

# The Psychodynamic Approach

Freud – psychiatrist, neurologist and key pioneer of the psychodynamic approach (including his psychoanalytic theory of personality) – theorised that our mental activity is mostly unconscious, and it is this unconscious activity that causes our behaviour. He explained that traumatic childhood experiences pushed into the unconscious mind can later lead to mental disorders, and developed ‘talking cures’ (psychoanalysis, or more generally termed psychotherapy) to help release problematic repressed memories and relieve symptoms.

- Unconscious activity is the key determinate of how we behave.
- We possess innate ‘drives’ (or ‘instincts’) that ‘energize’ our minds to motivate behaviour as we develop through our lives.
- Our [three-part] personality – the psyche – is comprised of the ID, ego and superego.
- Childhood experiences have significant importance in determining our personality when we reach adulthood.

## The Role of the Unconscious

The psyche, forming the structure of personality, has three parts:

- ID – driving us to satisfy selfish urges (i.e. acts according to the 'pleasure principle') (exists from birth).
- Ego - acts rationally, balancing the ID and the superego (i.e. acts according to the 'reality principle') (develops years 2-4).
- Superego – concerned with keeping to moral norms (i.e. acts according to the 'morality principle'), and attempts to control a powerful ID with feelings of guilt (develops years 4-5).

## Psychosexual Stages

Freud also thought that humans progress through 'psychosexual stages', during the development of the psyche. He named five stages, each with a particular characteristic behaviour:

- Oral – sucking behaviour (0-18 months)
- Anal – holding or discarding faeces (18 months – 3.5 years)
- Phallic – fixation on genitals (3.5 – 6 years)
- Latency – repressed sexual urges (6 years - puberty)
- Genital – awakened sexual urges (puberty onwards)

Freud claimed that, during development, becoming fixated on one of these stages would restrict full development result in displaying specific personality symptoms. An 'anally retentive' personality is one such symptom – he proposed that when conflict occurs over potty training, a person could become fixated on cleanliness and orderliness to an extreme.

## Ego Defence Mechanisms

The ego balances potential conflict between the ID and superego, and tries to reduce anxiety. In areas of significant conflict, the ego can redirect psychic energy using 'defense mechanisms'. Three key mechanisms Freud proposed are:

- Repression – burying an unpleasant thought or desire in the unconscious (e.g. traumatic childhood experiences may be repressed and so forgotten).
- Displacement – emotions are directed away from their source or target, towards other things (e.g. wringing a dishcloth in anger, which would have otherwise been directed at the cat scratching the furniture).
- Denial – a threatening thought is ignored or treated as if it were not true (e.g. a wife might find evidence that her husband is cheating on her, but explain it away using other reasons).

## Research methods used by the approach

Freud's psychoanalytical theory was based on case studies, which gather large amounts of detailed information about individuals or small groups. These cases were of patients with which he used psychoanalysis ('talking cures'), the aim of which to bring unconscious mental activity to the conscious to release anxiety. Techniques to do this include:

- Free association – expressing immediate [unconscious] thoughts, as they happen
- Dream interpretation – analysing the *latent content* (i.e. underlying meaning) of *manifest content* (i.e. what was remembered from the dream).

Current psychologists using the psychodynamic approach still utilize case study evidence (e.g. recording psychoanalytic interviews) to provide proof of their explanations.

## Evaluation of the psychodynamic approach/methods

### Strengths

- Freud highlighted a widely accepted link between childhood experience and adult characteristics.
- Case study methodology embraces our complex behaviour by gathering rich information, and on an individual basis – an idiographic approach – when conducting research.
- Some evidence supports the existence of ego defence mechanisms such as repression, e.g. adults can forget traumatic child sexual abuse (Williams, 1994).
- Modern day psychiatry still utilizes Freudian psychoanalytic techniques.

### Weaknesses

- It could be argued that Freud's approach overemphasises childhood experience as the source of abnormality (although modern psychodynamic theories give more recognition to the adult problems of everyday life, such as the effects of negative interpersonal relationships).

- By using case studies to support theories, the approach does not use controlled experiments to collect empirical evidence, so is considered far less scientific than other approaches.

- Case study evidence is difficult to generalise to wider populations.

