The Psychodynamic Perspective

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Originating in the work of Sigmund Freud, the psychodynamic perspective emphasizes unconscious psychological processes (for example, wishes and fears of which we’re not fully aware), and contends that childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult personality. The psychodynamic perspective has evolved considerably since Freud’s time, and now includes innovative new approaches such as object relations theory and neuropsychoanalysis. Some psychodynamic concepts have held up well to empirical scrutiny while others have not, and aspects of the theory remain controversial, but the psychodynamic perspective continues to influence many different areas of contemporary psychology.

Learning Objectives

- Describe the major models of personality within the psychodynamic perspective.
- Define the concept of ego defense, and give examples of commonly used ego defenses.
- Identify psychodynamic concepts that have been supported by empirical research.
- Discuss current trends in psychodynamic theory.

Introduction

Have you ever done something that didn’t make sense? Perhaps you waited until the last minute to begin studying for an exam, even though you knew that delaying so long would ensure that you got a poor grade. Or maybe you spotted a person you liked across the room—someone about whom you had romantic feelings—but instead of approaching that person you headed the other way (and felt ashamed about it afterward). If you’ve ever done something that didn’t seem to make sense—and who among us hasn’t—the psychodynamic perspective on personality might be useful for you. It can help you understand why you chose not to study for that test, or why you ran the other way when the person of your dreams entered the room.

Psychodynamic theory (sometimes called psychoanalytic theory) explains personality in terms of unconscious psychological processes (for example, wishes and fears of which we’re not fully aware), and contends that childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult personality. Psychodynamic theory is most closely associated with the work of Sigmund Freud, and with psychoanalysis, a type of psychotherapy that attempts to explore the patient’s unconscious thoughts and emotions so that the person is better able to understand him- or herself.

Freud’s work has been extremely influential, its impact extending far beyond psychology (several years ago Time magazine selected Freud as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century). Freud’s work has been not only influential, but quite controversial as well. As you might imagine, when Freud
suggested in 1900 that much of our behavior is determined by psychological forces of which we’re largely unaware—that we literally don’t know what’s going on in our own minds—people were (to put it mildly) displeased (Freud, 1900/1953a). When he suggested in 1905 that we humans have strong sexual feelings from a very early age, and that some of these sexual feelings are directed toward our parents, people were more than displeased—they were outraged (Freud, 1905/1953b). Few theories in psychology have evoked such strong reactions from other professionals and members of the public.

Controversy notwithstanding, no competent psychologist, or student of psychology, can ignore psychodynamic theory. It is simply too important for psychological science and practice, and continues to play an important role in a wide variety of disciplines within and outside psychology (for example, developmental psychology, social psychology, sociology, and neuroscience; see Bornstein, 2005, 2006; Solms & Turnbull, 2011). This module reviews the psychodynamic perspective on personality. We begin with a brief discussion of the core assumptions of psychodynamic theory, followed by an overview of the evolution of the theory from Freud’s time to today. We then discuss the place of psychodynamic theory within contemporary psychology, and look toward the future as well.

**Core Assumptions of the Psychodynamic Perspective**

The core assumptions of psychodynamic theory are surprisingly simple. Moreover, these assumptions are unique to the psychodynamic framework: No other theories of personality accept these three ideas in their purest form.

**Assumption 1: Primacy of the Unconscious**

Psychodynamic theorists contend that the majority of psychological processes take place outside conscious awareness. In psychoanalytic terms, the activities of the mind (or psyche) are presumed to be largely unconscious. Research confirms this basic premise of psychoanalysis: Many of our mental activities—memories, motives, feelings, and the like—are largely inaccessible to consciousness (Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Bornstein, 2010; Wilson, 2009).

**Assumption 2: Critical Importance of Early Experiences**

Psychodynamic theory is not alone in positing that early childhood events play a role in shaping personality, but the theory is unique in the degree to which it emphasizes these events as determinants of personality development and dynamics. According to the psychodynamic model, early experiences—including those occurring during the first weeks or months of life—set in motion personality processes that affect us years, even decades, later (Blatt & Levy, 2003; McWilliams, 2009). This is especially true of experiences that are outside the normal range (for example, losing a parent or sibling at a very early age).

