

## AQA specification for Topic 4: Approaches in Psychology

- The psychodynamic approach: the role of the unconscious, the structure of personality, that is: Id, Ego and Superego, defence mechanisms including repression, denial, and displacement, psychosexual stages.

### ◆ Introduction

The **psychodynamic approach** is one of the oldest and most famous approaches that was developed by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939). The word 'psychodynamic' is used because this approach sees the 'psyche' (the mind) being influenced by powerful active (dynamic) unconscious forces that determine our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Freud also developed a therapy called psychoanalysis designed to treat mental disorders, mainly neuroses (anxiety).

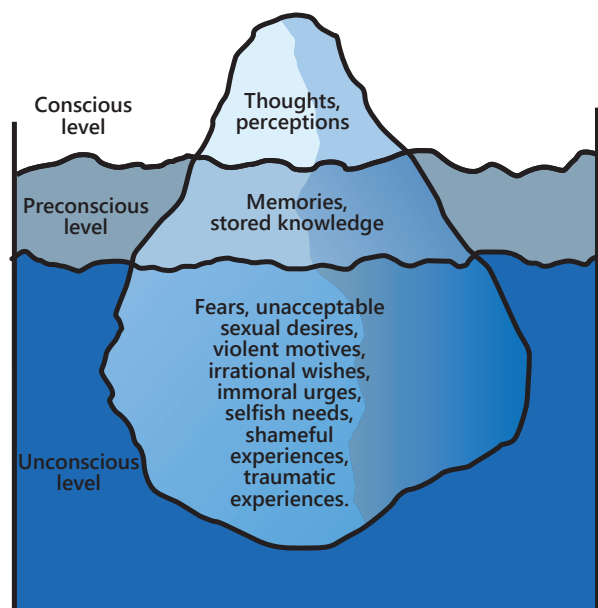
### ◆ The role of the unconscious

#### The iceberg analogy of the mind

Before we discuss the *role of the unconscious mind* it is worth explaining how Freud saw the mind to get a better understanding. Freud saw the mind as having three different levels: '*conscious*', '*preconscious*' and the '*unconscious mind*'. To help you understand the unconscious mind better, consider the iceberg analogy. Everything above the water represents the conscious mind (awareness), while everything below the water represents the unconscious mind.

- The *conscious mind* is the smallest part of our mind, responsible for mental activity such as attention, perception and our thoughts e.g. what we are thinking about.
- The *preconscious mind* is just below the surface of the conscious mind, and holds our memories, thoughts and knowledge that are accessible, but not at the forefront of our thoughts. For example, if I asked what your telephone number is, you would be using the preconscious part of your mind to bring into awareness i.e. into the conscious mind.
- The *unconscious mind* is the largest part of our mind. The role of the unconscious is to keep all our negative and unacceptable experience and desires repressed so we are not aware of them. However, the unconscious mind still influences our behaviour/personality, but we are not aware of it happening (see below for full description).

**Figure 8:** Freud's view of the human mind: the mental iceberg



## The unconscious mind

According to Freud, most of our mind is made up of the unconscious. The unconscious is a vast storage that contains all the *unacceptable* biological instincts, urges, and desires that we have (e.g. immoral urges or unacceptable sexual wishes). It also contains all the *unpleasant* memories, thoughts, feelings and emotions (e.g. anxiety, and traumas) we experienced since early childhood (e.g. anger at one's mother, memories of childhood abuse, hatred of a family member). The person is not aware of these unacceptable and unpleasant desires/memories. This is because they have been repressed from our conscious (by our ego defence mechanism – see below) to the unconscious to make them inaccessible; a person cannot access them, they are locked away and forgotten.

## How the unconscious influences our behaviour

The important part to understand is that the unconscious mind continues to influence our behaviour and personality, and abnormal behaviours, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences. For example:

- In terms of unacceptable desires, the unconscious is constantly influencing our behaviour, particularly with urges to seek pleasure. Sometimes the unconscious (usually sexual in nature, but not always) may show itself through our *dreams* or through a '*slip of the tongue*' (Freud referred to these slips as 'parapraxes'), which unconsciously reveal what we really think e.g. a man accidentally calls his wife by the name of his mistress.
- In terms of unpleasant memories and emotions, Freud believed that repressed memories of early traumatic experiences would be too painful and unpleasant for us and disrupt our normal everyday life if we became consciously aware of them. But Freud argued that such experiences could appear later in adulthood in the form of depression, phobia and obsessive or compulsive behaviour, now known as OCD. Freud therefore believed that if we have problems or challenging behaviour (e.g. anxiety, phobias), then we must access the unconscious mind to sort it out.

