

Name: _____ Class: _____

Freud's Theory of the Id, Ego, and Superego

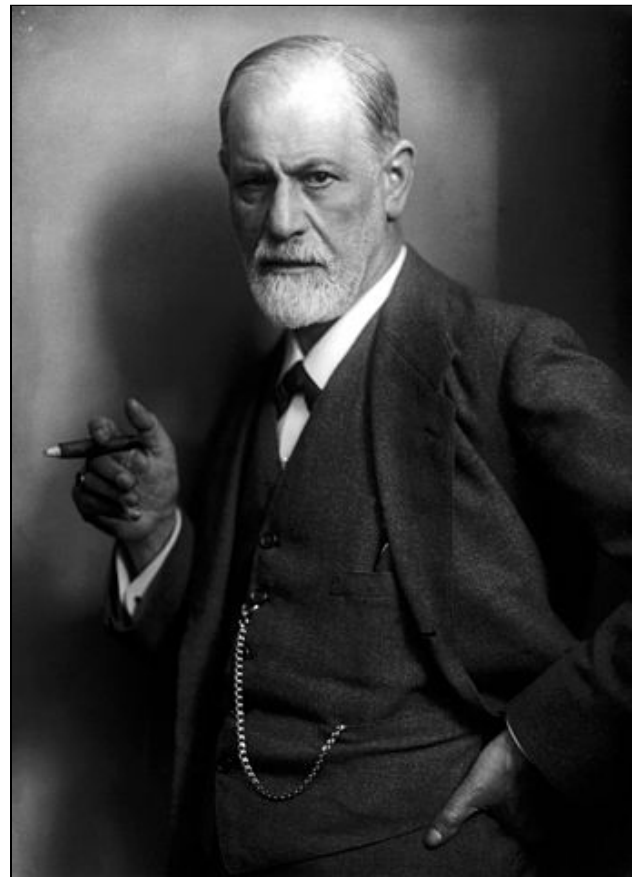
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Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is the most well-known psychologist that ever lived. Freud was born to Jewish parents in Austria in 1856 and lived through World War I. He died in 1939 at the beginning of World War II. During his life, he wrote numerous books, including The Interpretation of Dreams, many of which are still referenced by psychologists today. Freud is known as the father of psychotherapy, a practice that involves questioning patients over a period of time to see what kind of memories may be influencing their behavior. He is also credited for the development of the idea of the subconscious: the deepest layer of the human mind, said to be the place where memories, wishes, fears, and dreams are stored. As you read about Freud's theory of the unconscious mind, take note of the theory's relevance to your own life and Freud's influence on psychology in popular culture.

Freud's Famous Theory

- [1] In 1930, psychologist Sigmund Freud published one of the most radical and influential books of the time about human psychology: *The Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. The book described his ideas about the human mind, which completely changed the way psychiatrists treated their patients. Freud's revolutionary new theory argued that human beings are completely controlled by their unconscious mind.

The unconscious mind consists of the processes in the mind that occur automatically and are not available to introspection¹, and include thought processes, memory, affect², and motivation. Unconscious phenomena include repressed³ feelings, automatic skills, subliminal⁴ perceptions, thoughts, habits, and automatic reactions, and possibly also complexes⁵, hidden phobias⁶ and desires. Even though these processes exist well under the surface of conscious awareness, Freud theorized that they exert an impact on a person's behavior. In other words, he believed that all human behavior could be explained by what kinds of fears and desires are stored below the surface of our consciousness.



"Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, smoking cigar" by Max Halberstadt is in the public domain.

1. **Introspection (noun)** the examination of one's own conscious thoughts and feelings
2. **Affect (noun)** in psychology, this refers to emotion or desire
3. **Repress (verb)** to restrain or subdue (someone or something)
4. **Subliminal (adjective)** perceived by or affecting someone's mind without their being aware of it
5. **Complex (noun)** in psychology, this refers to a related group of emotionally significant ideas that are completely or

According to Freud, humans are not in control of the everyday decisions they make, but that they are completely controlled by three sections of the unconscious mind: the id, the ego, and the superego. Although the three components are purely symbolic concepts about the mind and do not correspond to actual structures of the brain, Freud believed they are all constantly working against each other in order to push ideas into our conscious or “awake” mind.

