Psychosexual Stages

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Saul McLeod, published 2008

Freud (1905) proposed that psychological development in childhood takes place in a series of fixed psychosexual stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital.

These are called psychosexual stages because each stage represents the fixation of libido (roughly translated as sexual drives or instincts) on a different area of the body. As a person grows physically certain areas of their body become important as sources of potential frustration (erogenous zones), pleasure or both.

Freud believed that life was built round tension and pleasure. Freud also believed that all tension was due to the build-up of **libido** (sexual energy) and that all pleasure came from its discharge.

In describing human personality development as psychosexual Freud meant to convey that what develops is the way in which sexual energy accumulates and is discharged as we mature biologically. (NB Freud used the term 'sexual' in a very general way to mean all pleasurable actions and thoughts).

Freud stressed that the first five years of life are crucial to the formation of adult personality. The id must be controlled in order to satisfy social demands; this sets up a conflict between frustrated wishes and social norms.

The ego and superego develop in order to exercise this control and direct the need for gratification into socially acceptable channels. Gratification centers in different areas of the body at different stages of growth, making the conflict at each stage psychosexual.

The Role of Conflict

Each of the psychosexual stages is associated with a particular conflict that must be resolved before the individual can successfully advance to the next stage. The resolution of each of these conflicts requires the expenditure of sexual energy and the more energy that is expended at a particular stage, the more the important characteristics of that stage remain with the individual as he/she matures psychologically.

To explain this Freud suggested the analogy of military troops on the march. As the troops advance, they are met by opposition or conflict. If they are highly successful in winning the battle (resolving the conflict), then most of the troops (libido) will be able to move on to the next battle (stage).

But the greater the difficulty encountered at any particular point, the greater the need for troops to remain behind to fight and thus the fewer that will be able to go on to the next confrontation.

Frustration, Overindulgence, and Fixation

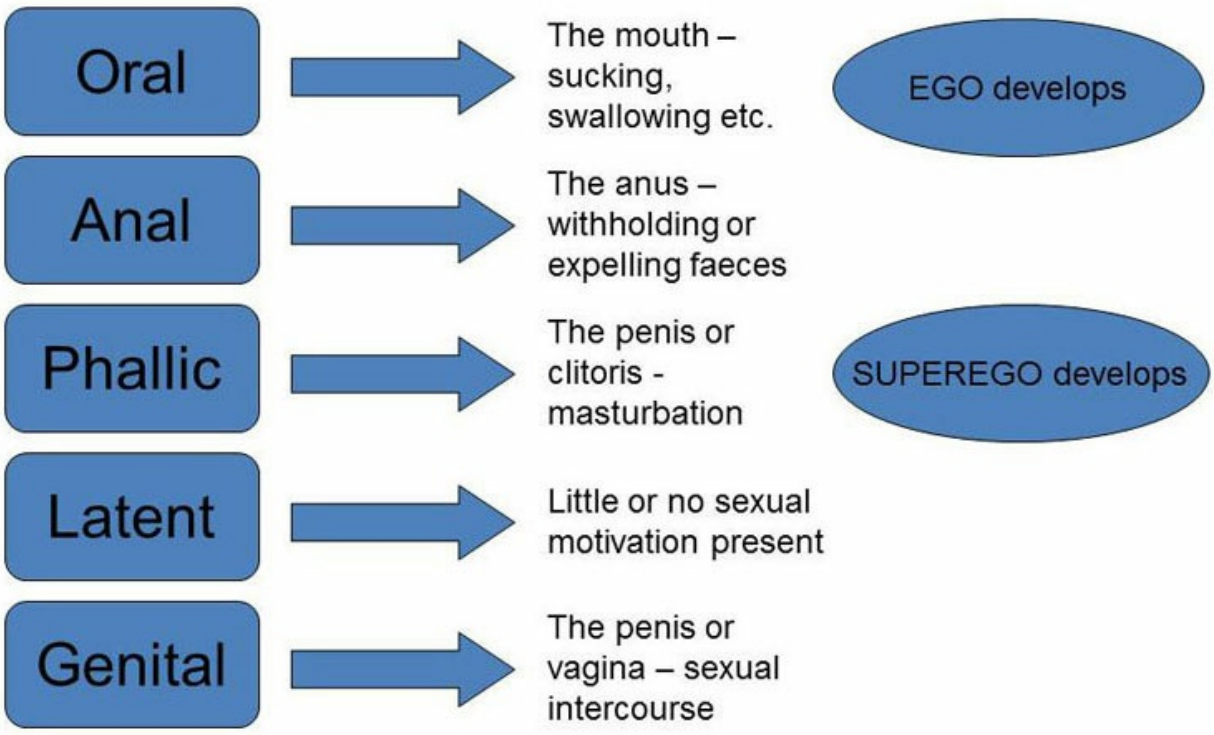
Some people do not seem to be able to leave one stage and proceed on to the next. One reason for this may be that the needs of the developing individual at any particular stage may not have been adequately met in which case there is frustration.

Or possibly the person's needs may have been so well satisfied that he/she is reluctant to leave the psychological benefits of a particular stage in which there is overindulgence.

Both frustration and overindulgence (or any combination of the two) may lead to what psychoanalysts call **fixation** at a particular psychosexual stage.