## ◆ The structure of personality

- As well as believing that the brain was made up of three different levels, Freud also believed that personality is divided into three different parts. Freud described personality as made up of the **id**, **ego** and **superego** (these are not part of the brain but hypothetical concepts). These three parts interact with each other, and how they interact will determine our thoughts and behaviour (normal behaviour).
- The **id (instinctual needs)** is the primitive part of our personality. This is because the id consists of all our instinctual biological needs such as sexual instincts (called **libido**), aggression, food, water, etc. The id works on the **pleasure principle**, because these instinctual needs are driven by a strong selfish desire to seek immediate gratification. The id will not tolerate delayed gratification, regardless of the circumstances or consequences of our behaviour. There is no organisation at this level, no rationality, no morality, no sense of justice or care for social rules. The id is formed before birth and is located in the unconscious part of our mind.
  - *For example (if someone was living purely by their id part of their personality):* If someone angers you, you kill them; if someone excites you, you have sex with them. If you need to urinate, you do it wherever you are, regardless of the consequence. Freud described babies as being just a 'bundle of id' – their continuous demand for satisfaction is a good example of living in the id mode.
- The **ego (rational thinking)** is the rational part of the personality, the voice of reason. The ego works on the **reality principle** by acting as a mediator in an attempt to negotiate a compromise (balance) between the unacceptable demands of the id and the moral restrictions imposed by the superego, in order to find behaviour that is realistic and socially acceptable. The ego is formed between 18 months – 3 years and is located in the conscious part of our mind.
- The **superego (moral standards)** is the morality aspect of the personality. It works on the **moral principle**,

by acting as a moral guide and judge of what behaviours are right or wrong. It punishes the ego, making us feel guilt and shame when our behaviour is inappropriate. One of its main functions is to try and moralise the action of the id to more appropriate or acceptable action. The superego is formed between 3-6 years and is located in the unconscious part of our mind.

## How the structure of the personality influences our behaviour

According to Freud, the id, ego, and superego are in constant dynamic conflict with each other to dominate our behaviour and thoughts. In other words, how you act in certain situations may be influenced by the three parts of the personality.

The id, the ego and the superego all function on different levels of consciousness and these three have to work harmoniously, in order to produce a healthy mental state. Abnormal behaviour occurs when there is an imbalance between the three.

### Normal behaviour

If you found a wallet full of money in a restaurant, the id part of your personality would influence you to keep the money for yourself. However, your superego acting on the morality principle would push you to hand the wallet to the restaurant manager. If you satisfy the demands of the id and keep the wallet, you risk feeling guilty and shameful as the conscience within the superego punishes you for acting immorally. The decision you make is down to the ego, which tries to balance the demands of the selfish id and the moral superego. You may do the right thing by handing in the purse but selfishly hope to get praise or a reward for doing so, thus satisfying both the moral and pleasure-seeking sides of your personality.

### Abnormality

According to the psychodynamic approach, psychological disorders/abnormal behaviours are due to an imbalance between the three parts of the personality. This usually occurs when the ego is weak (e.g. due to a life crisis such as loss or separation) and is overcome by the id or the superego, which then dominate our personality (behaviour and thoughts). For example:

- *Deviant behaviour.* If the superego is weak and is overpowered by the id, this may express itself in abnormal, immoral and destructive behaviour (e.g. deviant sexual or criminal behaviour).
- *Anxiety.* If the superego is strong and the id is weak, this can lead to unrealistic standards of behaviour and as a result, we experience high levels of shame and guilt that can lead to moral anxiety and anxiety disorders (e.g. phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorders).

