

## 6. PERSONALITY III

### 6.1 The Structural Model of Personality: According to Sigmund

Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, personality is composed of three elements. These three elements of personality--known as the id, the ego and the superego--work together to create complex human behaviors.

#### **The Id**

The id is the only component of personality that is present from birth. This aspect of personality is entirely unconscious and includes of the instinctive and primitive behaviors. According to Freud, the id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality.

The id is driven by the pleasure principle, which strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs. If these needs are not satisfied immediately, the result is a state anxiety or tension. For example, an increase in hunger or thirst should produce an immediate attempt to eat or drink. The id is very important early in life, because it ensures that an infant's needs are met. If the infant is hungry or uncomfortable, he or she will cry until the demands of the id are met.

However, immediately satisfying these needs is not always realistic or even possible. If we were ruled entirely by the pleasure principle, we might find ourselves grabbing things we want out of other people's hands to satisfy our own cravings. This sort of behavior would be both disruptive and socially unacceptable. According to Freud, the id tries to resolve the tension created by the pleasure principle through the primary process, which involves forming a mental image of the desired object as a way of satisfying the need.

#### **The Ego**

The ego is the component of personality that is responsible for dealing with reality. According to Freud, the ego develops from the id and ensures that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world. The ego functions in both the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind.

The ego operates based on the reality principle, which strives to satisfy the id's desires in realistic and socially appropriate ways. The reality principle weighs the costs and benefits of an action before deciding to act upon or abandon impulses. In many cases, the id's impulses can be satisfied through a process of delayed gratification--the ego will eventually allow the behavior, but only in the appropriate time and place.

The ego also discharges tension created by unmet impulses through the secondary process, in which the ego tries to find an object in the real world that matches the mental image created by the id's primary process.

### **The Superego**

The last component of personality to develop is the superego. The superego is the aspect of personality that holds all of our internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire from both parents and society--our sense of right and wrong. The superego provides guidelines for making judgments. According to Freud, the superego begins to emerge at around age five.

There are two parts of the superego:

1. The ego ideal includes the rules and standards for good behaviors. These behaviors include those which are approved of by parental and other authority figures. Obeying these rules leads to feelings of pride, value and accomplishment.
2. The conscience includes information about things that are viewed as bad by parents and society. These behaviors are often forbidden and lead to bad consequences, punishments or feelings of guilt and remorse.

The superego acts to perfect and civilize our behavior. It works to suppress all unacceptable urges of the id and struggles to make the ego act upon idealistic standards rather than upon realistic principles. The superego is present in the conscious, preconscious and unconscious.

### **The Interaction of the Id, Ego and Superego**

With so many competing forces, it is easy to see how conflict might arise between the id, ego and superego. Freud used the term ego strength to refer to the ego's ability to function despite these dueling forces. A person with good ego strength is able to effectively manage these pressures, while those with too much or too little ego strength can become too unyielding or too disrupting.

According to Freud, the key to a healthy personality is a balance between the id, the ego, and the superego.

**6.2 DEFENSE MECHANISMS:** Most notably used by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic theory, a defense mechanism is a tactic developed by the ego to protect against anxiety. Defense mechanisms are thought to safeguard the mind against feelings and thoughts that are too difficult for the conscious mind to cope with. In some instances, defense mechanisms are thought to keep inappropriate or unwanted thoughts and impulses from entering the conscious mind.

For example, if you are faced with a particularly unpleasant task, your mind may choose to forget your responsibility in order to avoid the dreaded assignment. In addition to forgetting, other defense mechanisms include rationalization, denial, repression, projection, rejection and reaction formation.

Because of anxiety provoking demands created by the id, superego, and reality, the ego has developed a number of defense mechanisms to cope with anxiety. Although we may knowingly use these mechanisms, in many cases these defenses work unconsciously to distort reality.

Researchers have described a wide variety of different defense mechanisms. Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud described ten different defense mechanisms used by the ego.

**Denial** is probably one of the best known defense mechanisms, used often to describe situations in which people seem unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth (i.e. "He's in denial."). Denial is an outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. Drug addicts or alcoholics often deny that they have a problem, while victims of traumatic events may deny that the event ever occurred.

Denial functions to protect the ego from things that the individual cannot cope with. While this may save us from anxiety or pain, denial also requires a substantial investment of energy. Because of this, other defenses are also used to keep these unacceptable feelings from consciousness.

In many cases, there might be overwhelming evidence that something is true, yet the person will continue to deny its existence or truth because it is too uncomfortable to face.

Denial can involve a flat out rejection of the existence of a fact or reality. In other cases, it might involve admitting that something is true, but minimizing its importance. Sometimes people will accept reality and the seriousness of the fact, but they will deny their own responsibility and instead blame other people or other outside forces.

Addiction is one of the best-known examples of denial. People who are suffering from a substance abuse problem will often flat-out deny that their behavior is problematic. In other cases, they might admit that they do use drugs or alcohol, but will claim that this substance abuse is not a problem.

