

Psychosexual Development: Freudian Concept

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Introduction

The theory of psychosexual development, also known as theory of libidinal development, is one of the earliest theories explaining how personality develops in human beings. This theory owes its credence to the findings of Sigmund Freud's clinical research with emotionally disturbed people. The theory of psychosexual development, however, is an integral part of the psychodynamic personality theory proposed by Freud. Freud is often considered the first psychological theorist to have emphasized the developmental aspects of personality and the decisive role of the early experiences during infancy and childhood in laying down the basic character structure of an adult person.

According to Freud, the individual passes through a series of dynamically differentiated developmental stages during the life span, which are characterized by distinct modes of functioning. The theory proposes that mishaps during different stages, especially during the early childhood, play an important role in the etiology of psychological problems including mental disorders. Based on his early research with emotionally disturbed persons, Freud found that the symptoms of mental problems during adulthood are related to frustrations of the erotic instinct. Such frustrations

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often occur as early as the first year of life and continue through the entire childhood stage. Freud was thus led to believe that children showed manifestations of sexual urges and that any theory of personality must take infantile sexuality into account.

Concept of Sexuality

According to Freud, sex is the most important life instinct in an individual. According to him sex instinct is centered around a number of bodily needs that give rise to erotic wishes. Each of these wishes has its source in a different bodily region referred to as erogenous zones. An erogenous zone is a part of the skin or mucous membrane that is extremely sensitive to irritation and which when manipulated in a certain way removes the irritation and produces pleasurable feelings and experiences. The lips and mouth, anal region, and the sex organs are examples of erogenous zones. Thus, sucking produces oral pleasure, elimination anal pleasure, and rubbing genital pleasure. In brief, Freud regarded the sexual instinct as a psychophysiological process, which has both mental and physical manifestations. He used the term libido to refer to the force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind.

In essence Freud used the term sexuality to refer to the erotic life of the individual. According to him, sexuality is not a matter for adults alone but also infantile. It is all-pervasive and covers all those activities and sensations that are pleasurable and afford sensual gratification. Freud noted that infants were capable of erotic activity from birth onward. The earliest manifestations of infantile sexuality arise in relation to bodily functions such as feeding and elimination of body wastes. Of all the concepts of Freud, the concepts he advanced with regard to the

erotic life of infants and young children aroused severe criticism from different corners.

Psychosexual Developmental Stages

Personality development takes place through constant activation of the life instinct. Sex being the most important life instinct in an individual, engagement in different erotic activities is a must to activate the life instinct. Sex is a biological instinct, which needs to be gratified. When present it creates tension and when met with, it leads to satisfaction. The earliest manifestations of sexuality arise in relation to bodily functions, which are basically nonsexual, such as feeding and elimination of body wastes. Each individual passes through a series of stages during the first five years of life, following which for a period of five or six years the dynamics become more or less stabilized. With the advent of adolescence, the dynamics erupt again and then gradually settle down as an adolescent moves into the stage of adulthood. For Freud, the first five years of life are decisive for the formation of personality.

Each stage of psychosexual development is defined in terms of the mode of reaction of a particular zone of the body. During the first 18 months of life of a new born baby, the mouth works as the principal region of dynamic activity. Hence this stage is called *oral stage*. The oral stage is followed by deriving pleasure around the eliminative functions, it is therefore, called the *anal stage*. This lasts for another 18 months and is succeeded by the *phallic stage* in which the sex organs become the leading erogenous zones. During these stages, the mucous membrane of the mouth, anus and external genitalia become the focus of child's erotic life depending on the stage of development. At

the close of the fifth year, the child goes into *latency period*, where the sexual urges are held in a state of repression. With the onset of adolescence the pregenital impulses are reactivated and the person passes into the *genital stage* of development. Let us learn in detail about these stages.

Oral Stage

This stage lasts up to eighteen months from the birth of a child. The principal source of pleasure derived by the child during this stage is that of sucking. Sucking involves both tactual stimulation of mouth as well as swallowing. Later when the teeth erupt the mouth is used by the child for biting and chewing. Since the child is primarily concerned about seeking pleasure, she needs immediate gratification of the needs. The need of the infant in seeking pleasure is adequately met with by sucking the breast of the mother as the erotic drive is localized in the mouth. Since gratification of needs at this stage depends on mother, she becomes the first love object for the child. Feeding at the mother's breast is the most important activity, both physiologically and psychologically for the young child. For this reason, psychoanalysis refers to the period from birth to about eight months as the oral sucking period. With the development of teeth, the child enters a new stage of her development called oral biting stage. During the oral biting stage, the mode of deriving pleasure become modified. Its sources are biting as well as sucking and swallowing. It is held that the two modes of oral activity i.e. sucking and swallowing and biting/chewing are the prototypes for many later personality traits that develop.

