

# Psychoanalytic Approaches to Personality

## influential but controversial

three distinct 'models' of the mind that he developed

- 1 topographic model, which presents the different levels of mental life
- 2 structural model, which proposes three different and often conflicting mental agencies; and
- 3 the genetic model, which lays out the stages of childhood development that form the adult personality. Along

defence mechanisms--- the nature of psychological conflict and the ways in which people protect themselves against undesirable thoughts and desires

## Anna O

Freud

wrote about one patient, Anna O., whose symptoms included loss of feeling in her limbs; inability to drink water; medically unexplained pains, paralyses, and muscular twitches; hallucinations of slithering black snakes; failure to see or hear nearby things; loss of the capacity to speak her native German while retaining facility with English; and 'absences' in which she lapsed into a trancelike state.

Freud treated his hysterics using hypnosis, and noticed that in the hypnotic state many patients recalled childhood memories of a sexual nature. He found that when his patients were led to recount these memories, a flood of emotion was often released, and their hysterical symptoms often vanished.

## Conclusion

- 1 origins of hysteria propose that the sources of the condition are to be found in phenomena that are outside the person's consciousness
  - 2 hysterics suffered from traumatic memories of childhood sexual abuse Soon after, however, abandoned this theory
  - 3 he argued that the origins of hysteria were to be found not in memories of actual events but in childhood fantasies Hysterics suffered not from memories, as Freud had first thought, but from the disowned products of their childhood desires
- . Freud's second theory of hysteria implies that the mind is a place of conflict: the hysteric has wishes that are forbidden and perverse, and that she cannot consciously acknowledge. The price of this conflict between the wish and the social prohibition that forbids it is suffering and symptoms
- .

4 childhood experience is given a privileged place in the explanation of adult behaviour

5 hysteric is a mystery to herself, her disturbed experience and behaviour produced by causes of which she is unaware, and which are accessible only by special procedures such as hypnosis

These basic elements of psychoanalytic theory – the unconscious, the meaningfulness of behaviour, and the importance of psychological conflict, childhood experience, and sexuality – give it its distinctive flavour

### The topographic model

The first model of the mind that we will consider is called the ‘topographic’ model because it refers to levels or layers of mental life. Freud proposed that mental content – ideas, wishes, emotions, impulses, memories, and so on – can be located at one of three levels: Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious. Before we examine each of these levels, it is important to understand that Freud used these terms to describe degrees of awareness or unawareness, but also to refer to distinct mental systems with their own distinct laws of operation.

Unconscious

### The Conscious

According to Freud, consciousness was merely the proverbial ‘tip of the iceberg’ of mental activity. The contents of the Conscious are simply the small fraction of things that the person is currently paying attention to: objects perceived, events recalled, the stream of thought that we engage in as a running commentary on everyday life.

### The Preconscious

Not all of our mental life occurs under the spotlight of attention and awareness, of course. There are many things to which we could readily pay attention but do not, such as ideas or plans we have set aside or memories of what we were doing yesterday. Without any great effort these things, which in the present are out of consciousness, can be made conscious. They form the domain of the Preconscious.

The boundary between the Conscious and the Preconscious is a permeable one. Thoughts, memories, and perceptions can cross it without great difficulty, according to the momentary needs and intentions of the individual. They also share a common mode of cognition, which Freud called the ‘secondary process’. Secondary process cognition is the sort of everyday, more-or-less rational thinking that generally obeys the laws of logi

## The Unconscious

The Unconscious is perhaps Freud's most celebrated theoretical concept. He did not invent or 'discover' the unconscious as is sometimes claimed – versions of the concept had been floating around intellectual circles for some time – but he gave it a **much deeper theoretical analysis** than anyone before him. Freud distinguished between mental contents and processes that are **descriptively unconscious** and those that are **dynamically unconscious**. The former simply exist outside of consciousness as a matter of fact, and therefore include Preconscious material that can become conscious if it is attended to. Freud's crucial contribution was to argue that some thoughts, memories, wishes, and mental processes are not only descriptively unconscious, but also cannot be made conscious because a countervailing force keeps them out of awareness. In short, mental life that is dynamically unconscious is a subset of what is descriptively unconscious, one whose entry to consciousness is actively thwarted. The Freudian Unconscious corresponds to the dynamic unconscious in this sense

Freud held that the Unconscious contains a large but unacknowledged proportion of mental life that operates according to its own psychological laws. The barrier between it and the Preconscious is much more fortified and difficult to penetrate than the border between the Preconscious and Conscious. In addition, it is policed by a mental function that Freud likened to a 'censor'. The censor's role is to determine whether contents of the Unconscious would be threatening or objectionable to the person if they became conscious. If the censor judges them to be dangerous in this way, the person will experience anxiety without knowing what caused it. In this case, these thoughts, wishes, and so on, will normally be repelled back into the Unconscious, a process referred to as '**repression**'. Unconscious material, by Freud's account, has an intrinsic force propelling it to become conscious. Consequently, repression required an active opposing force to resist it, just as effort is required to prevent a hollow ball from rising to the surface when it is submerged in water.

Under the unremitting pressure of Unconscious material bubbling up towards the Preconscious, the censor cannot simply bar entry to everything. Instead, it allows some Unconscious material to cross the barrier after it has been transformed or disguised in some way so as to be less objectionable. This crossing might take the form of a relatively harmless impulsive behaviour, or in the form of private fantasy, the telling of a joke, or in a slip of the tongue, where the person says something 'unintentionally' that reveals to the trained eye their repressed concerns and wishes. Psychoanalytic training teaches how phenomena such as these can be interpreted, a process that involves uncovering the unconscious material that is concealed within their disguises.

To Freud, dreams represent a particularly good example of the disguised expression of Unconscious wishes. They offered, he wrote, 'a royal road to the Unconscious'. One reason for this is that during sleep the censor relaxes and allows more repressed Unconscious material to cross the barrier. This material, given a less threatening form by a process referred to as the 'dream-work', then appears as a train of images in the peculiar form of consciousness that we call dreaming. By Freud's account, each dream has a 'latent content' of Unconscious wishes that is transformed into the 'manifest content' of the experienced dream. This transformation must allow the Unconscious wishes to be fulfilled while concealing their threateningness. If it fails to conceal the latent content sufficiently, the sleeper will register the threat and be awoken. To avoid this, the dream-work may change the identities of the people represented in a wish. For example, if a person has an Unconscious wish to harm a loved one, the dreamwork might produce a dream in which the person harms someone else or in which the loved one is harmed by another person. Neutralized in this way, the Unconscious wish finds conscious expression.

Dreams also showcase the distinct form of thinking that operates in the Unconscious. 'Primary process' thinking, unlike the secondary process that governs the Conscious and Preconscious, shows no respect for the laws of logic and rationality. In primary process thinking, something can stand for something else, including its opposite, and can even represent two distinct things at once. Contradictory thoughts can co-exist, and there is no orderly sense of the passage of time or of causation. Described in this way, primary process thinking captures the magical, chaotic quality of many dreams, the mysterious images that seem somehow significant, the fractured story lines, the impossible and disconnected events. To Freud, dreams are not simply night-time curiosities, but reveal how the greater part of our mental life proceeds beneath the shallows of consciousness.

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