

THE PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

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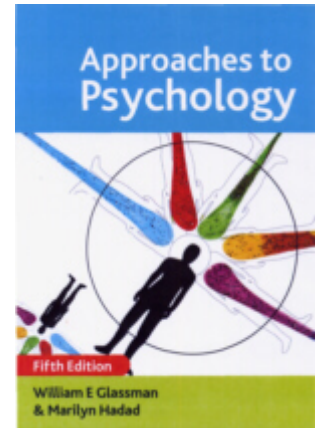
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Introduction to the Psychodynamic Approach

In many ways, 1900 was a significant moment in time. Just as we recently experienced 'millennium madness', so, too, the turn of the century was seen as a social and cultural landmark. From the perspective of psychology, the discipline was still in its infancy: Wilhelm Wundt had established the first experimental laboratory only 25 years earlier, and William James's *Psychology*, the first notable general text, had appeared only ten years earlier, in 1890. However, one could argue that even more significant, in terms of ultimate impact on both psychology and society, was the publication in 1900 of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The Interpretation of Dreams was a landmark, for it represented the first of Freud's books to capture popular as well as academic interest. Scientifically, Freud's ideas about dreaming and other mental processes were often controversial among his peers, and the controversy has not subsided in the 60+ years since his death. Yet whether one accepts or rejects Freud's theory, there is little doubt that psychoanalysis had significant impact. His study of motivation and mental processes laid the foundation for all psychodynamic theories, and changed our culture by changing how we see ourselves.

Understanding just how much our world was changed because of Freud's work can be difficult to grasp, for we are immersed in a world of Freudian concepts. Every time we make reference to doing something 'unconsciously', or refer to someone as having a big 'ego', we are using Freudian terms. (Most people in our culture in fact find it hard to believe that some cultures have no concept of 'unconscious' processes!) As a result, it

can be useful to explore the background of Freud's life, and the nature of our culture before his ideas so profoundly altered it.

Resources

The Freud Web

Overview of Freud's life and ideas; part of larger site on Victorian Era which was created by George Landow of Brown University. Useful for understanding the social context in which psychodynamic theories developed.

Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture

Online version of exhibit which appeared at the Library of Congress, Fall, 1998, and later travelled to several international sites. Provides many photos and materials to explore relationships between Freudian theory and our culture.

The Freud Museum

Site maintained by Freud Museum in Vienna (Freud's home and office for almost 50 years); variety of resources, from chronology to video clips, listed under "Sigmund Freud online". Also includes biography of Anna Freud (under sub-heading "Themes").

Freud Museum, London

Site for museum based in Freud's London residence; has extensive resources, including discussions of dream analysis, a photo collection, etc.

Freud and Psychoanalysis

All psychodynamic theories stem from psychoanalysis, for Freud first developed the basic ideas which underlie the approach as a whole – particularly the idea that understanding behaviour requires insight into the thoughts and feelings which motivate our actions. While the textbook deals extensively with the basic concepts of psychoanalysis, in many ways the theory is intertwined with the man. Indeed, one could argue that in no other approach has one person had such a dominating influence, not even Watson for Behaviourism, or Rogers for Humanistic Psychology. Consequently, it should not be surprising that Freud was ranked higher than any other psychologists on various lists of scientists and thinkers of the last millennium. While many other psychodynamic theories exist today, Freud still casts a long shadow, as the following resources show.

Resources

Sigmund Freud

Extensive discussion of Freud's theory (along with brief biography), by George Boeree of Shippensburg University.

Empirical Studies of Psychoanalysis

Annotated bibliography of research on assessing psychoanalysis, from the American Psychoanalytic Association.

Neurobiology and Its Application to Psychoanalysis

Recent paper (in PDF format) presented to conference of American Psychoanalytic Association.

