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Personality development**Abstract:** Sigmund Freud is considered one of the foremost theorists of personality development. He developed his theories through case histories through which he observed that human psychological development is a process involving what he referred to as tensions (or polarities) between the need for attachment and relatedness, on the one hand, and, on the other, individuation and self-definition (Blatt, 2006). The impact of Freud's work on modern ideas about mind, sexuality, and morality is vast but controversial. Although his work has been enormously influential in the development of clinical psychotherapy and psychoanalytic theory, his approach has been subject to intense criticism in relation to its assumptions about gender and his emphasis on the significance of mothers in personality development.**Full Text Word Count:** 3554**Accession Number:** 89185477**Database:** Research Starters

### Freud and Personality Development

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Keywords Defense Mechanisms; Displacement; Fixation; Freud, Sigmund; Identification; Libido; Personality Development; Psychosexual Development; Psychoanalysis; Socialization

#### Socialization > Freud & Personality Development

##### Overview

[Socialization](#) can be defined as the type of social learning that occurs when a person interacts with other individuals. It refers to a process through which individuals learn to become members of society by internalizing

social norms, values, and expectations and by learning the appropriate cognitive, personal, and social skills they need to function as productive members of their societies. Part of the socialization process entails personality development, or the process through which we become who we are and through which relatively stable characteristics develop that distinguish individuals from each other. Many theorists argue that while the socialization process occurs over a person's lifetime, personality development is dependent on crucial points and relationships that are present during childhood. While socialization and personality development are connected to each other, socialization tends to assume a more fluid, potentially alterable concept of self as a reflective, active subject, while personality refers to a relatively stable concept of an individual as a well-defined object accompanied by distinctive traits and characteristics (Marshall et al., 1994).

Sigmund Freud is considered one of the foremost theorists of personality development. He developed his theories through case histories through which he observed that human psychological development is a process involving what he referred to as tensions (or polarities, Blatt, 2006) between the need for attachment and relatedness, on the one hand, and, on the other, individuation and self-definition. The impact of Freud's work on modern ideas about mind, sexuality, and morality is vast but controversial. Although his work has been enormously influential in the development of clinical psychotherapy and psychoanalytic theory, his approach has been subject to intense criticism in relation to its assumptions about gender and his emphasis on the significance of mothers in personality development.

### **Sigmund Freud & His Work**

An Austrian by birth, Sigmund Freud studied medicine and began his career as a [neurologist](#). He studied hysteria and learned how to use hypnosis at the Vienna General Hospital with Joseph Breuer and then with Jean-Martin Charcot at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. In 1886, he returned to Vienna to set up his own private practice specializing in nervous and brain disorders (BBC, n.d.). He began treating his patients through [hypnosis](#), but when he saw that this form of treatment was ineffective, he sought an alternative method. He found that he obtained better results when he encouraged his patients to talk. In addition, he began an intense analysis of himself and his dream life (published as [The Interpretation of Dreams](#) in 1900). This type of treatment, or, the "talking cure" (Ian, 1993) serves as the foundation of what is known as modern psychoanalysis.

Freud moved from private practice back into academia in 1902 until the late 1930s. During this period, he developed his theories of personality and sexual development, based on his clinical observations, and subsequently began to apply them more generally to art, history, and culture (such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1956). His clinical work influenced the development of a group of followers (including [Carl Jung](#)) who subsequently developed his observations and theories concerning personality and psychosexual development (embodied in the International Psychoanalytic Association).

Freud believed that most children developed their personalities during their first five years of life. As he studied his patients in psychoanalysis sessions, he observed how most of the patients reflected back on childhood experiences. Based on these clinical observations and psychoanalytic sessions, Freud asserted that the human mind operates on both conscious and unconscious levels. The conscious mind refers to things we are aware of in the present, while the unconscious refers to parts of our experience (or mind) that are beyond immediate awareness (Rathus, Nevid & Fichner-Rathus, 2020).

### **Id, Ego & Superego**

Freud's concept of the mind, or psyche, is divided into three parts: [the id, the ego, and the superego](#). The id, with which we are born, is the host for a person's drive for pleasure and gratification and allows infants to get their basic needs met (e.g., hunger). Between infancy and the age of three, the child begins to interact with primary others. In Freudian theory, the primary Other is typically understood to be the mother (Ian, 1993). This process of intimate interaction generates the development of the ego. The ego mediates between the demands of the id and the reality of everyday life. It 'gets' that basic needs might not be satisfied immediately because other 'ids' also have needs. By about the age of five, the child develops a superego, which is responsible for providing the person with an understanding of what is acceptable in society and urges the person to value moral and ethical decisions. The ego mediates between the id and the superego and indeed protects the conscious mind from 'baser' sexual and aggressive urges through defense mechanisms and [repression](#) (Rathus, Nevid & Fichner-Rathus, 2020). Thus, a healthy ego enables a person to be rational and logical as well as establish boundaries for the id and superego (Freud, 1949).

