Psychoanalysis

Introduction

If you have ever heard of any psychologist, chances are you have heard of Sigmund Freud. Although Freud's methods and theories are very different from those of most current scientific psychologists, his basic ideas have had far reaching influence on many academic disciplines beyond psychology and society in general. There is no question that Freud's ideas are interesting and intuitively appealing. The school of psychology Freud started is referred to as psychoanalysis, and the most fundamental concept of psychoanalysis is that of the subconscious. According to psychoanalysis, the mind can be subdivided into three basic components, the ego, the id, and the superego. The ego represents ongoing conscious experience or awareness, while the id and superego represent the subconscious, of which we are not aware. The interesting notion about the subconscious, as conceived by the psychoanalysts, is that it controls the vast majority of our behavior. It would follow then, that most of the things we do are controlled by forces of which we are completely unaware. In fact, it is virtually impossible for you or I to become aware of what is actually going on in our subconscious, according to this view.

Model of the Mind

This model of the mind is sometimes conceived of as an iceberg with the ego on top and the subconscious below the surface (see Figure 1). The ego, the part we actually see is, of course, quite small. The subconscious consists of two fundamentally opposing forces, the id and the superego. The superego is something like our conscience (not to be confused with "conscious"). This represents the societal rules that we are taught as we go through life as to what is good and ethical. On the other hand, the id is a seething cauldron of emotions and desires. The id consists of our most basic animalistic drives and instincts, with the focus on aggression and sexual energies. A part of the id that gets a lot of attention is the "libido", which consists of our sex drive. This drive to reproduce, to pass on our genetic material to the next generation is one of our most basic drives, according to the psychoanalysts. Throughout our lives, the theory goes, there is constant conflict between the id and superego. On one hand we have basic drives and desires, while on the other hand we have societal and ethical rules that keep us from expressing these. So then, we have a picture of a human being whose mind is in constant conflict, with much of the conflict involving basic sexual and aggressive drives. All of this is greatly influencing the person's behavior, and none of it is the person consciously aware of in the least. You can begin to see why Freud's ideas so fascinated, and continue to fascinate, academics and society in general.
Methods

Freud considered himself and scientist and he used different research methods to explore and expand his theory. One psychoanalytic method is dream interpretation. Almost certainly you have seen the classic scene of the psychoanalyst asking a reclining patient to report on dreams. According to Freud we can consider dreams as consisting of both explicit and implicit content. The explicit content is the actual story that an individual can recall, while the implicit content is the subconscious meaning, often having to do with sex or aggression. A second psychoanalytic method is hypnosis. In fact, Freud was one of the first to introduce hypnosis into psychology. The basic idea is that, under the power of suggestion, an individual's responses can give clues as to the contents of the subconscious. Finally, the technique of free association is used by psychoanalysts to explore the subconscious. Free association refers to a set of techniques in which a person is presented with some ambiguous stimulus such as a word or an inkblot (Rorschach test) and is asked to respond to or interpret the stimulus. Again, an individual's response is thought to contain clues as to the nature of the subconscious.

Limitations and Legacy

Though there are still psychologists who refer to themselves as psychoanalysts and some therapists use psychoanalytic techniques to some degree, there is no question that psychoanalysis is not at all the force it once was in psychology, especially in scientific/experimental psychology. One basic limitation is that it is difficult to see much direct or objective relationship between the theoretical concepts (e.g., id and superego) and the data (e.g., dream interpretation). A second and related problem is that there is often a great deal of disagreement among psychoanalysts
about how to interpret the same data (i.e., the reliability problem again). A third fundamental problem is that the technique has had limited success in therapy, and this is one reason why it is difficult to find a psychoanalytic therapist today, and why many abnormal psychology text books refer to psychoanalytic techniques very little or not at all.

Before concluding this discussion of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis I would like to return to my point from the beginning of the discussion that Freud has had a powerful influence on western thought. I believe this is important to keep in mind, and, despite criticism of his theories, this is reason enough to discuss psychoanalysis in a general psychology class. It is interesting to note that some of Freud's general ideas have been supported by contemporary research. For example, there is certainly evidence that sexual motivation is an important factor in behavior. This may seem obvious to us now, but, with the exception of Freud, it was ignored until relatively recently in the study of psychology. As for our tendency to want to pass our genes to the next generation, one of the most popular and growing areas of psychology currently is evolutionary psychology. Also, it's interesting to note that Freud had a great interest in neurology, and was convinced that some day he would find his abstract theoretical structures in physical structures of the brain. Though he failed in doing this, neuroscience and the biology of behavior is another area of psychology that is currently very popular. In fact, as we'll see in the section on neuroscience, there are brain areas associated with basic animalistic drives and others associated with the control of these drives.