Dreams and their Meaning

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* attracted public interest in his theory, but he was certainly not the first person to suggest that dreams have a meaning. Indeed, from Biblical times, people have sought to understand their dreams. What distinguished Freud's interpretation was the way he related it to his broader theory of mental processes and behaviour, by invoking the concept of a **dream censor** whose function is to hide the true meaning of the dream from the person's conscious mind. Thus, Freud saw dreams as having a symbolic meaning that could only be fully understood in the context of the individual's overall behaviour. This view is still controversial, with some physiological researchers arguing that dreams are simply an artifact of brain activity during sleep, with no true significance. Clearly, psychodynamic theorists view dreams differently – as do many individuals. For those who are curious, the resources below provide a starting point for further explorations of dreaming.

Resources

The Interpretation of Dreams

Full text of English translation of third (1911) edition of Freud's classic work; from Christopher Green's History of Psychology web site at York University, Toronto.

Outline for a Theory of Dreaming

Article by psychoanalyst Ernst Hartmann, a well-known writer on dreaming, which appeared in *Dreams*, a publication of the Association for the Study of Dreams, in 1996; other articles and resources are found here on the ASD site.

The Quantitative Study of Dreams

Site created by two psychologists at the University of California, Santa Cruz; provides extensive resources on the scientific study of dreams. A companion site, Dream Bank, contains an online archive of thousands of dream reports, searchable by keywords and dreamer age, gender, etc.

Repression, Memory and Abuse

Imagine a situation: An adult seeks therapy because of distress about personal relationships. In the course of treatment, the individual comes to recall traumatic experiences from childhood – in particular, of being sexually abused by a family member. Recalling these experiences seems to produce therapeutic benefit – but also leads the individual to seek criminal prosecution of their presumed tormentor. The incidents seem to have happened more than twenty years previously, and there is no corroborating evidence. What should the individual do? What should society (in the form of the legal system) do?

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this situation would not be considered unusual: in essence, the therapy has led to remembering traumatic events which were repressed. The concept of **repression** is fundamental to Freud's theory, since it provides the basic explanation of how thoughts and experiences end up in the unconscious. Freud encountered such reports many times in his clinical practice – though he ultimately concluded that most such reports represented fantasies, not real experiences. As noted in the text, both his original interpretation (that many adult problems relate to childhood traumas, including abuse) and his subsequent reassessment (that most such reports are fantasies) have attracted controversy. Today, given increased awareness of sexual abuse, many mental health professionals tend to support Freud's original view, that most reports represent repressed memories.

While our society has become more sensitive to abuse of children, the attempt to seek justice through the criminal law, rather than simply therapeutic release, has made the issue more controversial. Although circumstances sometimes lead to independent evidence to indicate the repressed memories are true, the situation is more problematical in instances where there is no corroborating evidence, but simply therapeutic reports of experiences decades earlier. Not surprisingly, individuals who are accused of such crimes tend to vigorously defend against the charges, and the concern arises as to whether the events really happened or not. (Recall Freud's doubts.) In some cases, the defendant will draw upon expert testimony by cognitive psychologists like Elizabeth Loftus, who notes that recall can be distorted and – at least in the laboratory – people can be induced to recall events that never happened. (See text, and Cognitive Approach.) Thus, critics have argued that at least some reports of repressed memories of abuse represent fantasies misinterpreted by inept therapists.

In the end, the issue involves both scientific questions about the nature of memory (repression vs. reconstruction) and social questions about the justice system (burden of proof vs. false accusations). As the links below discuss, there is no absolute answer – some reports are doubtless true, but some may well be distorted or false, and there is no simple way to determine which is which. Indeed, the nature of memory makes it unlikely that we can find a technique to assess uncorroborated reports of abuse which will fully satisfy the needs of the justice system. As a result, the controversy is unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future.

Resources

Questions and Answers about Memories of Childhood Abuse

Official statement by American Psychological Association, providing non-technical discussion of the topic.

Memory, Abuse and Science

Article from *American Psychologist* by clinical psychologist Kenneth Pope, emphasizing methodological issues involved in evaluating reports of recovered memories; other resources, including a follow-up article, are listed under the link for 'Memory & Abuse'.

Scientific Research on Recovered Memories

Extremely detailed review of the existing literature on recovered memories of sexual abuse, by psychologist Jim Hopper. Tends to support idea that memories can be repressed, but nonetheless provides careful discussion of findings and citations for published studies.