Anal Stage

This stage starts when the child is around one and a half years old and ends when she is three years of age. During the initial part of anal stage there is pleasurable sensation of excretion and later there is erotic stimulation of the anal mucosa through retention of feces. This stage is divided into two sub stages i.e. the **anal expulsive period** and the **anal retention period**. The anal expulsive phase overlaps with the closing stages of oral period. Here the mode of deriving pleasure for the child is the expulsion of feces. The expulsion of the feces removes discomfort and produces a feeling of relief. When toilet training is initiated, the child has her first experience with the external regulation of an instinctual impulse. The child has to learn to postpone the pleasure that comes from relieving anal tensions. During the anal retention period, the child is expected to accede to the demands of toilet training. The child has to learn to derive pleasure from retention than expulsion. Depending upon the particular method of toilet training used by the mother and her feelings concerning defecation, the consequences of toilet training have far reaching effects upon the formation of specific personality traits and values.

Phallic Stage

This stage begins when the child becomes three years old and continues until the child is five years. During this stage rudiments of sex can be seen in the child. Child plays with its genitals and relieves tension and derives pleasure. Erotic activity is initially linked both psychologically and physically with the activities and sensations associated with urination. Urination is an important activity as it helps the child to consolidate its gender identity. A boy understands that he is a

boy; similarly a girl understands that she is a girl initially from the process of urination.

During the phallic stage development sexual feelings associated with the functioning of genital organs come into focus. The pleasures of playing with the genitals and the fantasy life of the child set the stage for the appearance of Oedipus and Electra complexes in boys and girls, respectively. The Oedipus complex is named after the Greek king of Thebes who killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus complex consists of a sexual attachment for the parent of the opposite sex and a hostile feeling for the parent of the same sex. The boy wants to possess his mother and remove his father. According to Electra complex girl wants to possess her father and displace the mother. These feelings express themselves in the child's fantasies during the act of masturbation. The emergence of the Oedipus and Electra complexes are considered to be the chief events of the phallic stage.

In Oedipus complex a boy has incestuous craving for the mother and a growing resentment toward the father. He imagines that his father is going to harm him. Threats from a resentful and punitive father may confirm this fear. His fears concerning what the father may do to him is centered on his genital organs as it is the source of his attachment to the mother. He fears that the father will remove it. This fear of castration helps a child to resolve his Oedipus complex, as he does not want to lose his genitals. Castration anxiety induces a repression of the sexual desire for the mother and hostility toward the father. It also helps to bring about identification with his father. By identifying with his father the male child converts his erotic feelings for the mother into harmless affection for the mother. Oedipus complex seems to represent the climax of the development of infantile sexuality.

In Electra complex, a girl child exchanges her love object, the mother, for a new object, the father. This takes place in a girl when she discovers that she is less equipped than a boy, as she does not possess a protruding sex organ, the penis. She holds her mother responsible for this and starts hating her for having brought her into the world less equipped than a boy. She transfers her love to the father because he has the valued organ, which she aspires to share with him. However her love for the father is mixed with a feeling of envy because he possesses what she lacks. Penis envy is the counterpart of castration anxiety in boys. A girl resolves her incestuous attachment for her father by recognizing the realistic barriers that prevent her from gratifying her sexual desire for the father. According to Freud, the differences in resolution of Oedipus and Electra complexes are the basis for many psychological differences between the sexes.

Latency Stage

According to Freud, at the close of fifth year infantile sexuality is gradually repressed both because of the fear of the social consequences and because of the realization that the love object is unattainable. During the period of about 5 or 6 years the child is not consciously concerned with sexual matters. As the literal meaning of the word 'latency' suggests, sexual urges are hidden during this stage. Child's active interest turns increasingly outward. During this period, the sexual urges are diverted into recreational, academic and social pursuits. The child learns to behave in society and acquires her ideals. Eroticism is overtly manifested in the form of attachment to parents and friends. Interest in the opposite sex is at the lowest ebb. The child spends all her energy to excel and prove herself. Child's energy is diverted

towards developing a *sense of competence*. During this stage of development a child's sexual urges are subordinated to the intellectual pursuits. Psychoanalysis has very little to say about personality development following the phallic stage. It, however, does analyze the genital stage of development.

