



Revisiting The Foundations of The Unconscious: A Review of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

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ABSTRACT: Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory remains one of the most influential and controversial frameworks in psychology and the humanities. This review revisits the core concepts of Freud's thought, including the topographical and structural models of the mind, psychosexual stages of development, defence mechanisms, and the interpretation of dreams. Central to his theory is the idea that unconscious processes, formed largely in early childhood, shape human behaviour, emotions, and neuroses. Freud's model of the psyche—comprising the id, ego, and superego—offers insight into internal conflict and the mechanisms individuals use to cope with anxiety and repression. Despite extensive criticism regarding its scientific validity, gender bias, and overemphasis on sexuality, Freud's work laid the groundwork for modern psychodynamic therapy and influenced a range of disciplines, from literature and art to film and critical theory. The paper also considers major revisions and expansions by post-Freudian theorists and evaluates psychoanalysis in light of contemporary clinical and cultural perspectives. Ultimately, Freud's legacy endures not as a fixed doctrine but as a dynamic, evolving tradition that continues to shape how we understand the unconscious, symbolic life, and the complexities of human experience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of modern psychology and psychiatry is deeply intertwined with the work of Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist whose theories transformed our understanding of the human mind. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Freud introduced psychoanalysis—a ground breaking framework that emphasized the role of unconscious processes, internal psychological conflict, and early childhood experiences in shaping personality and behaviour. Central to his theory were concepts such as the unconscious mind, repression, and the dynamic interplay between instinctual drives and social constraints, which marked a major departure from the rationalist and behaviourist views of human nature prevalent at the time.

Freud's work laid the foundation for a new approach to mental health, one that sought to uncover hidden motivations and unresolved conflicts through therapeutic dialogue. This review paper offers a critical examination of the central principles of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, including the topographical and structural models of the mind, psychosexual development, and defence mechanisms. It also explores how Freud's ideas have continued to evolve, been challenged, and been reinterpreted in contemporary contexts. By analysing both the enduring influence and the criticisms of psychoanalysis, the paper highlights its relevance and transformation within modern psychology, clinical practice, and cultural theory.

1.1. Historical Context and Development of Freud's Theory

Freud's intellectual trajectory began with his formal education in medicine and neurology, disciplines that shaped his early scientific worldview. His clinical interest in mental illness deepened during his work with patients suffering from hysteria—a condition characterized by physical symptoms without apparent organic cause. Collaborating with prominent neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot

in Paris, Freud observed how hypnosis could temporarily relieve hysterical symptoms, suggesting a link between the mind and bodily disorders. This insight was further developed through his partnership with Viennese physician Josef Breuer. Together, they explored the case of "Anna O.," a patient whose physical symptoms were alleviated through verbal expression of repressed experiences—a method that Breuer and Freud famously termed the "talking cure" (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2004).

This therapeutic breakthrough led Freud to develop free association, a technique in which patients were encouraged to speak spontaneously, revealing unconscious thoughts and memories. From these clinical practices, Freud formulated the revolutionary idea that unconscious mental processes—such as repressed desires and unresolved conflicts—could manifest as physical symptoms. This formed the conceptual basis of psychoanalysis.

Freud formally introduced psychoanalytic theory through key texts, most notably *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/2010), in which he argued that dreams symbolically express unconscious desires. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2011), he advanced the idea that human motivation is fundamentally rooted in early psychosexual development. These writings synthesized clinical case studies, introspective analysis, and theoretical speculation into a cohesive framework for understanding mental life, establishing psychoanalysis as both a therapeutic method and a theory of personality and psychopathology.

1.2. The Unconscious Mind

Freud's topographical model of the mind marked a foundational shift in psychological thought by dividing mental activity into three distinct regions: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. The conscious mind consists of thoughts and perceptions we are immediately aware of; the preconscious contains memories and information that can be brought into awareness with relative ease; and the unconscious houses repressed memories, instinctual drives, unresolved conflicts, and forbidden desires. Among these, the unconscious was central to Freud's theory. He argued that much of human behaviour is shaped not by rational deliberation but by unconscious impulses, which often find expression in disguised forms—such as dreams, slips of the tongue (known as Freudian slips), and neurotic symptoms (Freud, 1915/2005). These phenomena, Freud believed, were not random but meaningful, revealing underlying psychic tensions.

This idea directly challenged the Enlightenment belief in human rationality and self-mastery, presenting the mind as divided and in conflict with itself. Freud suggested that individuals are not fully aware of the forces guiding their behaviour—a radical claim that redefined the modern understanding of subjectivity.