The Id

The most primitive part of the human mind, the id is the source of our bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses. Freud believed that the id acts according to the “pleasure principle” – the psychic force that motivates the tendency to seek immediate gratification of any impulse. The id is the only component of personality that is present from birth, and for good reason. Infants depend on others to provide them with food, to change their diaper, and to avoid pain or discomfort. The id is the part of the mind that compels a baby to cry when he or she is in need of something, ensuring a healthy and happy upbringing.

- [5] The id, according to Freud, is the most selfish part of our mind. It is only concerned with the immediate satisfaction of whatever want or need the body is experiencing at the moment. Freud stated that the id “knows no judgements of value: no good and evil, no morality” – only the fulfillment of immediate desires. Infants, for example, do not consider the needs of their parents when they cry. The id simply demands what it wants, without regard for the reality of the situation, ethics, or the convenience of others.

The Ego

The second part of the human subconscious is what Freud called the ego: the rational part of our mind. Freud said that “The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions.” The ego acts according to the reality principle; i.e. it seeks to please the id’s drive in realistic ways that will benefit in the long term rather than bring grief. Freud considered it a mediator “between id and reality.” It is concerned with our interactions and relationships with others, understanding that other people are also driven by their own ids, and that indulging in our selfish impulses can sometimes be problematic. With the ego in place, a thirsty child can now not only identify water as the satisfaction of his urge, but can form a plan to obtain water, perhaps by finding a drinking fountain. Another example of the ego’s function would be the choice to resist the urge to grab other people’s belongings, and instead to purchase those items.

The Superego

The superego is the moral part of us, reflecting the internalization of cultural rules, mainly taught by parents applying their guidance and influence. For example, the superego would tell a child not to hit another child because that would be morally wrong. According to Freud, “The Super-ego can be thought of as a type of conscience that punishes misbehavior with feelings of guilt,” working in contradiction to the id. The superego strives to act in a socially appropriate manner, whereas the id just wants instant self-gratification. It controls our sense of right and wrong, and helps us fit into society by getting us to act in socially acceptable ways.

partly repressed and that cause psychic conflict leading to abnormal mental states or behavior

6. **Phobia** (*noun*) a type of anxiety disorder, usually defined as a persistent, often irrational fear of an object or situation

Freud believed that this part of human beings is not inborn, and that human beings do not develop the superego part of their mind until the age of five. In other words, he believed that human beings are not born with a moral sense, but that they can develop it through the rules and expectations of our caregivers.

Balancing Act

According to Freud, most people should be able to balance the three parts of the unconscious mind in a way that keeps them happy and healthy. A successful person, he believed, would have a strong ego in order to satisfy its id and its superego. Freud believed that when the three components become too out of balance, a person can suffer physical or emotional repercussions. If a person's id is too dominant, he or she may indulge in harmful impulses without considering the consequences. Conversely, if a person has an overly dominant superego, he or she may live an overly ordered, rigid life, may ignore their own wants and needs, or may be too judgmental of others. In other words, Freud's theory of the human mind is that it is in a constant battle with itself – a conflict between the id, ego, and superego.

Freud's Legacy

- [10] Freud's idea that "*we are not who we think we are*" and that the majority of what creates our identity lies under our conscious awareness was extremely radical and influential. He believed that most of what drives us is buried in our subconscious brains, and that the only way to access this part is through intense psychotherapy with a trained psychiatrist. Freud's psychotherapy techniques attempted to effect behavioral change such as overcoming irrational phobias, anxieties, or bad habits through having patients talk about their experiences, memories and dreams. Today, Freud's methods are still widely used by psychologists and psychotherapists around the world.

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