Genital Stage

This stage begins with the onset of adolescence. During genital stage sexual feelings reappear with new intensity and in more mature form. As a result self-love of the child gets channelized into genuine heterosexual relationships. Sexual attraction, socialization, group activities, vocational planning and preparations for marrying and raising a family begin to manifest. By the end of adolescence these concerns become fairly well established. The person becomes transformed from a pleasure seeking, self-loving infant into a reality oriented, socialized adult. The principal biological function of the genital stage is that of reproduction.

Fixation

Fixation can be defined as the persistent attachment of the sexual instinct to a particular phase of pregenital development. It can happen in any of the psychosexual developmental stages except the last one. In the course of development, it is expected that the child makes natural transition from one stage to the next at the end of a particular stage. Child's ability to forgo her attachment for the love object during a particular developmental stage for another promised but not guaranteed love object is a necessary condition for development of a healthy personality. Freud concluded that fixation adversely affects personality development. It may be noted that the behavioural manifestations

of fixation vary according to the stage of psychosexual development in which fixation takes place. For example, a child's inability to forgo mother as a love object during the oral stage leads to development of such behavioural manifestations like thumb sucking, alcoholism, smoking etc. These behavioural patterns help the individual to continue the erotic attachment with the love object of oral stage whereby he continues to derive pleasure from stimulation of the erogenous zone of lips and mouth. Similarly fixation can happen during anal, phallic and latency stages as well.

Significance of Psychosexual Stages for the Development of Personality

Many of our personality traits and behaviour patterns are rooted in the stages of psychosexual development. Psychoanalysis considers adult behaviour as the product of the infantile psychosexual stages. According to Freud, individuals subsume sex energy into their behaviour through the psychological processes of displacement, sublimation, and reaction formation. For example the sexual fantasies of an adult are looked on as a continuation of phallic genitality. Similarly overcleanliness or overemphasis on order and punctuality is considered as reaction formation against the anal stage of infantile psychosexuality. The process of psychosexual genesis is one of dialectical growth. It can lead to development of normal or abnormal behaviour depending upon the experiences of the individual during different psychosexual developmental stages.

Personality Traits Developed During Oral Stage

Oral stage activities of sucking and swallowing are the prototypes for many character traits that develop during subsequent years in one's life. Pleasure derived

from oral incorporation may be displaced to other modes of incorporation such as the pleasure gained from acquiring knowledge or possessions. Biting or oral aggression may be displaced in the form of sarcasm and argumentativeness. By displacements and sublimations of various kinds, as well as by defenses against the primitive oral impulses, these prototypic modes of oral functioning provide the basis for the development of vast networks of interests, attitudes and character traits.

Since the oral stage occurs at a time when the infant is completely dependent on mother for sustenance the feelings of dependency arise during this period. If she succeeds in fulfilling the needs of the child at this point, dependency leads to acquiring the virtue of hope. Feeling of hope is characterized by the belief that the needs will be taken care of properly by its mother. This belief helps the child to enter into a trusting, warm relationship with its mother, which ultimately leads to optimism in life. A nurturing and warm bond between mother and the child during this period sets the stage for trusting and affectionate relationship with others in later life. Rejection by mother or undue frustration experienced by the child resulting from non-fulfillment of his needs can lead to pessimism and mistrust in later life. It is in the oral phase that a child's attachment to crucial people in his environment and his feelings of love or hate toward these people develop. If a fundamentally warm relationship between mother and child has been established during this period, the stage will be set for the development of trusting and affectionate ties with others in later life.

If optimism is typical of individuals strongly fixated in the oral sucking period, pessimism is the trait of

individuals who have never properly resolved the frustrations of the oral biting stage. In extreme cases this pessimism may go completely out of normal bounds and become psychological depression. Thus even within the first year some of the important characteristics of personality are established.

