) (1950).

The words psychodynamic and [psychoanalytic](#) are often confused. Remember that Freud's theories were psychoanalytic, whereas the term 'psychodynamic' refers to both his theories and those of his followers. Freud's psychoanalysis is both a theory and therapy.

[Sigmund Freud](#) (writing between the 1890s and the 1930s) developed a collection of theories which have formed the basis of the psychodynamic approach to psychology. His theories are clinically derived - i.e., based on what his patients told him during therapy. The psychodynamic therapist would usually be treating the patient for depression or anxiety related disorders.

Basic Assumptions

Our behavior and feelings are powerfully affected by [unconscious motives](#):

The unconscious mind comprises mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgments, feelings, or behavior (Wilson, 2002).

According to Freud (1915), the unconscious mind is the primary source of human behavior. Like an iceberg, the most important part of the mind is the part you cannot see.

Our feelings, motives, and decisions are actually powerfully influenced by our past experiences and stored in the unconscious.

Our behavior and feelings as adults (including psychological problems) are rooted in our [childhood experiences](#):

Psychodynamic theory states that events in our childhood have a great influence on our adult lives, shaping our personality. Events that occur in childhood can remain in the unconscious, and cause problems as adults.

Personality is shaped as the drives are modified by different conflicts at different times in childhood (during psychosexual development).

All behavior has a cause (usually unconscious), even slips of the tongue. Therefore, all behavior is determined:

Psychodynamic theory is strongly determinist as it views our behavior as caused entirely by unconscious factors over which we have no control.

Unconscious thoughts and feelings can transfer to the conscious mind in the form of parapraxes, popularly known as Freudian slips or slips of the tongue. We reveal what is really on our mind by saying something we didn't mean to.

Freud believed that slips of the tongue provided an insight into the unconscious mind and that there were no accidents, every behavior (including slips of the tongue) was significant (i.e., all behavior is determined).

Personality is made up of three parts (i.e., tripartite): the [id](#), [ego](#), and [super-ego](#):

The id is the primitive and instinctive component of personality. It consists of all the inherited (i.e., biological) components of personality present at birth, including the sex (life) instinct – Eros (which contains the libido), and the aggressive (death) instinct - Thanatos.

The ego develops to mediate between the unrealistic id and the external real world. It is the decision-making component of personality. The superego incorporates the values and morals of society which are learned from one's parents and others.

Parts of the unconscious mind (the id and superego) are in constant conflict with the conscious part of the mind (the ego). This conflict creates anxiety, which could be dealt with by the ego's use of [defense mechanisms](#).

Psychodynamic Summary

<p style="text-align: center;">Key Features</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Methodology</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tripartite Personality • Psychosexual Stages of Development • Unconscious Mind • Drive / Instinct Theory (Eros, Thanatos) • Defence Mechanisms (repression) • Oedipus / Electra Complex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Studies (Little Hans) • Dream Analysis • Free Association • Projective Tests (TAT, Inkblots) • Slips of the Tongue • Hypnosis
<p style="text-align: center;">Assumptions</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Contributions of Freud</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The major causes of behaviour have their origin in the unconscious mind. • Psychic determinism: all behaviour has a cause/reason. E.g. slips of the tongue (we have no freewill). • Behaviour is motivated by instinctual drives Eros (Life) & Thanatos (Death). • Different parts of the unconscious mind are in constant struggle (Id, ego and superego). • Our behaviour and feelings as adults (including psychological problems) are rooted in our childhood experiences (psychosexual stages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Studies (Little Hans) • Unconscious Mind • Instincts / Drives • Projective tests (TAT, Ink Blots) • Defence Mechanisms (e.g. Repression) • Importance of Childhood • Personality (id, ego, superego)
	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Studies - Subjective interpretation • Unscientific (lacks empirical evidence) • Too Deterministic (little free-will) • Unrepresentative Sample (from Vienna) • Little Hans could be classical con. • Behaviourism believes we are born a blank slate and have no instincts at birth

History of Psychodynamic Theory

Anna O a patient of Dr. Joseph Breuer (Freud's mentor and friend) from 1800 to 1882 suffered from hysteria.