## ◆ Defence mechanisms

Freud argued that when the ego cannot remove or reduce anxiety, the ego will use irrational methods called a defence mechanism, to protect us from anxiety and unwelcome ideas and to keep the ego strong in order to mediate. It is important to note that when the ego uses a defence mechanism, this is an unconscious process, the person is unaware they are using them. Also, the ego's defence mechanisms falsify and distort reality. There are several ego defence mechanisms, the ones you need to know for the AQA examination are *repression*, *denial* and *displacement* (although we have also explained some others below).

- **Repression.** Repression is when unacceptable memories, emotions, desires or traumatic experiences are pushed into the unconscious and thus we are prevented from becoming conscious of them. This means we cannot recall the event or situation ever happening and thus prevents anxiety. Although they remain in the unconscious, they can still influence our behaviour, although we are not aware of this. For example, someone who was abused by a parent as a child may have no recollection of these events, but has trouble forming relationships.
- **Denial.** Denial is the refusal to accept the reality of a situation in order to avoid having to deal with any

painful feelings that might be associated with an event. For example, an alcoholic will often deny that they have a drinking problem, even though they are heavily dependent on alcohol.

- **Displacement.** Displacement is when a person has strong thoughts and feelings towards a person or situation but is unable to express them in the presence of the person, so such feelings are redirected onto a neutral person or object. This gives hostile feelings a route for expression, even though they are misapplied. For example, anger at one's partner that may cause a lot of damage to the relationship, if expressed directly, is taken out on the dog, and thus reduces anxiety by allowing the expression of emotions on an alternative object.
- **Projection.** This is when an individual has undesirable characteristics or desires that are attributed to someone else, for example, accusing someone of 'being a gossip' when actually you're the one being a 'gossip'. Therefore, anxiety is reduced by projecting your emotions onto someone else.
- **Reaction formation.** This is when an individual takes up the opposite feeling, impulse, or behaviour of what they really believe. An example of reaction formation would be treating someone you strongly dislike in an excessively friendly manner, in order to hide your true feelings. Reaction formation reduces anxiety by turning emotions/desires into their opposite.

## ◆ Psychosexual stages of development

One of Freud's key assumption was that early childhood experiences have a powerful influence on our adult personality (and thus on our behaviour). He also believed that abnormal behaviour later on in life, derives from early childhood experiences. Freud believed that all children go through the five psychosexual stages and how the child experiences these five stages will shape their personality in adult life.

At each psychosexual stage (apart from latency stage), the **libido**, the pleasure-seeking sexual energy of the id, becomes focused on certain erogenous areas of our body as this brings the greatest source of pleasure and gratification. To make a smooth transition from one psychosexual stage to the next, the child must not experience frustration (being 'under-gratified') or experience being satisfied too often and too easily (being 'over-gratified'). Both experiences will cause the child to become **fixated**, which means the child's libido becomes stuck at this stage and as a result of this fixation, will carry certain behaviours associated with that stage through to adult life – it will form part of their adult personality. Freud stated that any fixations occurring in the first three stages are the most important and have an enduring effect on the adult personality.

- **Oral stage** (0 mths -1½ years). The child's libido (sexual energy) is centred around the mouth. The mouth is the focal point of pleasure from oral stimulation through gratifying activities such as sucking (breastfeeding) and biting. Conflict can arise during weaning. If a child is breastfed too early, too much, too late, or feeding patterns are erratic, it is argued that the child will become fixated at the oral stage. For example, if a child is over-fed, this will have an unconscious effect on their personality. In adulthood, this fixation might mean they are dependent, very passive and gullible (believe anything you say). Or if a mother consistently fails to comfort and breastfeed her child, failing to satisfy the child's oral needs, fixation will occur, making the baby feel insecure. This can lead to displaying a personality in adult life that reflects this fixation, such as the mistrust for others or extreme dependency on others known as a *dependent personality disorder*.
- **Anal stage** (1½ -3 years). After the oral stage, the dominant pleasure of the libido becomes the anus-bowel movements. The pleasure of the id is derived from the child either retaining or expelling faeces. However, this is also the age at which the child is being potty trained, where the child *must learn to control its impulses*. Conflicts can occur when parental training has been inappropriate or poor. For example, if parents are too relaxed, or lenient with potty training, or the child is overly keen and loves to use the potty, this will have an unconscious effect on their personality. In an adult, this fixation translates to a generous person, messy, wasteful, who is demonstrative with their emotions (known as anal-expulsive personality). If parents are too strict with potty training, too early, the child will become anxious about using the potty and try to hold onto the faeces rather than use the potty. An adult with an unconscious fixation at this stage will display personality characteristics such as being controlling, organised, very neat and reluctant to spend their money (known as anal-retentive personality).
- **Phallic stage** (3-5 years). The libido's pleasure is now focused on the genitals. At this age, children have

