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Psychology of Personality

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Psychobiography from Freud’s Perspective

 I was born in 1993 in Bridgeport, Connecticut into a family with married parents, an older sister and brother, and eventually, a younger sister would join the family. I was born sick, with a cyst attached to my brain, left-side muscle weakness, and glue ear. For the first year of my life, I was hospitalized for a slew of tests, surgeries, and diagnoses. Eventually, after the cyst was removed, my parents decided to take me home from the hospital, and not continue searching for a diagnosis to every medical problem. After leaving the hospital, I went home to Monroe, Connecticut, where I lived until I was three. In April 1996, my brother accidentally set our home on fire, and forced us to rebuild from scratch. The day before Christmas, my family moved into our brand new home, unidentifiable if it were not in the same location. Until I turned eight, life was average. My mother gave birth to a healthy young girl a year before, my older sister and I did sports, and my siblings and I went to school. That year, however, my brother went to prison for the first time. For the years after, he was in and out of prisons, half-way houses, and our home. Being very close with my brother, this absolutely upset me. He was constantly in and out of my life, fighting with my parents, and leaving in the middle of the night. Every time he came back, he said he would never leave again. The next month he would be gone.

 According to Freud, childhood experiences form our personalities. The conditions we grow up with form our disposition. We have to form a strong ego capable of protecting us from the harsh realities of the outside world, but this must be done gradually, protected from psychiatric trauma. Three phases happen before the age of five, and shape a child’s personality for the rest of their life. The oral, anal, and phallic stages deal with how we control ourselves and our bodies. Within these three stages, a child finds new ways to cope with the implications put on us by society. For example, not being fed right when the stomach wants food would be a source of frustration from reality. However, if this is too extreme one way or the other, the ego cannot cope, and a personality development is hindered. Such events produce fixation, in which the impulse is repressed.

 For the first year of my life, every need of mine was met. I was fed, bathed, clothed, and tended to on a twenty-four hour a day service. Nurses coddled me when my parents were too tired, and I barely had to cry to get my needs fulfilled. During this time of my life, I was in the oral stage, which occurs from birth to age one. Because needs are met without effort, it is said that an infant such as I would feel omnipotent, and would begin to develop an oral character personality type, which would include traits such as optimism, passivity, and dependency. In extreme examples such as mine, oral fixation could also occur. People with oral fixation are focused on sensations around the mouth areas, and those related. In future studies done in relation to Freud’s theory, it has been suggested that those with oral preoccupations are very dependent, and are at risk for eating disorders, perfectionism, negative emotionality, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies, all of which would plague me later in life, especially dealing with eating disorders and perfectionism.

 Unlike the oral stage, my transition into the anal and phallic stages were sheltered by parental guidance, and passed as that of most children. As Freud described, I learned how to retain and hold onto certain things, as well as experience the pleasure of being self-reliable. I created a mature superego. Although a centralized source of trauma happened during the phallic stage, it did not impair development, since the family structure remained the same. However, it did lead to repressed feelings of loss which would be brought up later in my life.

 Like Freud described, middle childhood, or the latency stage, is relatively calm, and does not influence development much. His next stage, the genital stage, only develops if a person has no fixations, or if they have been resolved through psychoanalysis. If this does not happen, a person will be a very selfish lover, and possibly promiscuous. According to Freud, a person can also become homosexual from a problem before the genital stage, but that is not proven.

 Personally, I believe that I did not graduate to the genital stage because of my oral fixation. If an individual is halted at a stage of development, it can either hinder or completely stop development, based on the level of trauma and reliance. A seriously neglected child, for instance, may be toilet trained later in life, and may never learn certain social cues and moral senses. Although, a slightly impeded child, like myself, would pass through the rest of the stages, but could create a certain personality, such as an oral character. In the theory, oral fixation can result in one of two characters: the first being a manipulative person in fulfilling his or her own needs, rather than maturing to independence. The second outcome, often seen in over-protected children, may result in dependence and a fright or refusal to mature. In both circumstances the children will mature, but it may be delayed or altered slightly.

 Without fulfilling Freud’s genital stage, I reflect a selfish loving style, and expect others to aid me in most things. Often, I expect others to offer help, or to be waiting to provide assistance. Before I fully matured, I was also more promiscuous than the average teenager, which his stage says could also happen, if something is hindered in development. If an oral fixation is resolved with psychoanalysis, Freud said, an individual can go onto the genital stage and become an equal-pleasure love partner, avoiding selfish narcissistic acts.