Fixation refers to the theoretical notion that a portion of the individual's libido has been permanently 'invested' in a particular stage of his development. It is assumed that some libido is permanently invested in each psychosexual stage and thus each person will behave in some ways that are characteristic of infancy, or early childhood.

Psychosexual Stages of Development



> You can remember the order of these stages by using the **mnemonic**: “old (oral) age (anal) pensioners (phallic) love (latent) grapes (genital).

Oral Stage (0-1 year)

In the first stage of personality development, the libido is centered in a baby's mouth. It gets much satisfaction from putting all sorts of things in its mouth to satisfy the libido, and thus its id demands. Which at this stage in life are oral, or mouth orientated, such as sucking, biting, and breastfeeding.

Freud said oral stimulation could lead to an oral fixation in later life. We see oral personalities all around us such as smokers, nail-biters, finger-chewers, and thumb suckers. Oral personalities engage in such oral behaviors, particularly when under stress.

Anal Stage (1-3 years)

The libido now becomes focused on the anus, and the child derives great pleasure from defecating. The child is now fully aware that they are a person in their own right and that their wishes can bring them into conflict with the demands of the outside world (i.e., their ego has developed).

Freud believed that this type of conflict tends to come to a head in potty training, in which adults impose restrictions on when and where the child can defecate. The nature of this first conflict with authority can determine the child's future relationship with all forms of authority.

Early or harsh potty training can lead to the child becoming an anal-retentive personality who hates mess, is obsessively tidy, punctual and respectful of authority. They can be stubborn and tight-fisted with their cash and possessions. This is all related to pleasure got from holding on to their faeces when toddlers, and their mum's then insisting that they get rid of it by placing them on the potty until they perform!

Not as daft as it sounds. The anal expulsive, on the other hand, underwent a liberal toilet-training regime during the anal stage. In adulthood, the anal expulsive is the person who wants to share things with you. They like giving things away. In essence, they are 'sharing their s**t'!' An anal-expulsive personality is also messy, disorganized and rebellious.

Phallic Stage (3 to 5 or 6 years)

Sensitivity now becomes concentrated in the genitals and masturbation (in both sexes) becomes a new source of pleasure. The child becomes aware of anatomical sex differences, which sets in motion the conflict between erotic attraction, resentment, rivalry, jealousy and fear which Freud called the **Oedipus complex** (in boys) and the **Electra complex** (in girls).

This is resolved through the process of identification, which involves the child adopting the characteristics of the same sex parent.

The most important aspect of the phallic stage is the Oedipus complex. This is one of Freud's most controversial ideas and one that many people reject outright.

The name of the Oedipus complex derives from the Greek myth where Oedipus, a young man, kills his father and marries his mother. Upon discovering this, he pokes his eyes out and becomes blind. This Oedipal is the generic (i.e., general) term for both Oedipus and Electra complexes.

In the young boy, the Oedipus complex or more correctly, conflict, arises because the boy develops sexual (pleasurable) desires for his mother. He wants to possess his mother exclusively and get rid of his father to enable him to do so. Irrationally, the boy thinks that if his father were to find out about all this, his father would take away what he loves the most. During the phallic stage what the boy loves most is his penis. Hence the boy develops **castration anxiety**.

The little boy then sets out to resolve this problem by imitating, copying and joining in masculine dad-type behaviors. This is called **identification**, and is how the three-to-five year old boy resolves his Oedipus complex. Identification means internally adopting the values, attitudes, and behaviors of another person. The consequence of this is that the boy takes on the male gender role, and adopts an ego ideal and values that become the superego.

Freud (1909) offered the Little Hans case study as evidence of the Oedipus complex.

For girls, the Oedipus or Electra complex is less than satisfactory. Briefly, the girl desires the father, but realizes that she does not have a penis. This leads to the development of **penis envy** and the wish to be a boy.

The girl resolves this by repressing her desire for her father and substituting the wish for a penis with the wish for a baby. The girl blames her mother for her 'castrated state,' and this creates great tension. The girl then **represses** her feelings (to remove the tension) and identifies with the mother to take on the female gender role.

Latency Stage (5 or 6 to puberty)

No further psychosexual development takes place during this stage (latent means hidden). The libido is dormant. Freud thought that most sexual impulses are repressed during the latent stage, and sexual energy can be sublimated (re: defense mechanisms) towards school work, hobbies, and friendships.

Much of the child's energy is channeled into developing new skills and acquiring new knowledge, and play becomes largely confined to other children of the same gender.

Genital Stage (puberty to adult)

This is the last stage of Freud's psychosexual theory of personality development and begins in puberty. It is a time of adolescent sexual experimentation, the successful resolution of which is settling down in a loving one-to-one relationship with another person

in our 20's. Sexual instinct is directed to heterosexual pleasure, rather than self-pleasure like during the phallic stage.

For Freud, the proper outlet of the sexual instinct in adults was through heterosexual intercourse. Fixation and conflict may prevent this with the consequence that sexual perversions may develop.

For example, fixation at the oral stage may result in a person gaining sexual pleasure primarily from kissing and oral sex, rather than sexual intercourse.

References

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How to reference this article:

McLeod, S. A. (2008). Psychosexual stages. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/psychosexual.html

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