**Assumption 3: Psychic Causality**

The third core assumption of psychodynamic theory is that nothing in mental life happens by chance—that there is no such thing as a random thought, feeling, motive, or behavior. This has come to be known as the principle of psychic causality, and though few psychologists accept the principle of psychic
causality precisely as psychoanalysts conceive it, most theorists and researchers agree that thoughts, motives, emotional responses, and expressed behaviors do not arise randomly, but always stem from some combination of identifiable biological and psychological processes (Elliott, 2002; Robinson & Gordon, 2011).

The Evolution of Psychodynamic Theory

Given Freud’s background in neurology, it is not surprising that the first incarnation of psychoanalytic theory was primarily biological: Freud set out to explain psychological phenomena in terms that could be linked to neurological functioning as it was understood in his day. Because Freud’s work in this area evolved over more than 50 years (he began in 1885, and continued until he died in 1939), there were numerous revisions along the way. Thus, it is most accurate to think of psychodynamic theory as a set of interrelated models that complement and build upon each other. Three are particularly important: the topographic model, the psychosexual stage model, and the structural model.

The Topographic Model

In his 1900 book, The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud introduced his topographic model of the mind, which contended that the mind could be divided into three regions: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. The conscious part of the mind holds information that you’re focusing on at this moment—what you’re thinking and feeling right now. The preconscious contains material that is capable of becoming conscious but is not conscious at the moment because your attention is not being directed toward it. You can move material from the preconscious into consciousness simply by focusing your attention on it. Consider, for example, what you had for dinner last night. A moment ago that information was preconscious; now it’s conscious, because you “pulled it up” into consciousness. (Not to worry, in a few moments it will be preconscious again, and you can move on to more important things.)

The unconscious—the most controversial part of the topographic model—contains anxiety-producing material (for example, sexual impulses, aggressive urges) that are deliberately repressed (held outside of conscious awareness as a form of self-protection because they make you uncomfortable). The terms conscious, preconscious, and unconscious continue to be used today in psychology, and research has provided considerable support for Freud’s thinking regarding conscious and preconscious processing (Erdelyi, 1985, 2004). The existence of the unconscious remains controversial, with some researchers arguing that evidence for it is compelling and others contending that “unconscious” processing can be accounted for without positing the existence of a Freudian repository of repressed wishes and troubling urges and impulses (Eagle, 2011; Luborsky & Barrett, 2006).

The Psychosexual Stage Model

Freud remained devoted to the topographic model, but by 1905 he had outlined the key elements of his psychosexual stage model, which argued that early in life we progress through a sequence of developmental stages, each with its own unique challenge and its own mode of sexual gratification. Freud’s psychosexual stages—oral, anal, Oedipal, latency, and genital—are well-known even to non-
analytic psychologists. Frustration or overgratification during a particular stage was hypothesized to result in “fixation” at that stage, and to the development of an oral, anal, or Oedipal personality style (Bornstein, 2005, 2006).

Table 1 illustrates the basic organization of Freud’s (1905/1953b) psychosexual stage model, and the three personality styles that result. Note that—consistent with the developmental challenges that the child confronts during each stage—oral fixation is hypothesized to result in a dependent personality, whereas anal fixation results in a lifelong preoccupation with control. Oedipal fixation leads to an aggressive, competitive personality orientation.

The Structural Model

Ultimately, Freud recognized that the topographic model was helpful in understanding how people process and store information, but not all that useful in explaining other important psychological phenomena (for example, why certain people develop psychological disorders and others do not). To extend his theory, Freud developed a complementary framework to account for normal and abnormal personality development—the structural model—which posits the existence of three interacting mental structures called the id, ego, and superego. The id is the seat of drives and instincts, whereas the ego represents the logical, reality-oriented part of the mind, and the superego is basically your conscience—the moral guidelines, rules, and prohibitions that guide your behavior. (You acquire these through your family and through the culture in which you were raised.)

According to the structural model, our personality reflects the interplay of these three psychic structures, which differ across individuals in relative power and influence. When the id predominates and instincts rule, the result is an impulsive personality style. When the superego is strongest, moral prohibitions reign supreme, and a restrained, overcontrolled personality ensues. When the ego is dominant, a more balanced set of personality traits develop (Eagle, 2011; McWilliams, 2009).