a fascination with their own genitals and those of others. They begin to discover the differences between males and females and they also become sexually interested in the opposite sex. Freud believed that boys in the phallic stage will experience the **Oedipus complex** and girls will experience the **Electra complex**.

- **The Oedipus complex.** The Oedipus complex is when the male child *unconsciously* wishes to possess - experience an intense sexual feeling for - their mother. His father is then seen by the small boy to be a rival and therefore the boy wants to get rid of him so that the mother can focus on the child. As a result of this desire, the child feels threatened by the father (being bigger and stronger) and he fears that he will be punished by the father for seeing him as a rival. Because of this fear, the boy will experience **castration anxiety** – the father will punish the boy by removing his penis. In order to reduce the anxiety, the boy befriends his father by acting similarly to the father, he sees him as an ally rather than a rival for his mother's affections. This process of the boy identifying with the father is called **identification**. By identifying with the father, the son **internalises** (adopts) his *moral values* as his own, (and thus the superego is now fully developed), *attitudes, characteristics* that his father holds (e.g. personality, gender role, masculine behaviours, etc.). If the Oedipus complex is not resolved, this can lead to boys becoming fixated on their mothers, causing them to choose romantic partners that resemble their opposite-sex parent as adults.
- **The Electra complex.** The Electra complex is a term used to describe the female version of the Oedipus complex, which girls experience between 3-6 years of age. The Electra complex is when the female child realises that they do not have a penis which they think is very important, and they think that their mother has removed it from them. This causes the child to resent her mother for 'castrating' her and subsequently the girl develops **penis envy** – longs to have a penis of her own. Because of this envy to have a penis, she develops an unconscious sexual feeling for the father, who has this 'valued organ' she wants to share and at the same time get rid of her mother. However, when the desire to be with her father is not fulfilled, she realises she doesn't want to lose her mother's love, she represses her feelings in order to remove the tension, and instead, the little girl identifies with her mother. By **identifying** with the mother, she **internalises** the mother's moral values as her own, as well as attitudes, characteristics that her mother holds (e.g. personality, gender role, feminine behaviours, etc.). Fixation occurs when the Electra complex is not resolved, which can continue to affect behaviour into adulthood, and, according to Freud, the girl marrying someone like her father.
- **Latency stage** (6 years to puberty). At this stage, the child enters a latent stage, an inactive period. The libido is dormant, there is no main area of the body for sexual pleasure.
- **Genital stage** (from puberty onwards). This is the final stage of development and begins at puberty. The libido once again is focused on the genitals at this stage, where pleasure derives from having sexual relationships, and this is where it stays for the rest of the life. Everyone reaches this stage and from here the child becomes an adult.

## ◆ Evaluation

### Strengths

- ✓ **Positive contribution of psychodynamic approach.** The psychodynamic approach has provided valuable contributions to psychology. For example, Freud and other psychologists were the first to demonstrate the potential of psychological factors as the cause of mental disorders, rather than biological factors, and subsequently developed psychological forms of treatment for mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety (e.g. phobias). Before Freud, most explanations of mental illness were based on physical causes or ideas (e.g. possession of evil spirits). This is a strength of the psychodynamic approach because this approach changed how mental illness was viewed, which led to the development of many psychotherapies for the treatment of psychological disorders.