## Applications

### Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development

Personality development occurs as a child progressively learns to control his or her drives. As the child passes through five psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital), the child's id becomes focused on different erogenous areas, or parts of the body that are responsive to sexual stimulation (Rathus, Nevid & Fichner-Rathus, 2020).

Freud's five stages of personality development are centered on erogenous zones and have three key components:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Type of fixation

A brief summary of Freud's five stages of psychosexual development is as follows:

- **Oral Stage** (Birth–18 months of age)

During this stage, the child seeks pleasure through oral activities like nursing, sucking, eating, biting, and chewing. A child may develop an oral fixation if he or she receives too little or too much oral pleasure. Common oral fixations in adults are overeating, smoking, drinking, and nail-biting. A child who receives too little much or too little pleasure can develop either an oral-passive character, a character that is largely passive and dependent upon others, or an oral-aggressive character, a character that is overly independent and aggressive toward others (Freud, 1949).

- **Anal Stage** (18 months–3 years of age)

During this stage, the child seeks pleasure through the evacuation or retention of body waste. [Toilet training](#) plays a large role in this stage, as the child tries to reconcile his or her pleasure with his or her parents' desire that he or she learn to control his or her bodily functions. The child may refuse to use the toilet or refuse to

evacuate waste altogether. If the child does not get the proper balance of pleasure, he or she may develop an anal fixation and become either an anal-expulsive character (i.e., one that is messy, disorganized, and disobedient) or an anal-retentive character (i.e., one that has a preoccupation with control, cleanliness, and orderliness) (Freud, 1949).

- **Phallic Stage** (3–5 years of age)

During this stage, the child develops a desire for his or her parent of the opposite sex. In boys, this desire is called the **Oedipus complex**; in girls, it is called the **Electra complex**. According to Freud (1949), boys will be envious of their fathers and fantasize about a sexual relationship with their mothers. As they come to realize that women, especially their mothers, don't have penises, though, they will come to fear that their fathers will punish their desires by castrating them. This fear is called castration anxiety, and it causes boys to repress their desires for their mothers.

Girls' desires for their fathers, on the other hand, will cause them to fantasize about having a penis and develop penis envy. According to Freud, girls never realize their Electra complexes; instead, they live out their desires for their fathers vicariously by identifying with their mothers.

Children who do not successfully negotiate the phallic stage develop phallic fixations and a phallic character. One type of phallic character tends to have low self-regard; the other type tends to be excessively vain (Freud, 1949).

- **Latency Stage** (5 years of age–puberty)

During this stage, the child's "sexual development comes to a halt" (Freud, 1949, p. 23). He or she represses sexual desires and tends to primarily associate with children of the same sex (Freud, 1949).

- **Genital Stage** (adolescence through adulthood)

During this stage, the child becomes capable of forming his or her drive for pleasure into a mature expression of sexuality and establishing adult relationships. Because the ego is fully developed at this stage, the person is capable of accepting adult responsibilities and forming a family. However, if the individual is fixated on an earlier stage, he or she may develop psychological problems (Freud, 1949).

## **Conflict & Anxiety**

Each stage engenders certain kinds of conflict that the child attempts to reconcile with social and familial constraints (Hall, 1999). For instance, during the phallic stage, Freud believed that it was normal for children to develop erotic feelings toward the parent of the opposite gender (Rathus, Nevid & Fichner-Rathus, 2020). However, it is possible for children to not resolve the conflicts they face, and even if they do resolve these conflicts they may develop fixations on an erogenous area. According to Freud, a fixation can continue into adulthood and cause psychological disorders like neurosis and **hysteria**. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1905) elaborates on these conflicts in relation to women in particular, about which feminist theorists have subsequently challenged him.

Indeed, for Freud there is constant conflict among these three parts. The id always wants to be satisfied, while the ego fights for the need to deal with reality. The superego attempts to provide the person with a sense of what is moral and ethical. Freud believed that the conflicts between these three parts create anxiety, of which he identified three types (Straker, 2008):

- **Neurotic Anxiety:** This occurs when a person believes that he or she will lose control of the id's desires and be punished for inappropriate behavior (e.g., children touching their genitals in public).
- **Reality Anxiety:** This occurs when a person is afraid of events that may happen in the real world (e.g., being bitten by a snake when camping).
- **Moral Anxiety:** This occurs when a person is afraid that he or she will violate his or her society's moral principles (e.g., killing one's parents).