The Ego and Its Defenses

In addition to being the logical, rational, reality-oriented part of the mind, the ego serves another important function: It helps us manage anxiety through the use of ego defenses. Ego defenses are basically mental strategies that we use automatically and unconsciously when we feel threatened (Cramer, 2000, 2006). They help us navigate upsetting events, but there’s a cost as well: All ego defenses involve some distortion of reality. For example, repression (the most basic ego defense, according to Freud) involves removing from consciousness upsetting thoughts and feelings, and moving those thoughts and feelings to the unconscious. When you read about a person who “blocked out” upsetting memories of child abuse, that’s an example of repression.

Another ego defense is denial. In denial (unlike repression), we are aware that a particular event occurred, but we don’t allow ourselves to see the implications of that event. When you hear a person with a substance abuse problem say “I’m fine—even though people complain about my drinking I never miss a day of work,” that person is using denial. Table 2 lists some common ego defenses in psychodynamic theory, along with a definition and example of each.
Psychodynamic Theories: Where Are We Now?

The topographic model, psychosexual stage model, and structural model continue to influence contemporary psychology, but it is important to keep in mind that psychodynamic theory is never static, ever changing and evolving in response to new ideas and findings. In the following sections we discuss four current trends in the psychodynamic perspective: object relations theory, the empirical testing of psychodynamic concepts, psychoanalysis and culture, and the opportunities and challenges of neuroscience.

Object Relations Theory and the Growth of the Psychodynamic Perspective

In recent years a number of new psychodynamic frameworks have emerged to explain personality development and dynamics. The most important of these is object relations theory. (In psychoanalytic language, the term “object” refers to a person, so object relations theory is really something more like “interpersonal relations theory.”)

Object relations theory contends that personality can be understood as reflecting the mental images of significant figures (especially the parents) that we form early in life in response to interactions taking place within the family (Kernberg, 2004; Wachtel, 1997). These mental images (sometimes called introjects) serve as templates for later interpersonal relationships—almost like relationship blueprints or “scripts.” So if you internalized positive introjects early in life (for example, a mental image of mom or dad as warm and accepting), that’s what you expect to occur in later relationships as well. If you internalized a mental image of mom or dad as harsh and judgmental, you might instead become a self-critical person, and feel that you can never live up to other people’s standards . . . or your own (Luyten & Blatt, 2013).

Object relations theory has increased many psychologists’ interest in studying psychodynamic ideas and concepts, in part because it represents a natural bridge between the psychodynamic perspective and research in other areas of psychology. For example, developmental and social psychologists also believe that mental representations of significant people play an important role in shaping our behavior. In developmental psychology you might read about this in the context of attachment theory (which argues that attachments—or bonds—to significant people are key to understanding human behavior; Fraley, 2002). In social psychology, mental representations of significant figures play an important role in social cognition (thoughts and feelings regarding other people; Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Robinson & Gordon, 2011).

Empirical Research on Psychodynamic Theories

Empirical research assessing psychodynamic concepts has produced mixed results, with some concepts receiving good empirical support, and others not faring as well. For example, the notion that we express strong sexual feelings from a very early age, as the psychosexual stage model suggests, has not held up to empirical scrutiny. On the other hand, the idea that there are dependent, control-oriented, and competitive personality types—an idea also derived from the psychosexual stage model—does seem useful.

Many ideas from the psychodynamic perspective have been studied empirically. Luborsky and Barrett (2006) reviewed much of this research; other useful reviews are provided by Bornstein (2005), Gerber
For now, let’s look at three psychodynamic hypotheses that have received strong empirical support.

- **Unconscious processes influence our behavior as the psychodynamic perspective predicts.** We perceive and process much more information than we realize, and much of our behavior is shaped by feelings and motives of which we are, at best, only partially aware (Bornstein, 2009, 2010). Evidence for the importance of unconscious influences is so compelling that it has become a central element of contemporary cognitive and social psychology (Robinson & Gordon, 2011).

