

The Formation and Structure of the Human Psyche

Id, Ego, and Super-Ego - The Dynamic (Libidinal) and Static Unconsciousness, Sublimation, and the Social Dimension of Identity Formation

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As humans our behavior, our thoughts and actions, are the product of our psyche. In order to have an understanding of why we behave as we do, it is necessary to identify the formation and structure of the human psyche. Sigmund Freud's work in the field of psychoanalysis was ground breaking because it answered questions about the human psyche in a way that no one else had before him. This paper will explore Freud's conception of the formation and structure of the human psyche. It will discuss the shift from a static to a dynamic (libidinal) conception of unconsciousness, sublimation and its fundamental role not only in an individual's psychological development but also in psychological development from a cultural perspective, and finally it will explore the social dimension of identity formation. Explication of these concepts will clarify the role of the human psyche in governing human behavior on both an individual and societal level.

Freud analyzes the human psyche in terms of three elements, which he calls, the Id, Ego, and Super-Ego. In order to obtain an understanding as to why humans behave as they do, it is necessary to examine all three.

The Id is the unorganized part of the psyche that contains a human's instinctual drives. The Id is the only part of the psyche that is present at birth and it is the source of our bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses; particularly our sexual and aggressive drives. The Id is an entirely unconscious aspect of the psyche and, according to Freud, is the "source of all psychic energy"; thus making it the primary component of personality. Freud claimed that the Id acts according to the pleasure principle and that the Id contains the libido, which is the primary source of instinctual force that is unresponsive to the demands of reality.¹

The pleasure principle drives the Id to seek immediate gratification of all needs, wants, and desires. Clearly instant gratification of these desires is not always possible and thus psychological tension is created that needs to somehow be discharged. The Id remedies this tension through, what Freud called, Primary Process. The Id uses Primary Process to fulfill the need to act on an urge that is dangerous or unacceptable by creating a mental image of the desired object to substitute for the urge. This mental representation then diffuses psychological tension and relieves anxiety. Daydreaming and masturbation would be common examples of the Primary Process. To elaborate, Freud believed that when a person masturbated it was to relieve sexual tensions that they were experiencing. The act of masturbation proceeds from a mental image that then substitutes for the object of sexual desire in reality. Masturbation provides, what Freud thought, to be a perfect image of one's sexual desires. It allows that person to be in complete control of their experience and it is because of this that some actually argue that masturbation is better than sex.

The desires of the Id give rise to the Ego, which is generally the component of the psyche that ensures that the impulses of the Id are expressed in a way that is acceptable to the real world. The Ego operates according to the reality principle. In order to better understand the role of the Ego it is necessary to first discuss the three stages of consciousness and how they each function.

Freud equates consciousness with awareness. He believed that our behavior and personality derives from the constant and unique interaction of conflicting psychological forces that operate at the three levels of consciousness, or awareness.² The conscious mind includes everything that we are aware of. It is the aspect

of our mind that we can think and talk about rationally. Freud claims that there are two kinds of unconscious: The first is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the second is repressed and not capable of becoming conscious in the ordinary way.³ The latent kind of unconscious is the second level of awareness and is called the Preconscious (Pcs). This part of the mind generally represents ordinary memory. We are not consciously aware of the information contained in the Preconscious; however, we can retrieve it and pull it into consciousness at anytime. An analogy of the Preconscious is ones peripheral vision. While operating a motor vehicle it is impossible to be completely conscious of everything happening around you. We use our peripheral vision, which works rather like the preconscious, to supplement our awareness and allow us to safely and effectively navigate, utilizing data derived from it when we need to.

The repressed kind of unconscious is the third level and is referred to as the unconscious mind (Ucs). This part of the psyche deals with unconscious repressed data. It is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness. Freud believed that most of the contents of the unconscious were unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict. Freud also believed that the unconscious continually influences behavior and experience, even though there is no awareness of the influences. Freud links the unconscious to dreaming. He talks about symbolism, specifically how objects in the dream represent different objects in reality. A common Freudian example would be entering a tunnel in ones dream may result from ones sexual desires and thus symbolize a vagina.

Upon discussing the unconscious it is key to note hypnosis and its ability to bring repressed feelings and desires from the Ucs to a more conscious level of awareness. Under hypnosis we enter a special psychological state with physiological attributes that resemble sleep but give rise to a level of awareness distinguishable from the ordinary state. Freud believed it to be possible to recover repressed memories through the implementation of hypnosis. Hypnosis could serve as an instrument supplementing normal psychoanalysis by recovering repressed memories of past traumas that one may have experienced early in life, which could then allow for therapeutic breakthroughs to be made on the psychoanalytic level.