When anxiety sets in, the ego attempts to resolve the conflict by using defense mechanisms. Freud identified and classified a number of [defense mechanisms](#), and his successors identified and classified still more, elaborated in particular by his daughter, [Anna Freud](#) (1937):

- **Repression** occurs when a person prevents a thought or memory from entering the consciousness. An example of repression would be a rape victim not remembering the details of her rape.
- **Projection** occurs when a person locates his or her own undesirable thoughts in another person. An example of projection would be a person believing that his or her supervisor does not like him or her when, in reality, the person dislikes his or her supervisor.
- **Rationalization** occurs when a person justifies a belief or behavior for reasons other than the usually socially or morally unacceptable reasons that truly lie behind the belief or behavior. An example of rationalization would be a person who steals from his or her employer and, while knowing that theft is wrong, argues that his or her theft is justified because he or she is underpaid.
- **Regression** occurs when a person temporarily reverts to an earlier developmental stage when faced with a stressor, which requires a more mature response. An example of regression might be a person who sucks his or her thumb during the funeral service of a loved one.

## Viewpoints

Freud's work on personality and psychosexual development has been undoubtedly influential; however, it is also seen as controversial. Although there are some therapists who continue to use some aspects of Freud's system, many have modified his approach and revised the types of treatment they use with patients. The theorists who continue to use some aspects of Freud's work are referred to as neo-Freudians.

## The Neo-Freudians

Four of the most notable neo-Freudians are Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Karen Horney, and Erik Erikson.

- [Alfred Adler](#) became a follower of Freud around 1902 and the first president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1910. However, he defected from the camp in 1911 to start his own group, the Society for Free

Psychoanalytic Research (later the Society for Individual Psychology) when he came to disagree with some of Freud's theories. Adler is best known for his work on inferiority, parenting, and birth order (Heffner, 2002).

- **Carl Jung**, whom many in the field believed would be Freud's successor, also defected from Freud's camp as a result of a series of disagreements. In short, Jung believed that the unconscious comprised more emotions and thoughts than Freud acknowledged and that these emotions and thoughts are similar across cultures and age groups. Jung is most famous for developing his observations into a theory of the collective unconscious and for founding the field of analytic psychology (Heffner, 2002).
- **Karen Horney** was influenced by Freud's theories, but ultimately disagreed with several key points of his views of sexuality and gender. In the 1930s, she moved away from Freud's "phallogocentricity" and is credited with developing a critique of Freud's theory of the psychology of women (Humm, 1989). She argued that men suffer from womb envy just as women suffer from penis envy, and that any differences between male and female psychology are created by society and culture rather than biology. Horney is also known for her work on neurotic personalities (Heffner, 2002).
- **Erik Erikson** was a developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, and he is credited with being a pioneer in the study of personal and social identity. Although Erikson considered himself to be a Freudian, many saw him as a neo-Freudian because, though parts of his theory of personality development were inspired by Freud, other parts were uniquely his own. The basic premise of his theory is that individuals develop in psychosocial stages throughout their lifetimes and that each stage is accompanied by a type of identity crisis. Each crisis directly affects some aspect of the individual's personality development. The stages begin at birth and continue until the person dies. Erikson's concept differs from Freud's in that its developmental stages are dissimilar and continue throughout a person's lifetime (Heffner, 2002).

## Conclusion

Freud's breadth of work is expansive, and his influence on how people think about themselves and on theories of mind and personality has been vast. Nonetheless, his work is controversial. Perhaps the most thoroughgoing critique of Freud's theories of personality and psychosexual development has come from academic feminists and practicing [feminist psychotherapists](#). For instance, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone, and Eva Figes have all been critical of Freud's emphasis on hysteria, infantile sexuality, and gender acquisition. Other critics have questioned whether Freud's theories are applicable across cultures and whether they adequately explain personality development in relation to the acquisition of gender (Giddens, Duneier & Appelbaum, 2020). However, even though Freud's work has been subject to debate and has been hotly challenged in terms of its theoretical consistency and empirical basis, nonetheless it remains a touchstone for both contemporary psychoanalytic research and psychotherapeutic practice. Moreover, the idea of the unconscious as a persistent and powerful force continues to shape how we collectively think about everyday life, morality, and culture.

## Terms & Concepts

**Defense Mechanisms:** Tactics developed by the ego to protect against anxiety.

**Fixation:** According to Freud, a persistent preoccupation with the erogenous area associated with a particular psychosexual stage. A fixation forms when a child does not successfully complete the corresponding stage.

**Libido:** According to Freud, the psychic energy rooted in the id.

**Personality Development:** The progression to the organized pattern of behaviors and beliefs that make a person unique.

**Psychosexual Development:** Freud's theory of personality development. It holds that a child's personality develops as he or she passes through five stages and that, during each, the child derives pleasure from a particular erogenous area. If a child receives too much or too little pleasure during a stage, he or she will become fixated on the erogenous area and develop psychological problems as an adult.

**Psychoanalysis (Psychoanalytical Theory):** A theory and therapeutic system developed by Freud in which unconscious motivations are considered to shape normal as well as abnormal personality development and behavior.

**Socialization:** The process whereby a child learns to get along with and to behave similarly to others in the group and function in a society.

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