- Many of Freud's ideas are considered non-falsifiable – theories may appear to reflect evidence, but you cannot observe the relevant constructs directly (namely the unconscious mind) to test them scientifically, such that they could be proved wrong. Philosopher of science Karl Popper famously argued that a theory is not scientific if it is not falsifiable.

## The Cognitive Approach

The idea that humans conduct mental processes on incoming information – i.e. human cognition – came to the fore of psychological thought during the mid twentieth century, overlooking the stimulus-response focus of the behaviourist approach. A dominant cognitive approach evolved, advocating that sensory information is manipulated internally prior to responses made – influenced by, for instance, our motivations and beliefs.

Introspection – a subjective method predominantly used by philosophical and psychodynamic approaches – was rejected in favour of experimental methodology to study internal processes scientifically.

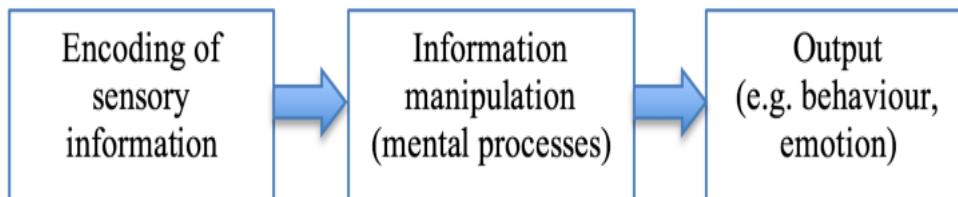
### The cognitive approach assumes:

- The mind actively processes information from our senses (touch, taste etc.).
- Between stimulus and response are complex mental processes, which can be studied scientifically.
- Humans can be seen as data processing systems.
- The workings of a computer and the human mind are alike – they encode and store information, and they have outputs.

### The Study of Internal Mental Processes

Using experimental research methods, the cognitive approach studies internal mental processes such as attention, memory and decision-making. For example, an investigation might compare the abilities of groups to memorize a list of words, presenting them either verbally or visually to **infer** which type of sensory information is easiest to process, and could further investigate whether or not this changes with different word types or individuals.

**Theoretical and computer models** are proposed to attempt to explain and infer information about mental processes. For example, the **Information-Processing Model** (Figure 1) describes the mind as if a computer, in terms of the relationship between incoming information to be encoded (from the senses), manipulating this mentally (e.g. storage, a decision), and consequently directing an output (e.g. a behaviour, emotion). An example might be an artist looking at a picturesque landscape, deciding which paint colour suits a given area, before brushing the selected colour onto a canvas.



Flow chart

highlighting the role of mental processing defined by the Information-Processing Model

In recent decades, newer models including **Computational** and **Connectionist** models have taken some attention away from the previously dominant information-processing analogy:

- **The Computational model** similarly compares with a computer, but focuses more on how we structure the process of reaching the behavioural output (i.e. the aim, strategy and action taken), without specifying when/how much information is dealt with.
- **The Connectionist model** takes a neural line of thought; it looks at the mind as a complex network of neurons, which activate in regular configurations that characterize known associations between stimuli.

## The role of Schema

A key concept to the approach is the schema, an internal ‘script’ for how to act or what to expect from a given situation. For example, gender schemas assume how males/females behave and how is best to respond accordingly, e.g. a child may assume that all boys enjoy playing football. Schemas are like stereotypes, and alter mental processing of incoming information; their role in eyewitness testimony can be negative, as what somebody expects to see may distort their memory of what was actually witnessed.

## Cognitive Neuroscience emergence

This related field became prevalent over the latter half of the twentieth century, incorporating neuroscience techniques such as brain scanning to study the impact of brain structures on cognitive processes.

## **Evaluation of the cognitive approach**

### **Strengths**

- Models have presented a useful means to help explain internal mental processes
- The approach provides a strong focus on internal mental processes, which behaviourists before did not.
- The experimental methods used by the approach are considered scientific.

### **Weaknesses**

- It could be argued that cognitive models over-simplify explanations for complex mental processes.
- The data supporting cognitive theories often come from unrealistic tasks used in laboratory experiments, which puts the ecological validity of theories into question (i.e. whether or not they are truly representative of our normal cognitive patterns).
- Comparing a human mind to a machine or computer is arguably an unsophisticated analogy.