The Debate over Recovered Memories

One of a series of articles looking at the overall issue, in a generally well-balanced manner; from About.com.

Carl Jung's Theory

Among psychodynamic theorists, the name Carl Jung is probably second only to Freud in terms of popular recognition. Though at one time he was a close friend of Freud, and seen by Freud as his potential successor, Jung was already a practicing therapist before he first made contact with Freud. As the text notes, Freud had a poor track record in terms of mentoring, with many of his best students ultimately separating from him on bad terms, usually because of disputes about the theory of psychoanalysis. (Freud was a pioneer, but he seemed to have little tolerance for critics.)

Jung ultimately developed his own theory, which differed in important respects from Freud's. Most significant were his de-emphasis of the importance of sexuality and aggression as motives, and his division of the **unconscious** into the **personal** (much like Freud's original concept) and the **collective** (a universal unconscious, containing symbolic patterns called **archetypes**). (For more information, see text and or links below.)

Resources

Carl Jung

A chapter from an electronic book, detailing Jung's life and theory, by George Boeree of Shippensburg University.

Carl Gustave Jung

Site includes biography, discussion of Jung's theory, and online essay by Jung on the relation of analytical psychology to poetry.

C. G. Jung

Commercial site about Jung and Jungian analysis, includes a good collection of web links.

The Shadow Exercise

A simple exercise to explore the Shadow, one of the basic elements of Jung's theory of personality; by John Suler of Rider University.

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter

An online personality test, based on Jung's concept of psychological types. The test is similar to the Myers-Briggs test, and has the same 16 basic types. NOTE: including this link implies no sanctioning of the test's validity or reliability, but it may nonetheless be instructive and/or entertaining.

Adlerian Theory

There are several similarities between Jung and Alfred Adler. Both men trained as doctors, over time sought out Freud to learn about psychoanalysis, were seen as potential successors by Freud, but eventually broke from him over theoretical disputes. While both men disagreed with the emphasis Freud placed on sexuality as a motive, the similarities in their views end there. To Adler, the most important motive is the feeling of **inferiority**, which he felt originated in the sense of dependence and helplessness which infants experience. (Many biographers see a parallel between Adler's theory and his often experience of being sickly as a child.)

Adler's theory in many ways seems more straight-forward than Jung's, since his focus on **striving for superiority** seems less abstract than Jung's concept of **individuation** as the goal of growth. This is also seen in other aspects of this theory, such as **style of life** as an individual's pattern of personality and adjustment. (Note Adler had little interest in Jung's concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious.) In the end, his theory faces many of the same difficulties as other psychodynamic theories, in terms of evaluating its validity. (See text.) Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Adler has had significant influence within the psychodynamic approach and, as the following links illustrate, his theory still has many supporters.

Resources

Alfred Adler

Another chapter from Boeree's online personality text, detailing Adler's life and theory.

Alfred Adler

A briefer biography and overview of Adler's theory, along with a timeline and set of links to other Adler sites.

Classical Adlerian Psychology

Website of Adler Institute of San Francisco; contains variety of background material related to Adler, as well as articles on Adlerian therapy.

A Conversation with Harry Stein

Interview with a contemporary Adlerian therapist; from BehaviourOnline website.

Other Psychodynamic Theorists

There are many forms of psychodynamic theory, beyond those discussed above. Some, described as neo-Freudians, retained many of the concepts proposed by Freud. Among these are the 'ego psychology' school pioneered by Freud's daughter Anna, which focuses on the strategies used to preserve the ego, especially defense mechanisms. The 'object relations' school (emphasising the importance of relationships, especially to the mother in early childhood) includes a number of theorists, including Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and John Bowlby. Other psychodynamic theorists diverged significantly from the Freudian tradition – even some who were trained originally in psychoanalysis, like Karen Horney, Erik Erikson (a student of Anna Freud), and Erich Fromm (who, while often described as a neo-Freudian, is actually closer to the humanists than to traditional Freudian theory). It is impossible to address all of the variants here, either historical or contemporary, but the following links can provide a starting point if seeking information on a specific theorist.

