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Rational Version of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory



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Definition

A modern version of Freudian psychoanalytic theory proposed by Walter Toman (1920–2003), an Austrian psychoanalyst.

Introduction

Freud's theory was the first major modern theory of personality. Many later theories were developed by modifying some aspect of Freud's theory or by rejecting one feature and proposing a new theory that set up a dialectic with Freud's theory. As such, Freud's theory is the seminal theory of personality.

However, there are flaws in the way that the theory was presented by Freud. He used the concept of energy, but Hebb (1949) argued forcefully that the concept of energy was unnecessary for understanding human behavior. There are problems in the translation of Freud's German writings, as pointed out by Bettelheim (1962), which result in misunderstandings of Freudian concepts.

For example, Freud did not use the terms, *ego*, *id*, and *superego*. He used the German words for *me*, *over-me*, and *it*.

A modern version of Freudian theory has been proposed by Walter Toman (1920–2003), an Austrian psychoanalyst, who purposely tried to make Freud's theory rational from a modern point of view. He redefined the terms in a way that did not change their essential meaning so much as change the implications of the terms. The following sections present Toman's (1960) version of psychoanalytic theory.

The Basic Assumptions

There are three basic assumptions in Freudian theory.

1. All behaviors are determined; specifically, all behaviors satisfy desires – *the principle of psychic determinism*.
2. Almost all behaviors (observable and internal) satisfy many desires.
3. Some of the desires motivating human behavior are unconscious.

The Id, Ego, and Superego

The basic elements of psychoanalytic theory are desires (or wishes). A more neutral term would be

psychological forces. Freud distinguished three *subsets of wishes*: the id, the ego, and the superego. This is an important statement. The id, ego, and superego are not objects or structures. They do not exist. They are labels, hypothetical constructs. Ideally, they should be used only as adjectives. This is an id wish. That is a superego wish.

Id wishes are those that you had as an infant and child and that often were punished and forbidden. Some of them, although not all, are unconscious. Superego desires are those taken over from important figures in our lives, mainly our parents, but also our siblings, relatives, friends, and heroes. We have introjected most of the desires others had for us. Ego desires are the desires of the mature and rational adult, and they are often compromises between the id desires and the superego desires.

Traditionally, psychoanalysts saw the id subset of wishes as present from birth, with the ego subset developing after a few months and the superego subset of desires after a year or two. However, for a baby, id desires and ego desires are the same. It is only from an adult perspective that we label certain of our desires as id desires because they are those we had as infants and children. Furthermore, the baby can do little or nothing without the parents deciding that it is permissible to do so. The baby wants food, and the parents decide that the baby ought to have food when they give the baby the bottle. Therefore, id/ego desires and external desires both get satisfied when the baby feeds. Toman argued that it makes sense to assume that the desires in all three subsets of desires (the id, ego, and superego subsets) begin to develop at birth, although perhaps not necessarily at the same rate.

Development

What are the essential features of psychological development? There are two components. First, we form derivative desires. For example, babies initially drink only mother's milk (or formula from a bottle); small children will accept several liquids; and adults will drink perhaps hundreds

of different liquids in the course of a year. All of these desires (for cola, tea, cocktails, spring water, etc.) derive from the first, single desire one had as a baby.

Forming derivative desires gives us control. If we desire only one or two liquids, then not to have either leads to great distress. Forming derivative desires enables us to deal with loss (temporary or permanent) of the object of a desire. In the example above, we now can choose from dozens of possible drinks. Forming derivative desires involves cathexis. Toman defined *cathexis* as the process of learning about an object or a desire, learning to like it and appreciate it, perhaps learning to love it. We become connoisseurs of what we cathect.

The second way in which we develop is that we gain control over the conditions under which our desires can be gratified. As hungry babies, all we could do was cry and hope that someone fed us. As children, we can open the refrigerator and get something to eat.

