



PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

How Freud explained gender development using his psychosexual theory

Freud argued that everyone passes through five stages of *psychosexual development* in their life. The first three stages are where the focus of Freud's theory is at, because those occur during the first five years of life (remember, one of the key assumptions of this approach is the importance of those first five years). Freud believed that at each stage, the centre of sexual energy was located in a different place.

Freud said that it was possible to come out of a stage having not fully resolved it. If each stage is not resolved correctly, a person becomes **fixated** at that stage, which will result in problems later in life. Fixation can occur through:

- **frustration** – this occurs when the stage is not resolved as the needs have not been met at that stage
- **overindulgence** – this occurs when the person has been overexposed and overindulged in a certain stage and is too comfortable with being in that stage to move on

Depending on the different type of fixation (frustration or overindulgence) experienced, Freud believed that there were different adult characteristics which are exhibited due to fixation of those stages.

The oral stage

The first stage of psychosexual development is the **oral stage**. This lasts from birth to around the age of 18 months, but can be variable (for example, breast feeding lasts longer in some societies than others, so the duration of this stage is variable). The focus for sexual energy is the **mouth** because the baby gets pleasure from sucking and feeding.

If fixation arises at this stage due to *frustration*, characteristics brought forward to adult life will be envy, pessimism and sarcasm, and a person may be obsessed with oral stimulation (achieved by smoking, or chewing a pen). If fixation here is due to *overindulgence* (often caused by nursing too early, too late or for too long), adult characteristics will be optimism, admiration of others and gullibility, also possibly remaining needy and being demanding of others.

To summarise, the *oral stage*:

- ✎ lasts from birth to around 18 months of age
- ✎ the focus of sexual energy is the mouth
- ✎ frustration leads to: pessimism, envy and sarcasm; a need to achieve oral stimulation
- ✎ overindulgence leads to: optimism, admiration of others and gullibility; neediness of others

The anal stage

The second stage of psychosexual development is the **anal stage**. This lasts up to around the age of three years, as the ego is developing and where potty training will have been completed. The pleasure focus is the **anus** and the retention or expulsion of faeces.

If parents are too lenient and get pleasure from making a mess, the adult will form an **anal expulsive character**, but if the pleasure arises from holding in the faeces, the adult will become an **anal retentive character**. An anally-expulsive character is messy, reckless and disorganised (which will be reflected in their job or hobbies, such as building or pottery) and an anally-retentive character is overly obsessed with cleanliness and will be stubborn and hoard possessions.

To summarise, the *anal stage*:

- ✎ lasts from around 18 months old up to the age of 3 years
- ✎ the focus of sexual energy is the anus
- ✎ frustration leads to: anal retentive character (stubborn, overly-obsessed with being clean, possessive)
- ✎ overindulgence leads to: anal expulsive character (messy, disorganised and reckless)

The phallic stage

The third stage of psychosexual development is the **phallic stage**. This stage occurs at around the age of four or five years, just as the superego is developing. The focus of sexual energy is the **genital region**. Freud emphasised the importance of this third stage, as the superego, conscience and ego ideal are developing, and gender identity begins to form.

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Gender development occurs at this stage due to the **Oedipus complex** (which also causes the superego and its components to develop). Freud based the name for this concept on *Oedipus*, an ancient mythical figure who killed his father and married his mother – but was unaware of those relationships at the time.

It was because Freud noted that parents seemed to have problems with their children at this age (four – five years) that he concluded they were sexual issues. Freud believed that a boy would have natural love for his mother up until this stage, but as the pleasure focus at this stage is the genital region, it was inevitable that this love would become sexual. Whilst these sexual feelings were in the unconscious, a young boy would see his father as a rival standing in his way, and would therefore feel feelings of aggression and hatred towards his father.

At this stage, the boy will have noticed that his mother has no penis. He would then fear that his father would remove his penis. This fear comes about from the threats and disciplines from being caught masturbating by his parents. This **castration fear** outdoes the desire for the boy's mother, so those sexual feelings are *repressed*.

By now, the superego has developed and so there are feelings of guilt and fear, which will be hard to reconcile. So the boy will want to resolve the conflict with his father by 'becoming' him, adopting his masculine behaviour. Therefore, Freud explains gender development using his psychosexual theory by explaining how boys learn their behaviours from identifying with their fathers as a result of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex also results in the development of the superego (and its components: the conscience and the ego ideal), so the boy is able to possess his mother without guilt, hatred and fear for his father. Once this stage is over, the fourth stage of development begins.