Building on this, Freud later introduced the structural model of the psyche, which proposed three interacting systems: the id, ego, and superego (Freud, 1923/2011). The id represents primal, instinctual urges driven by the pleasure principle, such as hunger, aggression, and sexual desire. The ego, operating according to the reality principle, mediates between the id's demands, the constraints of the external world, and the moral imperatives of the superego, which internalizes societal norms and parental authority. This model emphasizes the internal psychodynamic conflict inherent in human life, with the ego constantly negotiating among irrational desires, moral ideals, and real-world limitations. Freud believed that much of psychological distress arose from these internal struggles, particularly when the ego was overwhelmed by anxiety.

Together, the topographical and structural models provided a comprehensive view of mental life, framing the psyche as a complex system of conscious and unconscious processes, regulated by competing forces. These models not only influenced clinical practice but also left a profound impact on cultural theory, philosophy, and the arts.

1.3. Psychosexual Development

One of Freud's most debated and provocative contributions to psychoanalytic theory are his concept of psychosexual development. According to Freud, personality is shaped through a series of stages in early childhood, each characterized by the dominant focus of libido—or sexual energy—on different erogenous zones of the body. These five stages are: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital (Freud, 1905/2011). At each stage, the child faces specific developmental conflicts. How these conflicts are resolved—or left unresolved (resulting in fixation)—influences personality traits and behavioural patterns in adulthood.

A central feature of this model is the Oedipus complex, introduced during the phallic stage (around ages 3–6). Freud proposed that boys experience unconscious sexual desires for their mothers and view their fathers as rivals for maternal affection. This intrapsychic conflict, if resolved successfully through identification with the father, leads to the formation of the superego and the internalization of societal norms, thereby establishing a stable gender identity and moral conscience. Failure to resolve the Oedipus complex, Freud argued, could result in neuroses or disturbances in sexual identity and interpersonal relationships.

Freud later extended this idea to girls in the form of the Electra complex, though his treatment of female psychosexual development was less detailed and more speculative. He controversially suggested that girls experience "penis envy" and desire their fathers while feeling resentment toward their mothers. These ideas have been widely criticized for their androcentric assumptions and for privileging male experience as the normative developmental path. Feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow (1978) challenged Freud's model, arguing that it reflects patriarchal cultural values rather than universal psychological truths.

Despite its controversies, Freud's psychosexual theory brought attention to the formative role of early childhood, family dynamics, and unconscious desires in shaping personality. While modern developmental psychology has moved away from some of Freud's biologically based claims, his emphasis on internal conflict and the enduring impact of early relational experiences continues to inform psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches to human development.

1.4. Defence Mechanisms and the Ego

Defence mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies employed by the ego to protect the individual from anxiety, internal conflict, and emotional distress. Originating in Freud's psychoanalytic theory and later expanded by his daughter Anna Freud (1936/1992), these mechanisms illustrate how the psyche manages the demands of the id, superego, and external reality. **Repression**, considered the primary defence, involves unconsciously blocking painful or unacceptable thoughts from awareness. **Denial**, on the other hand, is the refusal to accept external reality, often seen in individuals facing illness or loss. **Projection** allows a person to attribute their own unacceptable impulses to others, while **displacement** redirects emotional responses from a threatening object to a safer substitute—such as venting anger at home after workplace stress. **Regression** entails a reversion to earlier developmental behaviours, often in response to trauma or stress. **Rationalization** involves justifying actions with logical explanations to avoid feelings of guilt, whereas **reaction formation** masks unwanted desires by adopting their opposite behaviour. One of the most adaptive defences, **sublimation**, channels instinctual drives into productive outlets such as art, science, or sports. **Intellectualization** uses abstract thinking to detach from emotional content, and **identification** involves unconsciously imitating the traits of another person, often as a way to reduce fear or increase self-esteem. Other mechanisms include **undoing**, where individuals attempt to "reverse" an unacceptable act through compensatory behaviour; **compensation**, where perceived weaknesses are offset by excelling in other areas; **fantasy**, which provides an escape from reality through imagined fulfilment of desires; and **suppression**, a conscious decision to delay or avoid distressing thoughts. While some defence mechanisms are considered immature or maladaptive when overused, others—especially sublimation and suppression—are viewed as mature strategies that support emotional regulation and social functioning. Together, these mechanisms highlight the dynamic, often unconscious processes through which individuals navigate inner tension and maintain psychological balance.