Resources

Anna Freud

Detailed profile of Anna Freud; from the website of Women's Intellectual Contributions to the Study of Mind and Society at Webster University.

Personality Theories

George Boeree's online text, containing individual chapters discussing the lives and theories of most of the well-known neo-Freudian and non-Freudian psychodynamic theorists, including Horney, Erikson, etc.

Selected Biographies

A set of online biographies of various individuals in the history of psychology, including a number of the major psychodynamic theorists; part of Muskingum College 'History of Psychology' site.

Applying the Concepts: Freud and Dream Analysis

As discussed in the text, Freud saw the role of the unconscious as a key element in the dynamics of behaviour – but how could one gain access to the unconscious? One of the techniques which Freud identified early on, and which he continued to emphasise as he developed his theory, was the interpretation of dreams. (Freud, 1900) As time went on, the idea that dreams had a special meaning (which could be understood through psychoanalysis) captured the popular imagination. By the 1920's, many books and articles aimed at the general public had appeared, leading non-psychoanalytic psychologists to challenge the value of dream analysis. However, for many people, the desire to understand their dreams was stronger than any skepticism expressed by critics.

Benjamin and Dixon (1996) provide an example of this popular interest, as expressed in the case of a young woman who wrote directly to Freud in 1927. Mary Fields had evidently read a number of Freud's works, including *The Interpretation of Dreams*; in her letter, she asked him to explain a dream which had so deeply upset her that she obsessed over its meaning for weeks. She was 20 years old, a stenographer living in a city in the American Midwest. She was an only child, and came from a relatively prosperous Protestant family. Recently, she had become involved with an Italian man from a poorer family – a relationship her parents rejected. In her dream, she was in an unfamiliar but pleasant house, with her father and uncle on the porch. The brother of her boyfriend appeared with a letter from him, informing her that he had married the day before to a 'Mildred Dowl' (a name she didn't recognise). On hearing this news, she plunged a letter opener into her chest, collapsing on the floor. When she awoke from the dream, highly agitated, she found herself lying in bed in the same position she had been in at the end of the dream.

Mary Fields sent her letter directly to Freud's home in Vienna in November, 1927. At this point in time, Freud was 71, and in poor health (partly owing the cancer of the larynx which eventually killed him). He received large volumes of mail, and despite his failing health, continued to be an avid correspondent. He replied to Mary Fields (his letter dated only two weeks after hers) in a typed letter which Benjamin and Dixon suggest may have been transcribed by his daughter Anna. His response was gracious, but he declined to interpret her dream other than to suggest that she likely felt some ambivalence about her boyfriend. This reply is consistent with his character (intellectually curious and considerate), but also reflects his belief that dreams could not be properly interpreted without sufficient contextual information of the type that develops during analysis. In fact, in his letter, Freud suggested that some of the details, like the name Mildred Dowl, would be understandable "if you were here in Vienna and could talk to me in my study". (Benjamin and Dixon, 1996, p. 465)

Hence, while strongly committed to the belief that dream analysis was an important tool, Freud was unwilling to consider dreams out of context, in the way that many

popularisers of the 1920s were promoting. Today, most psychoanalysts would express a similar reluctance: dreams may be meaningful, but that meaning is not easily understood through self-analysis or superficial dream guides.

References

Benjamin, L. T., Jr., & Dixon, D. N. (1996) Dream analysis by mail: an American woman seeks Freud's advice, *American Psychologist*, 51, 461-468.

Freud, S. (1900) *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Reprinted as Vol. 6 of Strachey, J. (Ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1960.

Publications Related to the Psychodynamic Approach

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere

Online journal edited by Robert M. Young of Sheffield University; part of the Human Nature Review psychoanalytically-oriented website and journal.

Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing

On-line archive of classic psychoanalytic articles and books.

British Institute of Psychoanalysis

On-line archive of selected articles.

International Journal of Psychoanalysis

Provides effective search tools, with some online content and access to contents pages in archive.

Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association

Provides archive of contents pages, but not full texts.