Anxiety

There are two sources of anxiety in Freudian theory. First, anxiety is aroused whenever desires are deprived. With some exceptions (such as extreme starvation), the greater the deprivation, the greater the anxiety. Since unconscious desires cannot be consciously gratified, unconscious desires result in anxiety. Second, we become anxious whenever an unconscious desire is stimulated and in danger of becoming conscious. We become anxious because we cannot tolerate the knowledge of this desire, knowledge in both an intellectual and an emotional sense.

This double source of anxiety is the essence of Freud's theory of personality, in essence a *system principle*. The basic motivation for human existence is to keep our anxiety level at a minimum. To do this, we have to satisfy our unconscious desires (to keep our anxiety level low) while remaining unconscious of the desires (to keep our anxiety level low).

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are common ways in which people solve this dilemma about anxiety. Each mechanism involves leaving the original desire unconscious, a process called repression, while substituting a different desire or different object. For example, in displacement and sublimation, we change the object of the desire. In reaction formation, the desire that becomes conscious is the opposite of the unconscious desire. Love becomes hate or hate becomes love. All defense mechanisms involve cathecting the new desire and avoiding situations that might stimulate the unconscious desire – mini-phobias.

Psychosexual Stages

In order to describe development at the abstract level, Freud made an obvious and unobjectionable proposition: the desires that are noteworthy to the psychologist, salient to the person, and interesting to the observer change with age. As is well known, the first three stages were labeled by Freud as oral, anal, and phallic.

Rate of Psychological Functioning

The hypotheses that (i) the mind has an optimal rate of functioning and (ii) that this optimal rate may be different for each of us has a long history (e.g., Berlyne 1960; Fiske and Maddi 1961). In psychoanalytic theory, the concept appears as the rate of cathexis. The *rate of cathexis* is the rate with which we learn about and learn to appreciate new objects and new desires, and this rate determines how quickly we form derivative desires. If our rate of cathexis is high, we will develop more derivative desires and develop them sooner. This in turn will facilitate coping with loss since such a person will have more substitute objects and desires with which to replace the lost ones. This person will be more psychologically resilient.

Although we each have a characteristic rate of cathexis throughout our life, transient fluctuations

occur from moment to moment, day to day. These transient fluctuations are caused by deprivation of our desires. The more generally deprived we are at any particular moment, the lower our current rate of cathexis.

Disturbed Behavior

Disturbed behavior can be described in various ways using psychoanalytic theory. For example, the strength of the id, ego, and superego subsets of desires can be used to describe various disorders. Those with depressive disorders may have too strong and extensive a superego subset of desires, and those who show criminal behavior without shame, guilt, or remorse (the so-called psychopath or person with an antisocial personality disorder) may have too weak and small a superego subset of desires.

The only causal explanation of disturbed behavior is that frustration and deprivation of desires has occurred in the first 6 years of life. This may be labeled trauma, but what makes the events traumatic is that objects of desires are lost or that the desires are forbidden satisfaction. Some deprivation of desires is inevitable. Children have to be weaned, toilet-trained, and socialized in many kinds of ways. But some children experience severe trauma.

There are two general rules for how severe the later disturbed behavior will be:

1. The earlier in life the trauma occurs, the more severe the later psychiatric disorder. Loss of a mother at age 2 is more traumatic than loss of her at the age of 5.
2. The more severe the loss involved, the more severe the later psychiatric disorder. Loss of a mother at age 2 is probably more traumatic than loss of a sibling, at least in the traditional family.

All intrapsychic theories of personality agree that early trauma is the major causal factor in the development of disturbed behavior. The theories differ, however, in the kind of trauma on which they focus.

Comment

Toman made several important changes to Freudian theory. He redefined the concepts of id, ego, and superego as subsets of desires. He also eliminated the concept of energy from the theory. He redefined cathexis as the rate of learning (or information processing), and he made resolution of the inevitable anxiety as the core process of the theory.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Freud, Sigmund](#)
- ▶ [Freud's Theory of Humor](#)
- ▶ [Freudian Catharsis](#)

- ▶ [Freudian Dream Interpretation](#)
- ▶ [Freudian Slip](#)
- ▶ [Neo-Freudians](#)
- ▶ [Psychosexual Stages of Development](#)

References

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