In 1895 Breuer and his assistant, Sigmund Freud, wrote a book, *Studies on Hysteria*. In it they explained their theory: Every hysteria is the result of a traumatic experience, one that cannot be integrated into the person's understanding of the world. The publication establishes Freud as "the father of psychoanalysis."

By 1896 Freud had found the key to his own system, naming it *psychoanalysis*. In it, he had replaced hypnosis with "free association."

In 1900 Freud published his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which established the importance of psychoanalytical movement.

In 1902 Freud founded the *Psychological Wednesday Society*, later transformed into the *Vienna Psychoanalytic Society*.

As the organization grew, Freud established an inner circle of devoted followers, the so-called "Committee" (including Sándor Ferenczi, and Hanns Sachs (standing) Otto Rank, Karl Abraham, Max Eitingon, and Ernest Jones).

In the years following the visit to the United States, the International Psychoanalytic Association was founded. Freud designated Carl Jung as his

successor to lead the Association, and chapters were created in major cities in Europe and elsewhere. Regular meetings or congresses were held to discuss the theory, therapy, and cultural applications of the new discipline.

Jung's study on schizophrenia, *The Psychology of Dementia Praecox*, led him into collaboration with Sigmund Freud.

Jung's close collaboration with Freud lasted until 1913. Jung had become increasingly critical of Freud's exclusively sexual definition of libido and incest. The publication of Jung's *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (known in English as *The Psychology of the Unconscious*) led to a final break.

Following his emergence from this period of crisis, Jung developed his own theories systematically under the name of *Analytical Psychology*. Jung's concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetypes led him to explore religion in the East and West, myths, alchemy, and later flying saucers.

Anna Freud (Freud's daughter) became a major force in British psychology, specializing in the application of psychoanalysis to children. Among her best known works are *The Ego and the Mechanism of defense* (1936).

Critical Evaluation

The greatest criticism of the psychodynamic approach is that it is unscientific in its analysis of human behavior. Many of the concepts central to Freud's theories are subjective, and as such, difficult to test scientifically.

For example, how is it possible to scientifically study concepts like the **unconscious mind** or the **tripartite personality**? In this respect, it could be argued that the

psychodynamic perspective is unfalsifiable as its theories cannot be empirically investigated.

However, cognitive psychology has identified unconscious processes, such as procedural memory (Tulving, 1972), automatic processing (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Stroop, 1935), and social psychology have shown the importance of **implicit processing** (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Such empirical findings have demonstrated the role of unconscious processes in human behavior.

Kline (1989) argues that psychodynamic theory comprises a series of hypotheses, some of which are more easily tested than others, and some with more supporting evidence than others. Also, while the theories of the psychodynamic approach may not be easily tested, this does not mean that it does not have strong explanatory power.

Nevertheless, most of the evidence for psychodynamic theories is taken from Freud's case studies (e.g., **Little Hans**, **Anna O**). The main problem here is that the case studies are based on studying one person in detail, and with reference to Freud, the individuals in question are most often middle-aged women from Vienna (i.e., his patients). This makes generalizations to the wider population (e.g., the whole world) difficult.

Another problem with the **case study method** is that it is susceptible to researcher bias. Reexamination of Freud's own clinical work suggests that he sometimes distorted his patients' case histories to 'fit' with his theory (Sulloway, 1991).

The **humanistic approach** makes the criticism that the psychodynamic perspective is too deterministic. Freud suggests that all thoughts, behaviors and emotions are determined by our childhood experiences and unconscious mental processes. This is a weakness because it suggests we have no conscious free will over our behavior, leaving little room for the idea of personal agency (i.e., free will).

Finally, the psychodynamic approach can be criticized for being sexist against women. For example, Freud believed that females' penis envy made them inferior to males. He also thought that females tended to develop weaker [superegos](#) and to be more prone to anxiety than males.

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