**Repression** is another well-known defense mechanism. Repression acts to keep information out of conscious awareness. However, these memories don't just disappear; they continue to influence our behavior. For example, a person who has repressed memories of abuse suffered as a child may later have difficulty forming relationships.

Sometimes we do this consciously by forcing the unwanted information out of our awareness, which is known as **suppression**. In most cases, however, this removal of anxiety-provoking memories from our awareness is believed to occur unconsciously.

**Displacement** Have ever had a really bad day at work and then gone home and taken out your frustration on family and friends? Then you have experienced the ego defense mechanism of displacement. Displacement involves taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening. Displaced aggression is a common example of this defense mechanism. Rather than express our anger in ways that could lead to negative consequences (like arguing with our boss), we instead express our anger towards a person or object that poses no threat (such as our spouse, children, or pets).

**Sublimation** is a defense mechanism that allows us to act out unacceptable impulses by converting these behaviors into a more acceptable form. For example, a person experiencing extreme anger might take up kick-boxing as a means of venting frustration. Freud believed that sublimation was a sign of maturity that allows people to function normally in socially acceptable ways.

**Projection** is a defense mechanism that involves taking our own unacceptable qualities or feelings and ascribing them to other people. For example, if you have a

strong dislike for someone, you might instead believe that he or she does not like you. Projection works by allowing the expression of the desire or impulse, but in a way that the ego cannot recognize, therefore reducing anxiety.

**Intellectualization** works to reduce anxiety by thinking about events in a cold, clinical way. This defense mechanism allows us to avoid thinking about the stressful, emotional aspect of the situation and instead focus only on the intellectual component. For example, a person who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness might focus on learning everything about the disease in order to avoid distress and remain distant from the reality of the situation.

**Rationalization** is a defense mechanism that involves explaining an unacceptable behavior or feeling in a rational or logical manner, avoiding the true reasons for the behavior. For example, a person who is turned down for a date might rationalize the situation by saying they were not attracted to the other person anyway, or a student might blame a poor exam score on the instructor rather than his or her lack of preparation.

Rationalization not only prevents anxiety, it may also protect self-esteem and self-concept. When confronted by success or failure, people tend to attribute achievement to their own qualities and skills while failures are blamed on other people or outside forces.

**Regression** When confronted by stressful events, people sometimes abandon coping strategies and revert to patterns of behavior used earlier in development. Anna Freud called this defense mechanism **regression**, suggesting that people act out behaviors from the stage of psychosexual development in which they are fixated. For example, an individual fixated at an earlier developmental stage might cry or sulk upon hearing unpleasant news.

Behaviors associated with regression can vary greatly depending upon which stage the person is fixated at:

- An individual fixated at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively, or might become very verbally aggressive.
- A fixation at the anal stage might result in excessive tidiness or messiness.

**Reaction formation** reduces anxiety by taking up the opposite feeling, impulse or behavior. An example of reaction formation would be treating someone you

strongly dislike in an excessively friendly manner in order to hide your true feelings. Why do people behave this way? According to Freud, they are using reaction formation as a defense mechanism to hide their true feelings by behaving in the exact opposite manner.

While all defense mechanisms can be unhealthy, they can also be adaptive and allow us to function normally. The greatest problems arise when defense mechanisms are overused in order to avoid dealing with problems.

In psychoanalytic therapy, the goal may be to help the client uncover these unconscious defense mechanisms and find better, more healthy ways of coping with anxiety and distress.

You've probably heard people talk about "defense mechanisms," or ways that we protect ourselves from things that we don't want to think about or deal with. The term got its start in psychoanalytic therapy, but it has slowly worked its way into everyday language. Think of the last time you referred to someone as being "in denial" or accused someone of "rationalizing." Both of these examples refer to a type of defense mechanism.

In Sigmund Freud's topographical model of personality, the ego is the aspect of personality that deals with reality. While doing this, the ego also has to cope with the conflicting demands of the id and the superego. The id seeks to fulfill all wants, needs, and impulses while the superego tries to get the ego to act in an idealistic and moral manner.

What happens when the ego cannot deal with the demands of our desires, the constraints of reality, and our own moral standards? According to Freud, **anxiety** is an unpleasant inner state that people seek to avoid. Anxiety acts as a signal to the ego that things are not going right. As a result, the ego then employs a defense mechanism to help reduce these feelings of anxiety.

### **Freud identified three types of anxiety:**

1. **Neurotic anxiety** is the unconscious worry that we will lose control of the id's urges, resulting in punishment for inappropriate behavior.

2. **Reality anxiety** is fear of real-world events. The cause of this anxiety is usually easily identified. For example, a person might fear receiving a dog bite when they are near a menacing dog. The most common way of reducing this anxiety is to avoid the threatening object.
3. **Moral anxiety** involves a fear of violating our own moral principles.

In order to deal with this anxiety, Freud believed that defense mechanisms helped shield the ego from the conflicts created by the id, superego, and reality.