- **We all use ego defenses and they help determine our psychological adjustment and physical health.** People really do differ in the degree that they rely on different ego defenses—so much so that researchers now study each person’s “defense style” (the unique constellation of defenses that we use). It turns out that certain defenses are more adaptive than others: Rationalization and sublimation are healthier (psychologically speaking) than repression and reaction formation (Cramer, 2006). Denial is, quite literally, bad for your health, because people who use denial tend to ignore symptoms of illness until it’s too late (Bond, 2004).

- **Mental representations of self and others do indeed serve as blueprints for later relationships.** Dozens have studies have shown that mental images of our parents, and other significant figures, really do shape our expectations for later friendships and romantic relationships. The idea that you choose a romantic partner who resembles mom or dad is a myth, but it’s true that you expect to be treated by others as you were treated by your parents early in life (Silverstein, 2007; Wachtel, 1997).

**Psychoanalysis and Culture**

One of Freud’s lifelong goals was to use psychoanalytic principles to understand culture and improve intergroup relations (he actually exchanged several letters with Albert Einstein prior to World War II, in which they discussed this issue). During the past several decades, as society has become increasingly multicultural, this effort has taken on new importance; psychoanalysts have been active in incorporating ideas and findings regarding cultural influences into their research and clinical work. For example, studies have shown that individuals raised in individualistic, independence-focused cultures (for example, the United States, Great Britain) tend to define themselves primarily in terms of personal attributes (like attitudes and interests), whereas individuals raised in more sociocentric, interdependent cultures (for example, Japan, India) are more likely to describe themselves in terms of interpersonal relations and connections with others (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Our self-representations are, quite literally, a product of our cultural milieu (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

**The Opportunities and Challenges of Neuroscience**

Fifteen years ago, Nobel Laureate Eric Kandel (1998) articulated a vision for an empirically oriented psychodynamic perspective firmly embedded within the principles and findings of neuroscience. Kandel’s vision ultimately led to the development of **neuropsychoanalysis**, an integration of
psychodynamic and neuropsychological concepts that has enhanced researchers’ understanding of numerous aspects of human behavior and mental functioning (Solms & Turnbull, 2011). Some of the first efforts to integrate psychodynamic principles with findings from neuroscience involved sleep and dreams, and contemporary models of dream formation now incorporate principles from both domains (Levin & Nielsen, 2007). Neuroimaging techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imagery (fMRI) have begun to play an increasingly central role in this ongoing psychoanalysis–neuroscience integration as well (Gerber, 2007; Slipp, 2000).

Looking Ahead: Psychodynamic Theory in the 21st Century (and Beyond)

Despite being surrounded by controversy, the psychodynamic perspective on personality has survived for more than a century, reinventing itself in response to new empirical findings, theoretical shifts, and changing social forces. The psychodynamic perspective evolved considerably during the 20th century and will continue to evolve throughout the 21st century as well. Psychodynamic theory may be the closest thing we have to an overarching, all-encompassing theory in psychology. It deals with a broad range of issues—normal and pathological functioning, motivation and emotion, childhood and adulthood, individual and culture—and the psychodynamic perspective continues to have tremendous potential for integrating ideas and findings across the many domains of contemporary psychology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Development Task</th>
<th>Associated Personality Traits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>0–18 months</td>
<td>Moving from infantile dependency toward autonomy</td>
<td>Dependency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal</td>
<td>18–36 months</td>
<td>Learning to exercise control over one’s body, one’s impulses, and other people</td>
<td>Obsessiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oedipal</td>
<td>5–6 years</td>
<td>Mastering competitive urges and acquiring gender role related behaviors</td>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latency</td>
<td>6 years–puberty</td>
<td>Investing energy in productive, rewarding tasks and activities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genital</td>
<td>Puberty onward</td>
<td>Mature sexuality (sexuality blended with intimacy)</td>
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Note: Dashes indicate that no associated character traits exist for that stage (fixation in the latency and genital periods does not play a role in classical psychoanalytic theory).