✓ **Supporting research evidence.** A further strength of the psychodynamic approach is that this approach has led to successful treatment. For example, Maat et al.'s (2009) large-scale review of psychotherapy studies concluded that psychoanalysis (therapy) produced significant improvement in symptoms for many years after treatment. However, other psychologists have questioned how effective psychodynamic therapies are. For example, Eysenck (1952) carried out a review of data from 24 studies that investigated the effectiveness of psychoanalysis. He found that approximately 44% of neurotic patients who received psychoanalysis had improved, compared to 66% of neurotic patients who received no therapy but still improved (were on a waiting list and unexpectedly got better - known as spontaneous remission). According to Eysenck, this demonstrates that psychoanalysis is not an effective treatment as people can get better without the needs for such therapy.

✓ **Research evidence for defence mechanisms.** There is research evidence to support the use of repression as a defence mechanism. There are patients that have experienced child abuse and do not remember, but subsequently, such memories are recovered in a therapeutic setting. However, some critics have questioned the validity of recovered repressed memories as often being false and are often due to the therapist's suggestion that such events occurred (Geraerts et al., 2007).

## Weaknesses

✗ **Unscientific.** A criticism of Freud's theory is that many of his concepts are untestable, which make them unscientific. For example, Karl Popper argued that for a theory to be scientific it must be tested empirically, through experiments or observations to see if it is true or false. This is a criticism of Freud's theories because many of his concepts such as the id, superego, fixation, Oedipus complex, and defence mechanisms are said to occur at an unconscious level, which makes the concepts impossible to test empirically to see if they are true, which makes his theories unscientific. Consequently, the difficulty of testing such concepts has meant supporting research evidence from studies for his theory have been very few. Furthermore, many of Freud's theories cannot be falsified – cannot be tested to see if they are true or not. For example, the psychodynamic approach may predict that children who experience harsh potty training will grow up to be over-tidy with a tendency for perfectionism. Even if this does not happen, this does not show his theory is wrong, but another explanation may be offered, that is, the person is displaying reaction formation (showing the opposite behaviour). For Popper, this is unscientific as Freud's theory can never be proven wrong. As a result, the credibility of the psychodynamic approach is reduced.

✗ **Based on case studies.** Another weakness of the psychodynamic approach was its reliance on the use of case studies. For example, Freud came up with the concept of the Oedipus complex through a single case study. Little Hans was a five-year-old boy who developed a phobia of horses after seeing one collapse in the street. Freud suggested Hans' phobia was a form of displacement in which his repressed fear of his father was displaced onto horses. Thus, horses were merely a symbolic representation of Hans' real unconscious fear of castration experienced during the Oedipus complex. Furthermore, his case studies were culturally specific; his patients belonged to a distinct cultural group of mainly Jewish, white, middle-class Viennese women, who were suffering from neurotic disorders and at a particular historical period (i.e. between the 1880s and the 1920s). This is a weakness of the psychodynamic approach and Freud's theory because his case studies lack reliability and cannot be generalised to the general population, which makes it difficult to apply his theory universally. Therefore, this reduces the credibility of the psychodynamic approach in explaining human behaviour.



**X Too deterministic.** A further criticism of the approach is that it is based on psychic determinism. The psychodynamic approach explains all behaviour as determined by unconscious forces and early childhood experiences, suggesting there is little you can do about changing this. Even something as apparently random as a 'slip of the tongue' is driven by unconscious forces and has deep symbolic meaning. Critics argue this is an extreme determinist stance to take and underestimates the control that we have over own behaviour (free will). As a result, the psychodynamic approach raises ethical concerns because the approach implies that others may be to 'blame' for the cause of the person's mental disorders. The suggestion that the parent may be partly to blame can bring about more distress to the individual and to the parents (e.g. guilt).

### Practice exam questions

1. Using an example, explain the role of the unconscious in behaviour. **[5 marks]**
2. Outline the structure of personality according to the psychodynamic approach. **[5 marks]**
3. Explain what is meant by the term id, ego and superego. **[2 marks each]**
4. Explain the defence mechanisms of 'repression' 'denial' and 'displacement'. **[2 marks each]**
5. Name and explain three of Freud's psychosexual stages of development. **[2 marks each]**
6. Briefly evaluate defence mechanisms as a way of explaining human behaviour and experience. **[4 marks]**
7. Describe and evaluate the psychodynamic approach to psychology. **[16 marks]**