Defence Mechanism	Description	Example
Repression	Unconscious blocking of distressing thoughts	Forgetting a traumatic childhood event
Denial	Refusal to accept reality	Ignoring a medical diagnosis
Projection	Attributing one's impulses to others	Accusing someone else of being angry
Displacement	Redirecting emotion to a safer target	Yelling at family after work stress
Regression	Reverting to childlike behaviour	Throwing a tantrum
Rationalization	Creating justifications for behaviours	"Everyone cheats on taxes"
Reaction Formation	Acting opposite to true feelings	Overly kind to someone you dislike
Sublimation	Channelling drives into acceptable outlets	Becoming an artist or athlete
Intellectualization	Using logic to avoid emotion	Discussing grief with clinical detachment
Identification	Modelling behaviour after others	Imitating a parent's speech or mannerisms
Undoing	Trying to "erase" wrongdoing	Over-apologizing for a mistake
Compensation	Excelling to make up for weaknesses	Gaining prestige to hide insecurities
Fantasy	Escaping into imagination	Daydreaming about power or success
Suppression	Consciously avoiding a thought	"I'll deal with this later"

1.5. Dream Interpretation and Symbolism

Freud famously referred to dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious," emphasizing their central role in revealing hidden aspects of the psyche. In his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/2010), he argued that dreams are not random or meaningless but instead serve as **disguised wish-fulfilments**, expressing repressed desires that cannot be openly acknowledged in waking life. To conceal these unconscious wishes, the mind employs a set of **symbolic mechanisms**, including **condensation** (the merging of multiple ideas or images into a single dream element), **displacement** (the shifting of emotional intensity from important to trivial elements), and **secondary revision** (the reorganization of dream content into a more coherent narrative upon waking). These processes form part of what Freud called the **dream-work**—a set of operations that transform latent dream thoughts into manifest content.

Freud also distinguished between two modes of mental functioning: the **primary process**, which dominates dream life and unconscious thought, and the **secondary process**, which governs rational, conscious thinking during waking hours. The primary process is driven by the **pleasure principle**, relying on illogical associations, imagery, and timelessness, while the secondary process

operates according to the **reality principle**, emphasizing logic and temporal coherence. Through the analysis of dreams, Freud believed it was possible to access the unconscious material that shaped neuroses and psychological conflicts.

Freud's dream theory became a cornerstone of psychoanalytic technique, especially through **free association** and **symbolic interpretation**, and has had a lasting impact not only in clinical settings but also in literary, artistic, and cultural analysis. His ideas inspired later psychoanalytic thinkers such as **Carl Jung**, who emphasized archetypes and the collective unconscious, and **Jacques Lacan**, who reinterpreted dreams in terms of language and the symbolic order. Although contemporary neuroscience has challenged some of Freud's biological assumptions, his insight that dreams reflect unconscious processes remains influential in both therapeutic and theoretical contexts.

1.6. Psychoanalysis as Therapy

Freud's clinical method marked a significant departure from traditional medical approaches to mental illness by prioritizing verbal expression, emotional insight, and unconscious exploration. Central to this approach was the development of talk therapy, in which patients were encouraged to speak freely—a technique known as free association—allowing repressed thoughts, memories, and emotions to emerge into consciousness. Freud believed that the therapeutic setting functioned as a safe space where these unconscious materials could be accessed, interpreted, and eventually integrated, leading to symptom relief and deeper self-understanding.

Two key concepts in Freud's therapeutic model were transference and resistance. In transference, patients unconsciously redirect emotions, desires, and relational patterns from significant figures in their past (such as parents) onto the therapist. Rather than being an obstacle, Freud viewed transference as a vital tool for uncovering unresolved conflicts and understanding the patient's inner world (Freud, 1912/1958). Resistance refers to the patient's unconscious defenses against confronting painful or threatening material—often seen in missed appointments, silence, or shifting topics during therapy. Recognizing and working through both transference and resistance became essential elements of psychoanalytic treatment.

While classical psychoanalysis is known for its long-term, intensive nature—often requiring multiple sessions per week over several years—its foundational principles have profoundly shaped modern therapeutic practices. Techniques derived from Freud's model have been adapted into more accessible forms, most notably psychodynamic therapy, which retains the focus on unconscious processes and early relationships but in a more time-limited framework. In addition, Freud's emphasis on internal conflict and relational dynamics laid the groundwork for object relations theory (Kernberg, 1980), which explores how early relationships with caregivers shape the structure of the psyche, and relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1988), which emphasizes the co-constructed nature of the therapeutic relationship.