Freud was a little less clear for girls in his theory, as he mainly focused on boys (the majority of supportive evidence for this theory came from his case study of Little Hans, a boy). As you would expect, girls learn their behaviour by identifying with their mothers, just as boys do with their fathers.

For girls, Freud identified the **Electra complex**, which begins as a young girl discovers that she (and other girls) lack the penis which her father, and other men, will have. Her before-natural love for her father now becomes both envious and erotic, and she longs for a penis of her own. She then blames her mother, thinking she is responsible for her castration, and develops **penis envy** of her father.

The girl will learn her gender behaviours from identifying with her mother, in an attempt to possess her father vicariously, just as boys learn to do with their mothers. Freud said that he didn't believe girls ever resolve the Electra complex 100 per cent, but are always a little fixated at this stage. However, they will move on to the fourth stage.

If fixated at this stage, a **phallic character** can develop, which is reckless, vain, proud, self-assured, arrogant and it is very possible that the adult will not be capable of loving another person and entering a relationship.

To summarise, the *phallic stage*:

-  takes place at approximately four years of age
-  the focus of sexual energy is the genital region
-  for boys, Freud explained gender development using the Oedipus complex:
 - boys develop sexual feelings towards their mothers due to the sexual centre being the genital region
 - a boy therefore sees his father as a rival, and develops hatred and aggression for him
 - noticing his mother has no penis, the boy fears the father will remove his penis (castration fear)
 - the castration fear outstrips the sexual feelings for the mother, so those feelings are repressed
 - the boy identifies with his father in order to reconcile feelings of guilt and fear
-  for girls, Freud used the Electra complex to explain gender development, which was a little less clear:
 - girls discover at this stage that women have no penis whereas men (including their fathers) do
 - a girl's love for her father then becomes both erotic and envious, and wants her own penis (penis envy)
 - the girl will identify with her mother in an attempt to vicariously possess her father
-  if fixation occurs at this stage, a phallic character develops, who is arrogant, reckless and has difficulty building and maintaining relationships with people in adulthood

The latency period

Following the phallic stage comes a period known as the **latency period**. This is not so much a psychosexual stage of development, but more of a resting period. There is *no sexual drive* at this stage. It starts from the age of about five (whenever the phallic stage is completed – i.e. the Oedipus or Electro complex has been resolved) and continues through until puberty. Children at this stage will form healthy same-sex friendships at school, and will start to focus on their school life and sport. Fixation is not possible at this stage, as there is no pleasure focus.

The genital stage

The final stage of psychosexual development is the **genital stage**. This stage begins at puberty, and the focus of sexual energy is the **genitals** again.

If the Oedipus complex was correctly resolved and the phallic stage successfully passed through, boys will go on to develop normal and healthy friendships and heterosexual relationships. However, if an individual does not successfully resolve the Oedipus complex, then relationship problems can occur, according to Freud, which includes the development of **homosexuality**.

Freud's psychosexual theory contains a lot of information, and the credibility of it is questionable. Of course, these stages of psychosexual development are probably the most controversial aspect of Freud's work. Below, the table has a few summarising points to evaluate Freud's theory, and the Psychodynamic Approach:

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| ✓ As a result of his work, Freud provided some new treatments to patients with mental health problems, which were otherwise unavailable – his development of <i>psychoanalysis</i> was particularly useful in the treatment of those with neuroses | ✗ Freud's approach does not use any scientific method as the data is qualitative and specific to an individual – so not generalisable and a theory should not be generated from such findings |
| ✓ Freud generated his theory from in-depth case studies which provided him with very rich and in-depth information, and as he conducted more research, he constantly amended his models and concepts of the psychosexual theory | ✗ The concepts are not measurable and therefore cannot be tested (e.g. the id, ego and superego cannot be measured; the unconscious is unreachable via normal means, etc) |
| ✓ His theory was built from valid data and it focused on the dreams and problems of each individual | ✗ The case studies he used (albeit providing strong information) required his own personal interpretation of symbols in dreams, etc, and so the findings may be subjective and therefore not generalisable as a theory |