Table 1: The Psychosexual Stage Model
**Defense** | **Description**  
--- | ---  
**Repression** | Moving upsetting information (for example, sexual feelings regarding one's parents, aggressive feelings toward a sibling) from consciousness to the unconscious  
**Denial** | Failing to appreciate the negative implications of an event or experience (for example, dismissing a potentially serious physical symptom as being unimportant)  
**Reaction Formation** | Expressing outwardly the exact opposite of what one is feeling inwardly (for example, when a young boy feels affection for a young girl, but responds by making fun of her)  
**Displacement** | Expressing a negative emotion—often anger—in a setting that is less risky than the setting one first experienced the emotion (for example, being yelled at by your boss, then coming home and taking it out on your partner)  
**Rationalization** | Making excuses for engaging in unacceptable acts (for example, justifying cheating on your taxes by convincing yourself that everyone does it, so it’s not really cheating)  
**Sublimation** | Expressing unacceptable impulses in a way that actually brings rewards rather than punishment (for example, unleashing pent-up aggression by playing field hockey or football)

*Note: This is a partial list of ego defenses; although psychologists disagree regarding the precise number of defenses we use, most lists include 10–15 defenses altogether.*

Table 2: Some Common Ego Defenses

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<tr>
<th><strong>Model</strong></th>
<th><strong>Conception of Personality</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topographic</strong></td>
<td>Unconscious material is a primary determinant of personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychosexual</strong></td>
<td>Fixation at a particular psychosexual stage leads to an associated personality type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural</strong></td>
<td>Id-ego-superego dynamics determine personality traits and defense strategies</td>
</tr>
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Table 3: Conceptions of Personality within Psychodynamic Theory

**Outside Resources**

Institution: Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR) - A branch of the International Psychoanalytic Association, IPTAR plays an active role in supporting empirical research on psychoanalytic theory and therapy.  
http://www.iptar.org/
Institution: The American Psychoanalytic Association - The American Psychoanalytic Association supports psychodynamic training and research, and sponsors a number of workshops (as well as two annual meetings) each year.
http://www.apsa.org/


Web: Library of Congress Exhibit – Freud: Conflict and Culture. This is a terrific website full of photos, original manuscripts, and links to various Freud artifacts. Toward the end of Section Three (From the Individual to Society) there is a link to Freud’s 1938 BBC radio address; play it and you’ll get to hear Freud’s voice.
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/freud/

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is psychic causality?

2. What are the main differences between the preconscious and the unconscious in Freud’s topographic model?

3. What are the three key structures in the structural model of the mind—and what does each structure do?

4. Which ego defense do you think is more adaptive: reaction formation or sublimation? Why?

5. How do people raised in individualistic societies differ from those raised in more sociocentric societies with respect to their self-concept—how do they perceive and describe themselves?

6. According to object relations theory, how do early relationships with our parents and other significant figures affect later friendships and romantic relationships?

7. Which field has the potential to benefit more from the emerging new discipline of neuropsychoanalysis: neuroscience, or psychoanalysis? Why?

**Vocabulary**

**Ego defenses**
Mental strategies, rooted in the ego, that we use to manage anxiety when we feel threatened (some examples include repression, denial, sublimation, and reaction formation).

**Neuropsychoanalysis**
An integrative, interdisciplinary domain of inquiry seeking to integrate psychoanalytic and neuropsychological ideas and findings to enhance both areas of inquiry (you can learn more by visiting the webpage of the International Neuropsychoanalysis Society at http://www.neuopsa.org.uk/).
Object relations theory
A modern offshoot of the psychodynamic perspective, this theory contends that personality can be understood as reflecting mental images of significant figures (especially the parents) that we form early in life in response to interactions taking place within the family; these mental images serve as templates (or “scripts”) for later interpersonal relationships.

Primacy of the Unconscious
The hypothesis—supported by contemporary empirical research—that the vast majority of mental activity takes place outside conscious awareness.

Psychic causality
The assumption that nothing in mental life happens by chance—that there is no such thing as a “random” thought or feeling.

Psychosexual stage model
Probably the most controversial aspect of psychodynamic theory, the psychosexual stage model contends that early in life we progress through a sequence of developmental stages (oral, anal, Oedipal, latency, and genital), each with its own unique mode of sexual gratification.

Structural model
Developed to complement and extend the topographic model, the structural model of the mind posits the existence of three interacting mental structures called the id, ego, and superego.

Topographic model
Freud’s first model of the mind, which contended that the mind could be divided into three regions: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. (The “topographic” comes from the fact that topography is the study of maps.)

Reference List