Freud's conception of the unconscious moves from being one that is static to one that is dynamic because within the psyche, the forces will enter into psychological conflict with one another. The static conception of the unconscious is descriptive. It connotes what ever is outside of the field of consciousness, thus embracing both the Ucs and Pcs as one. The dynamic approach to the unconscious allows for the distinction to be made between the two. It designates not only latent ideas but also ideas with a certain dynamic character, ideas keeping apart from consciousness in spite of their intensity and activity.⁴

Moving back to Freud's structure of the psyche, the Ego is identified as being " a coherent organization of mental processes". Freud's conception of the Ego is strongly related to consciousness and it controls approaches to the discharge of excitations into the external world. It is an element of the psyche that tries to regulate all of its constituent processes. Freud believed that even when one went to sleep at night, the Ego continued to exercise a censorship upon ones dreams. It is from this aspect of the Ego that it becomes necessary to discuss its role in the unconscious. Repressions are an attempt to cut off certain aspects of mental functioning not merely from consciousness but also from their other forms of manifestation and activity. Those functions that have been shut out stand in opposition to the Ego. All that is repressed is a part of the Unconscious mind meaning that it is possible that a part of what was initially the Ego may become a part of the Ucs. Freud suggests that the real difference between an unconscious and a preconscious thought consists in the notion that the unconscious is formed from some material which remains unrecognized, whereas the preconscious can be brought into connection with verbalizable images. With the repressed unconscious there are no verbalizable images to refer to, thus it remains unrecognized.

Fundamentally, the Ego has a set of psychic functions able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. It organizes thoughts and makes sense of the world. The Ego represents reason and common sense. The ego is said to serve three masters: the external world, the Id, and the Super-Ego.⁵

The Super-Ego is the third part of Freud's system. The Super-Ego reflects the internalization of cultural rules, mainly taught by parents applying their guidance and influence. For Freud the Super-Ego can be described as a successful instance of identification with the parental agency. The Super-Ego aims for perfection. It is made up of the organized part of the personality structure, which includes the individual's Ego ideals, spiritual goals, and ones conscience. It is a psychic agency that criticizes and prohibits ones drives, fantasies, feelings, and actions. The Super-Ego works in contradiction to the Id because it strives to act in a manner that is socially appropriate. As a consequence of the Super-Ego conflicting with the demands of the Id, the Ego often has to mediate between the two.

Understood as the conscious individual the Ego, is driven by the Id and confined by the Super-Ego; it sometimes struggles to bring about harmony among the forces and influences working and acting upon it, causing it to break out in anxiety; realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety, regarding the Super-Ego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength and passions of the Id. To overcome these anxieties the Ego employs defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are not necessarily direct or conscious. They lessen the tension by covering up our impulses that are threatening.

One defense mechanism Freud talks about in particular is Sublimation. Sublimation is the defense mechanism where socially unacceptable impulses or desires are consciously transformed into socially acceptable behaviors or actions, possibly resulting in a long-term conversion of the initial impulse.⁶ Freud believed sublimation to be a sign of maturity, not only individually but also societally, allowing people to function in culturally acceptable ways. Freud defined sublimation as the process of deflecting sexual instincts into acts of higher social valuation. He saw it as an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development. Sublimation is what allows for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.

Ultimately it is the interaction of each aspect of the human psyche that accounts for one to develop. Each aspect has its own unique features that give the human psyche an immeasurable degree of depth. These features often conflict with one another but they also work harmoniously to resolve these conflicts. It is also by analyzing these aspects and their functions that we are able to interpret why human beings behave the way they do on both an individual and cultural level. These interpretations allow us to derive a better understanding of each other's behavior and also allow us to engage in self-reflection, to better understand our own behavior.

References

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⁴ Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Dynamic Unconscious", in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, with an introduction by Daniel Lagache (London: Karnac Books, 1973), http://books.google.com/books?id=PsvZpv0ZRw0C&pg=PA126&lpg=PA126&dq=Freud+on+the+dynam+c+and+static+unconsciousness&source=bl&ots=PgPvPk6tgr&sig=MHanmoEQR2LOK6I4TZ1cfhIHIDs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=dZFoUp_jAcqrkAeL8oB4&ved=0CCwQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Freud%20on%20the%20dynamic%20and%20static%20unconsciousness&f=false (accessed October 12, 2013)

⁵ *Id, Ego, and Super Ego*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Id,_ego_and_super-ego#Ego (accessed 10 24, 2013)

⁶ *Sublimation*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublimation_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublimation_(psychology)) (accessed 10 15, 2013)