

Psychoanalytic Theory

by Sigmund Freud

Written by Ayuushi Barsaley

With guidance and support from Ms. Tarushi Kaur

Summary

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory explores the hidden layers of the human mind, where unconscious desires, fears, and memories shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. He proposed that personality is structured around the id, ego, and superego, which balance instinct, morality, and reason. Techniques such as dream interpretation, Freudian slips, and free association reveal the unconscious mind, while defense mechanisms like repression, denial, and projection protect us from emotional distress. By reflecting on our actions, emotions, and conflicts, we can better understand ourselves. Freud's work emphasizes that self-awareness and introspection are key to achieving balance, growth, and emotional insight.

Introduction

The human mind carries many mysteries, bundled together with layers of complexities. Sigmund Freud, the father of Psychoanalysis, tried to decode some of these mysteries through his extensive work in the field. Psychoanalytic theory proposes that our personality is shaped by our childhood experiences, unconscious desires, and sexual desires. It consists of three interacting parts: the id, ego, and the superego, which we will explore further. Now, before diving into what unconscious desires are, Freud stated that the human mind comprises three layers of consciousness:

1. **Conscious** - The awareness; our subjective experiences of being physically and mentally present about our feelings, emotions, and moods.
2. **Pre-conscious** - locus preceding consciousness; when thoughts are currently unconscious but can be retrieved easily into consciousness.
3. **Unconscious** - Inability to remain conscious; The unconscious mind is like a hidden storehouse in our brain. Some desires exist that we are not aware of. The unconscious of the human mind is like an ice-berg; Humans only ever get to acknowledge a tiny portion of it, while the rest of it remains submerged in the depths of our mind. We often manifest behaviour without knowing the true meaning behind it.

These hidden thoughts and emotions — the fears, frustrations, and desires we suppress — form what Freud called the unconscious mind. Freud sought the answers to these unconscious desires through the interpretation of sexual urges and pleasure-seeking dreams.

Interpreting Dreams

If a young boy wishes to pursue a career in fine arts, but his father insists that he study engineering instead, it creates an internal conflict between his desires and his father's expectations. One night, the boy dreams that his father is driving a car while he sits beside him. Suddenly, they get into an accident.

In Freudian analysis, this dream could symbolize that the father has control over the “steering wheel”, representing the boy's direction in life and career choices. The accident, then, may reflect the boy's subconscious fear that letting his father take charge of his future will lead to an unhappy or destructive outcome.

Freud believed that dreams often disguise deeper emotions and hidden conflicts. What appears to be a simple dream may, in fact, reveal the mind's way of expressing unresolved struggles and truths that the person is not consciously aware of.

Methods to Uncover Hidden Desires

1. Freudian Slips

These are unintentional errors that reveal unconscious and subconscious desires. It's when you want to say something but end up saying something else. A slip of the tongue or verbal slips is used in our daily lives.

For example, accidentally calling a teacher “mom” or “dad,” or saying “goodnight” instead of “goodbye,” are small slips that might hint at what's on our mind without us realizing it.

2. Free Association

This technique allows people to reveal whatever comes to their mind, without any criticism or self-doubt. This helps them unveil their unconscious thoughts and desires. The method often creates a continuous chain of ideas—what begins with a simple topic, such as talking about *a childhood toy*, might unexpectedly shift into memories of family dynamics or hidden fears.

In daily life, free association can also be seen when someone day-dreams—a casual thought about *planning a vacation* may lead to reflections on freedom, relationships, or even long-term goals.

This process even strengthens the brain by connecting neurons and forming elongated pathways that enhance thought flow and creativity.

Structures Of Personality

According to Sigmund Freud, human personality is not a single, unified entity but rather a complex structure made up of interacting parts. He believed that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are shaped by internal psychological forces that often conflict with each other. To explain how these forces work together, Freud divided the personality into three main structures — the id, ego, and superego. Each plays a unique role in influencing our actions and decision-making, balancing our basic desires, moral values, and sense of reality.

ID

- **Nature:** Like a child; thrives on pleasure and immediate needs.
- **Driving Force:** Operates on the *pleasure principle*—wants instant gratification.
- **Characteristics:** Reckless, impulsive, risk-taking, ruled by instincts and energy.
- **Morality:** Lacks morals; doesn't consider right or wrong.
- **Desires:** Includes strong sexual urges and aggressive feelings.

SUPEREGO

- **Nature:** Like an elderly person; practical, wise, and self-critical.
- **Driving Force:** Operates on *morality*—decides right from wrong.
- **Characteristics:** Moralistic, disciplined, strict, and values-oriented.
- **Morality:** Strong sense of ethics; no “grey areas.”