 These stages also open up the possibility of defense mechanisms, and their influence over the personality development of most people. According to Freud’s theory, one uses defense mechanisms if direct expression of the id impulse is unacceptable to the superego or dangerous in the real world. By distorting the aim of a thought or memory, the ego is avoiding retaliation of the superego, allowing the impulse to be socially acceptable. Defense mechanisms range from primitive ones, to mature ones, developed throughout our lives. In life, everyone needs defense mechanisms to cope with everyday events, such as embarrassing moments and painful experiences. As an event is more traumatic, it becomes harder and harder to defend against. Likewise, as the ego gets filled with more repressed experiences or feelings, containing them from everyday life becomes more difficult.

 Often in childhood, we use the most primitive forms of defense: denial and distortion. As we get older, the defense mechanisms often become more mature. Any experience can be denied and distorted, from the slightest bit of embarrassment, such as tripping, to the most traumatic experiences, like rape or abuse. One can deny an experience happened, or make it less severe. For example, breaking a vase might be forgotten, or changed so the blame is not placed on a child, but rather a sibling or animal.

Growing up, I probably had more to repress than the average child. I was born sick, and bullied because of it; my home had burned down at the hands of my brother; my brother was constantly getting in trouble, finally to end up in a cell. On top of these traumatic events, I also had to deal with everyday problems, such as not being the youngest child anymore, and being a shy girl switching in and out of schools. As much as I tried, it all obviously could not be repressed.

Another well-used defense mechanism is reaction formation, where an unacceptable impulse is repressed and its opposite is developed in exaggerated form. Mainly, this was used in my life to keep me loving my brother. He tore apart my house, my family, and then left. He said he loved me, then disappeared. He walked in and out of my life like it was nothing, and favored girlfriends over family. Somewhere in my unconscious, I hated him. Yet somehow, my childhood mind continued going back to him, because I wanted to love him. My hatred was denied. In reaction formation, one denies something because it is not accepted. Until it is confronted and accepted, a person will continue to exaggerate the opposite impulse. For many years, this was the life I lived. I fought for him, and could not understand why others did not. When I confronted the fact that my brother was not the hero I wanted him to be, I could accept my hatred. Of course, this was not an immediate response, and I still want to feel love for him, but by now I know better than to defend myself against his reality.

Rather, I resort to isolation, where thought related to an unpleasant occurrence are disassociated from other thinking, and thus do not come to mind. Not thinking of the experience is easier than dealing with it, but also is not as harmful to one’s psyche. In addition, it has become much less demanding to confront a problem and accept it as my emotions get more unattached from my brother, and more focused on the situation at hand. In a way, this could be seen as intellectualization, in which one focuses on thinking, and avoids the feelings associated. Like stated before, it gets easier to deal with a situation as emotions become separated from the individual, and more on the experiences. By now, I can tell that associating with my brother is not good for me, as difficult as it may be.

From a Freudian perspective, I can clearly see that I have an oral fixation, and heavily rely on defense mechanisms to get through my days. As my ego becomes filled with more and more repressed materials, I can tell that my understanding of reality is becoming slightly more stressed, and present stress with my brother could be the cause of the problem. Freud states that as an ego has to defend against more anxieties, it becomes weaker, until one may not adequately defend against anxiety, or require a person to behave in rigid ways to avoid anxiety. The ego tries to reconcile the conflicting demands of the id and the superego when dealing with anxiety, while taking into account external demands, with limited opportunities for satisfaction. Simply said, the ego tries to protect the psyche from pain, but as repressed materials have energy, the energy attempts to return the repressed material to the consciousness. We continue trying to fight the painful material, but that is detrimental for both the id and the superego. As this continues, conflicts happen within the psyche, and cause psychotic episodes or mental breakdowns.

Recently, this has been relevant to me. As more information comes to me about my family, I have been growing more agitated, distracted, and have even begun having panic attacks and depressed episodes. Life is difficult to stay focused on at times. Speaking about the relevant events helps, but at times, it is also much easier to intellectualize, or isolate the thoughts.

Freud’s theory is focused strongly on the mind, and our past. We have to learn to adjust to anxiety, and to cope with life as it is given. According to him, I am a very dependent person, and rely on others to help me through experiences. As life goes on, I see where he was right. I need people to rely on, or I repress information until it ends up hurting me. My biggest fault in life is possibly dealing with balancing productive and healthy mental and emotional states.