Freud's clinical legacy endures not only through traditional psychoanalysis but also through its influence on a wide range of therapeutic modalities, confirming the lasting relevance of his insights into the human mind and emotional life.

2. CRITICISMS AND REVISIONS

Freud's psychoanalytic theory has been the subject of extensive criticism from both within and outside the field of psychology. One of the most prominent philosophical critiques came from Karl Popper (1959), who argued that psychoanalysis fails to meet the criteria of scientific falsifiability. According to Popper, because Freudian concepts can be interpreted to fit almost any outcome, they are not empirically testable and thus fall outside the realm of legitimate science. In addition to concerns about scientific rigor, Freud's theories have been challenged for their androcentric assumptions, particularly in his portrayal of female psychosexual development. Feminist thinkers, such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011), critiqued the notion of "penis envy" and Freud's implication that female development is inherently defined by lack and inferiority. These critiques highlighted the cultural and gender biases embedded in early psychoanalytic theory and called for more nuanced and egalitarian models of development.

Furthermore, the rise of empirical psychology and behaviorism in the mid-20th century shifted the discipline's focus toward observable behaviors and experimentally verifiable phenomena. Psychoanalysis, grounded in introspection and clinical interpretation, was increasingly viewed as subjective and lacking methodological transparency. Despite these criticisms, Freud's influence has not been eradicated; rather, it has been revised and expanded through various post-Freudian developments.

Neo-Freudians, such as Erik Erikson (1950), reworked Freud's emphasis on early childhood by proposing a psychosocial developmental model that spans the entire lifespan, incorporating social and cultural influences on identity. Object relations theorists, including Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, shifted the psychoanalytic focus from instinctual drives to early relational experiences, emphasizing the child's internalized representations of caregivers and the importance of emotional attunement in development. Meanwhile, Jacques Lacan (1977) offered a radical reinterpretation of Freud through the lens of structuralism and linguistics, asserting that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacan emphasized the role of the symbolic order, language, and the mirror stage in the formation of the subject, situating psychoanalysis within a broader philosophical and cultural framework. These theoretical evolutions demonstrate that, while Freud's original formulations have been challenged, his legacy continues to shape contemporary psychoanalytic thought, providing a dynamic foundation for on-going clinical, theoretical, and cultural inquiry.

3. CULTURAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY INFLUENCE

Freud's impact extends far beyond the boundaries of clinical psychology, permeating the broader landscape of the humanities and social sciences. His theories have significantly shaped fields such as literary theory, film studies, anthropology, art criticism, and gender studies, offering powerful tools for analyzing human behavior, symbolism, and meaning. In particular, Freud's concepts of the unconscious, repression, desire, and symbolic expression have provided a foundation for psychoanalytic criticism, an approach that interprets texts, artworks, and cultural practices through the lens of psychic conflict and unconscious motivation.

Intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek have engaged deeply with Freudian theory to interrogate questions of language, identity, ideology, and subjectivity. Derrida's deconstruction draws on Freud's ideas to reveal the instability of meaning and the repression inherent in language. Kristeva incorporates Freudian and Lacanian thought in her theories of the semiotic and abjection, which explore how subjectivity is constructed and destabilized. Žižek uses a Lacanian-Freudian framework to critique ideology, media, and political systems, particularly highlighting how unconscious desires shape collective behavior and cultural narratives.

Freud's influence is especially visible in psychoanalytic literary and film criticism. Texts like Shakespeare's Hamlet or Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov have been reinterpreted through psychoanalytic frameworks that explore Oedipal conflict, guilt, and repression. In cinema, directors such as Alfred Hitchcock have been analyzed through Freudian themes, particularly in films like Psycho (1960), where issues of the unconscious, maternal fixation, and split identity mirror Freud's own case studies.

Beyond the realm of interpretation, Freud's work profoundly shaped 20th-century understandings of the self, neurosis, and the structures of modern society. In Civilization and Its Discontents (1930/2002), Freud examined the deep tension between individual instinctual drives and the demands of social order. He argued that civilization requires the repression of personal desires, which in turn produces psychological suffering and inner conflict—a dynamic that remains central to critical theory, postmodern thought, and cultural analysis. Thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Michel Foucault engaged with Freud to explore how power, sexuality, and repression operate within modern institutions.