EGO

- **Nature:** Like an adult; rational and balanced.
- **Driving Force:** Operates on the *reality principle*—considers what is practical and safe.
- **Characteristics:** Logical, problem-solving, mediates between the Id and the Superego.
- **Morality:** Not extreme—tries to satisfy desires without breaking rules.
- **Role:** Balances the Id's impulses and the Superego's morals in realistic ways.

Example (Kid and Ice Cream):

It's a hot summer afternoon, and a child is walking home after playing outside. On the way, they see another kid happily eating an ice cream cone. The sight immediately catches their attention. The ice cream looks cold, creamy, and delicious. The child starts craving it, but realizes they don't have any money and their parents have told them not to eat sweets before dinner.

ID

The Id-driven reaction is immediate and impulsive:

- The child wants the ice cream right away.
- They may try to snatch it without asking.
- No thought is given to fairness, rules, or the other child's feelings.
- The only focus is on satisfying the craving instantly.

SUPEREGO

The Superego-driven reaction would be:

- *"It's not right to take what isn't mine."*
- The child may remind themselves that snatching is bad behaviour.
- They might even feel guilty for *wanting* to take it.
- Instead of grabbing, they wait for permission or decide not to have it.

EGO

The Ego-driven reaction would be:

- *"I want that ice cream, but I can't just snatch it."*
- The child might ask their parents politely to buy one.
- If not possible immediately, they may wait until later when it's affordable or available.

This way, the desire is fulfilled, but realistically and without guilt.

Id = impulsive child (wants now!)

Superego = strict elderly person (morals and rules first)

Ego = adult mediator (realistic balance)

Ego as Personality (Freud's Structural Model)	Ego as "I" (Everyday/Philosophical Use)
1. Part of Freud's model of personality (Id–Ego–Superego)	1. The sense of <i>self</i> or "I", our self-image, identity, or consciousness of being an individual
2. A rational mediator that balances desires (Id) and morals (Superego)	2. It's how we perceive ourselves, our pride, and our self-importance.
3. How the mind functions to manage instincts, morals, and reality.	3. How a person views themselves in relation to others
4. Example: Wanting a new phone but saving up for it instead of stealing	4. Example: " <i>My ego was hurt</i> " means your self-esteem or pride was affected.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies our mind uses to protect us from anxiety, stress, or uncomfortable thoughts. They help us cope with difficult emotions by either distorting reality or pushing painful feelings away. Most of the time, we don't even realize we are using them, for example, blaming others for our mistakes, denying a problem, or forgetting a painful memory. While they can reduce stress in the moment, overusing them may stop us from healthily dealing with issues.

Repression

Repression is a defense mechanism in which unwanted thoughts, memories, or desires are pushed deep into the unconscious mind. These are kept hidden because, if brought to awareness, they can cause emotional distress. Often, such repressed material is linked to socially

unacceptable desires, especially sexual or aggressive impulses, which cannot be expressed openly.

Through repression, the mind either:

- **Expresses desires in a socially acceptable way, or**
- **Prevents them from surfacing altogether.**

For example, a person who experienced a traumatic event in childhood may have no conscious memory of it, yet the feelings may resurface in dreams, slips of the tongue, or unexplained anxiety.

Denial

Denial is a defense mechanism where a person refuses to accept reality to protect themselves from emotional pain or anxiety.

Example:

A said bad things about C, which B didn't like. When B confronted A, instead of admitting it, A denied ever saying such things. By refusing to take accountability, A avoided the anxiety and discomfort of confrontation.

Projection

Projection is a defense mechanism where a person unconsciously attributes their own thoughts, feelings, or insecurities to someone else.

Example:

A person is asked, "*Why don't you like that perfectly fine person?*" They respond, "*Because they don't like me, so I don't like them.*" In reality, it is their own dislike or insecurity being projected onto the other person, even though there may be no evidence that the other person feels that way.

Self-Reflection

Freud's psychoanalytic theory reminds us that much of who we are lies beneath the surface. The unconscious shapes dreams, slips of the tongue, and everyday choices. But we are not powerless—we can **reflect**.

Take time to **dig deep**:

- Notice your moods—*what triggers them?*
- Observe your actions—*when, where, and how do they repeat?*
- Question yourself—*what might this mean beyond the surface?*

Be open to the fact that dark or uncomfortable thoughts might arise. That's normal. Recognizing them is the first step toward growth. With reflection, balance, and honesty, we can learn to make peace between our Id's desires, our Superego's rules, and our Ego's reality.

Self-reflection is not always easy, but it is the bridge between what is hidden and what is understood. In exploring your inner world, you may discover not just conflict—but also clarity, healing, and acceptance.