Personality Traits Developed During Anal Stage

According to psychoanalysis, ego development is complete during the anal stage. As a result sense of reality overbears pleasure seeking in the child. Maternal care in combination with the conflicts surrounding toilet training alters the direction of pleasure seeking for the child. Compulsive neatness seen in some individuals is often seen as a form of regression to the anal stage. Depending upon the particular method of toilet training used by the mother and her feelings concerning defecation, the consequences of this training may have far reaching effects upon the formation of specific personality traits. If the mother is very strict and repressive in her methods of child rearing, the child may hold back its feces and become constipated. If this mode of reaction generalizes to other ways of behaving, the child will develop a retentive character. It will become obstinate and stingy in its character. Instead, if the child vents its rage by expelling feces at the most inappropriate times, expulsive traits like cruelty, destructiveness, temper tantrums, disorderliness etc. are developed. Thus the basis for a large number of behaviour traits is laid down during the anal stage.

Toilet training is an important activity as it leads to development of values and traits in an individual. The child learns to bring the erotic gratification resulting from defecation to social control. Normal continuations of the anal expulsive period include an interest in the

bowels, bowel habits, and daily bowel movements. Some people are so concerned with the bowels that this interest becomes central to their individual personalities. Failure at the resolution of anal conflicts leads to constellation of character traits, which are called *anal character*. Anal character is characterized by traits like excessive devotion to details, and unevenness of character leading to easy anger outbursts.

Personality Traits Developed During Phallic Stage

The behaviour of the child during phallic stage is marked to a great extent by the operation of the Oedipus complex. Although it is modified after the age of five, it remains a vital force in the personality throughout life. Attitudes toward the opposite sex and toward people in authority are largely conditioned by the Oedipus complex. Repression of Oedipus complex causes the superego to undergo its final development. According to Freud, the differences in the resolution of Oedipus and Electra complexes are the bases for differences in male and female personalities in later life. Freud considered females to be weak, dependent and inferior basically because of the development of penis envy and the associated psychodynamics. This view is criticized worldwide, and the criticism was led by Karen Horney, another influential psychoanalyst.

Of all the psychosexual developmental stages, phallic stage is the most eventful one. Developments in this stage influence the personality markedly. The transition from Oedipal strivings to adult sexuality is a prerequisite of normal development. Failure to resolve Oedipus complex is seen as the nucleus of adult neurosis. According to Freud, neuroses are characterized by an unconscious clinging to the Oedipal tendencies. How the child emerges from the Oedipus

situation exerts a profound influence on the development of character and personality.

Personality Traits Developed During Latency and Genital Stages

Freud was much preoccupied with the forms of infantile sexuality and its influence on the psychological development of a person. As a result Freud has not written much on how the courses of development during these two stages relate to personality. Psychoanalysis has not given much emphasis on these two stages in comparison to the first three stages of development.

Developments in latency stage help the child to acquire a *sense of competency and industry*. Competency feelings and industriousness develop as a result of the benefits reaped by the child from diverting its urges to various nonsexual activities like recreational, academic and social pursuits. With the diversion of a child's active interest to these activities, it gets an opportunity to excel, prove herself and be creative.

Genital stage, which begins roughly with the onset of adolescence, is a period when group activities, vocational planning and preparations for family life take prominence. By the end of adolescence, these socialized, altruistic feelings become fairly well established. The person becomes transformed from a pleasure seeking, narcissistic infant into a reality oriented, socialized adult.

Conclusion

The theory of psychosexual development proposed by Sigmund Freud is one of the most prominent psychoanalytic theories of personality. This theory looks

at psychological development of individuals over five different stages. In this unit we have tried to understand the different psychosexual stages of development and how these stages influence the course of personality development. We have also learned about the concepts of sexuality and fixation.

As we have learned in this unit, the individual passes through a series of dynamically differentiated stages during the life span, which play a decisive role in the formation of personality. These stages are called oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital stages. During each of these stages the individual engages in a variety of erotic activities that stimulate and satisfy life instinct. We have seen in detail the erogenous zones in each stage of development and the nature of erotic activity engaged by the child in the different stages.

While discussing the significance of these stages for the development of personality we have noted that individuals subsume sex energy into their behaviour through the psychological processes of continuation, displacement, sublimation and reaction formation. We have also seen that the process of psychosexual genesis is one that involves dialectical growth. It can lead to development of normal or abnormal pattern of behaviour depending upon the experiences the individual had during the different psychosexual developmental stages. As explained with the help of examples, development of abnormal behaviour is considered to be shaped by the nature of mishap that happens during a given developmental stage.

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