Thus, Freud's intellectual legacy continues to inform contemporary debates about identity, culture, morality, and the human condition, underscoring his enduring relevance not only as a psychologist but as a foundational thinker of modern thought.

4. CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS AND NEUROSCIENCE

Contemporary developments such as neuropsychoanalysis represent efforts to bridge the gap between Freud's foundational psychoanalytic theories and modern neuroscience. This interdisciplinary field seeks to integrate the subjective, introspective insights of psychoanalysis with objective, empirical findings from brain science. Leading figures like Mark Solms have argued that Freud's ideas—particularly about the unconscious, affect, and the motivational structure of the mind—find support in contemporary understandings of brain function. For example, research in affective neuroscience has shown that much of emotional processing occurs outside of conscious awareness, lending credibility to Freud's notion of unconscious drives and internal conflict (Solms & Turnbull, 2002). Additionally, the concept of repression aligns with findings on memory suppression and neural inhibition, suggesting that psychoanalytic mechanisms may have identifiable neurological correlates.

Although Freud's theories are often criticized for their lack of empirical falsifiability, many modern psychoanalysts argue that their value lies in clinical utility, symbolic interpretation, and phenomenological depth, rather than in experimental reproducibility. Psychoanalysis continues to offer a unique lens through which to explore subjectivity, relational dynamics, and meaning-making, particularly in the treatment of complex and deeply rooted psychological issues. Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches have shown efficacy in addressing conditions such as personality disorders, trauma-related disorders, and attachment-based difficulties, where insight, emotional processing, and the therapeutic relationship are central to healing.

Moreover, psychoanalytic frameworks are increasingly adapted for culturally sensitive therapy, taking into account the influence of sociocultural history, identity, and unconscious cultural scripts. These developments reflect a shift away from rigid classical models toward more integrative, relational, and contextually aware psychoanalytic practices. While Freud's original formulations have evolved, his legacy persists in the ongoing attempt to understand the depth and complexity of the human psyche, bridging the clinical, the cultural, and the neuroscientific in contemporary psychological thought.

5. LEGACY AND RELEVANCE TODAY

Despite more than a century of rigorous critique and evolving scientific paradigms, Freud's legacy remains deeply embedded in both psychological thought and broader cultural discourse. Concepts such as "repression," "projection," "sublimation," and even colloquial expressions like "anal-retentive" have entered everyday language, reflecting the widespread diffusion of psychoanalytic vocabulary into popular understanding. More importantly, Freud's foundational recognition of the unconscious, the use of defense mechanisms, and the formative impact of early childhood experiences continues to shape contemporary clinical practices, literary

analysis, and cultural criticism. His insights into the symbolic structure of dreams, the hidden motivations behind human behavior, and the emotional legacies of family dynamics have provided enduring frameworks for interpreting both individual and societal patterns.

In the present day, psychoanalysis persists not only as a therapeutic approach—especially in its evolved, relational, and psychodynamic forms—but also as a rich intellectual tradition across disciplines. Its continuing appeal lies less in its capacity for empirical verification and more in its symbolic, hermeneutic, and narrative depth. Psychoanalysis offers a language of inner life—a way of speaking about desire, loss, identity, and meaning that resonates in the clinic, the classroom, and the cultural sphere. As both method and metaphor, Freud's work remains vital to the on-going effort to understand the complexities of the human condition.

6. CONCLUSION

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory offered a radical reconceptualization of the human mind, introducing the idea that much of mental life occurs beyond conscious awareness. Through his models of the unconscious, mechanisms of defence, dream interpretation, and psychosexual development, Freud fundamentally transformed not only clinical psychology but also how we understand art, literature, culture, and identity. His insights challenged Enlightenment notions of rationality, highlighting the complex, often contradictory forces that govern thought and behaviour. While his theories have been critiqued for scientific limitations, cultural bias, and overemphasis on sexuality, they have also inspired rich traditions of critical inquiry, therapeutic practice, and interdisciplinary innovation.

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, shifting social identities, and increasing psychological complexity, Freud's psychoanalytic legacy remains profoundly relevant. It continues to offer a vocabulary for exploring the depth of the inner self, the unconscious dimensions of language and culture, and the symbolic structures through which meaning is produced and negotiated. As both a clinical method and a cultural theory, psychoanalysis endures—not as a static doctrine, but as an evolving framework that continues to provoke, challenge, and illuminate our understanding of human subjectivity and civilization itself.

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