

PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES: PSYCHOANALYSIS

Introduction

The psychodynamic approach believes that the best way to treat abnormalities is to find out what it is that is buried deep within the unconscious that is causing a person to behave abnormally. Therefore, abnormality should be treated by **making the unconscious conscious** in order to find the conflict's causes. Once the causes of the conflict are clear, a person can deal with them more effectively. It is important to note that because things that have happened in the past cannot be undone, the person must learn to live with them, which is why the phrase 'deal with them more effectively' is used.

Two techniques used in psychoanalysis

The best known psychodynamic approach to therapy is called *psychoanalysis* (sometimes called '*the talking cure*'). Psychoanalysts use various methods to try and make the unconscious conscious, including *free association*, *word association*, *the interpretation of dreams*, and *parapraxes*.



Psychoanalysis - the 'talking cure'

The interpretation of dreams: Freud believed that the content of dreams is determined by *unconscious impulses* as well as by the 'residue of the day'. The unconscious impulses are expressed in dreams as a form of *wish fulfilment*. Thus, dreams function as a *psychic safety valve*, that is, a way of fulfilling a repressed desire in a 'safe' way. Freud believed

dreams to be the 'royal road to the unconscious', and a rich source of information about hidden aspects of personality.

For Freud, things that happened during the day evoked repressed childhood memories and desires. However, because some desires are too disturbing for a person to face, even when asleep, they are expressed in *symbolic form*. Freud used the term *manifest content* to describe the content of the dream as reported by the dreamer. The term *latent content* refers to what the dream really means (its presumed hidden or symbolic content).

The transformation of repressed desires into symbols is carried out by the ego, and is called *dreamwork*. Transforming the manifest content into its latent content is the job of the **dream analyst**. The analyst tries to piece together the themes that gradually emerge from dream analysis, and attempts to explain to the person what underlying conflict and desires the symbols represent. The idea is that once a person understands these reasons s/he can deal with them more effectively.

Parapraxes: Freud was a *psychic determinist*. What this means is that he saw all behaviours (even those we believed to be 'accidents') as having an *underlying cause* ('everything happens for a reason'). Freud argued that normally the ego censors our thoughts, so that whilst we might be thinking something unpleasant about someone, we don't actually say what we are thinking to avoid hurting or offending them. Occasionally, though, unconscious thoughts *are* able to get past the ego. When they are in the conscious, they are expressed as words. Freud believed that parapraxes (or *Freudian slips*) are important to study because they reveal our true feelings that we are not consciously aware of.

For example, Freud describes the case of a woman who was offered a slice of cake by another woman, who claimed to have baked it herself. The first woman knew that the cake had really been bought from a shop, but her ego didn't want to offend the second woman. At the end of their meeting, the first woman thanked the second for her 'delicious home-baked *fake*'. For Freud, this slip was not an accident - the first woman's true feelings had managed to find their way into consciousness.

Evaluating the use of psychoanalysis

There are over 400 types of therapy based on the psychodynamic model, and 'analysis' with a 'therapist' is very popular amongst Americans. Elsewhere, however, such therapies are less common. It is therefore difficult (for me at least) to suggest that psychoanalysis has any strengths whatsoever.

One of the reasons for this is that Freud developed his techniques after studying only a small and very limited sample of people. Perhaps the most important reason, though, is that there is very little evidence that the therapy is successful. In fact, one famous study showed that people were more likely to improve if they received *no* treatment than if they received psychoanalysis). Because psychoanalysis can last for years, and because analysts charge for their services, it could be argued that psychoanalysis is an expensive waste of time.

Additionally, since psychoanalysis depends on the person gaining *insight* into the causes of their condition, it isn't suitable for those people who may not be willing to talk about their lives in the way required by psychoanalysis. It also isn't suitable for disorders like schizophrenia, which is characterised by a lack of insight in the person experiencing it.

Psychoanalysis may also raise *ethical issues*, since the person may have to face distressing material during therapy, such as sexual abuse that occurred in childhood. Note also that although psychoanalysis is referred to as the 'talking cure', it doesn't actually cure disorders. Even Freud acknowledged this, and talked about 'reducing unhappiness' rather than curing it.