



ALKEBULAN

**A Journal of West and
East African Studies**

Volume 5, Issue 2

Alkebulan: A Journal of West and East African Studies

<http://gnosipublishers.com.ng/index.php/alkebulan>

[/index](#)

ISSN (Online): 2971-6187

Examining the Changes from Adolescents to Adulthood According to Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transition from adolescence to adulthood through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality development. It outlines the core structures of the psyche—the id, ego, and superego—and their dynamic interactions in shaping behavior. The analysis is framed within Freud's five psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital), with a particular focus on the latency period and the reawakened genital stage that characterizes adolescence. The paper explores how the psychological changes of adolescence, including the push for independence, the formation of identity, and the maturation of relationships, can be understood as a process of navigating the demands of the id, the reality-testing of the ego, and the moral dictates of the superego. While acknowledging criticisms of Freud's theory, the paper concludes that his model provides a significant conceptual framework for understanding the unconscious influences and early childhood foundations that underpin the developmental challenges on the path to adult maturity.

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Received: 23 July 2024

Accepted: 22 July 2025

Published: 30 September 2025

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Keywords: Psychoanalytic Theory; Personality Development; Adolescence; Psychosexual Stages.

INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic theory is the theory of personality organization and the dynamics of personality development relating to the practice of psychoanalysis, a clinical method for treating psychopathology. First laid out by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, psychoanalytic theory has undergone many refinements since his work. The psychoanalytic theory came to full prominence in the last third of the twentieth century as part of the flow of critical discourse regarding psychological treatments after the 1960s, long after Freud's death in 1939. Freud had ceased his analysis of the brain and his physiological studies and shifted his focus to the study of the psyche, and on treatment using free association and the phenomena of transference. His study emphasized the recognition of childhood events that could influence the mental functioning of adults.

His examination of the genetic and then the developmental aspects gave the psychoanalytic theory its characteristics. Starting with his publication of The Interpretation of Dreams in 1899, his theories began to gain prominence. Adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19. It is a unique stage of human development and an important time for laying the foundations of good health. Adolescents experience rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth. This affects how they feel, think, make decisions, and interact with the world around them. On the other hand, adulthood, the period in the human lifespan in which full physical and intellectual maturity have been attained (Christopher & Izard, 2021).

THE THREE PRIMARY DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF ADOLESCENCE

According to John and Cunha (2022) here are three primary developmental stages of adolescence: which include early adolescence (10 to 13 years), middle adolescence (14 to 17 years), and late adolescence/young adulthood (18 to 21 years and beyond).

Stage 1: Early adolescence (10 to 13 years)

- Puberty begins in this stage
- Children experience considerable physical growth and increased sexual interest
- Body changes such as hair growth under the arms and near the genitals, breast development in females and enlargement of the testicles in males, starts to occur
- These changes can start as early as age 8 for females and age nine for males
- Girls may start their period around age 12
- Body changes can cause both curiosity and anxiety
- Children may question their gender identity during this stage, and it can be a challenging time for transgender children
- *Cognitive development at this stage*
- Adolescents at this stage tend to have concrete, black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking and a limited capacity for abstract thought
- Thinking may be egocentric, and children this age may be self-conscious about their appearance and apprehensive about being judged by their peers
- Intellectual interests expand, and early adolescents develop deeper moral thinking
- Pre-teens also feel an increased need for privacy
- They explore how to be independent from their family and may push boundaries and react strongly when limits are enforced

Stage 2: Middle adolescence (14 to 17 years)

- Puberty changes for both males and females continue
- Males may have a growth spurt and some voice cracking as their voices lower
- Physical growth for females slows and most have regular menstrual periods by this time
- Interest in romantic and sexual relationships may start and teens may question and explore their sexual identity; masturbation may be a part of this sexual exploration and getting to know their body
- Arguments with parents may increase as teens strive for more independence
- Less time is spent with family and more time is spent with friends
- Teens become more self-involved, appearances are important, and peer pressure can peak at this stage
- The brain continues to mature and there is a growing capacity for abstract thought, though emotions often drive decision-making and they may act on impulse without thinking things through
- During this stage, children may start to set long-term goals and become interested in the meaning of life and moral reasoning

Stage 3: Late adolescence/young adulthood (18 to 21 years and beyond)

- This phase usually encompasses less physical development and more cognitive developments
- Most have grown to their full adult height
- In this stage, young people become able to think about ideas rationally, have impulse control and can delay gratification, and plan for the future
- They have a stronger sense of identity and individuality and can identify their own values
- They also experience increased independence, emotional stability, stability in friendships and romantic relationships, and may also establish an “adult relationship” with parents, looking to them less as authority figures and more as peers

Over time, psychoanalytic theories of adolescence came to place less emphasis on the process of detachment or the motivating role of puberty, and began to emphasize the psychological capacities that developed as the adolescent negotiated a path toward independence and adult maturity. To this end, this paper examines life changes each adolescent must navigate to adulthood according to psychoanalytic theory of personality development.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

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The primary purpose in psychodynamic counselling is to release repressed emotions and experiences so as to make the unconscious motives conscious. That is, to enable individual to review feelings, thoughts, early-life experiences, and beliefs to gain insight into current problems and patterns of behaviour. While other Psychologists like Eric Erickson and Lawrence Kohlberg also created theories surrounding personality development, this paper will focus exclusively on that developed by Sigmund Freud.

FREUD'S THEORY OF PERSONALITY

One of the basic tenets of his general theory, regardless of the model being used, is that people have drives that are unconscious. These unconscious drives can cause various psychopathological symptoms (meaning they manifest as mental illness), for instance, different kinds of neuroses. Freud's theory of personality involves a topographical model of the mind, or in other words, Freud's theory is expressed in a map of different mental agencies. The names of these agencies are the id, the ego, and the superego (Freud, 1937).

Id, Ego, and Superego: Freud's Elements of Personality

According to Sigmund Freud, human personality is complex and has more than a single component. In his famous psychoanalytic theory, Freud states that personality is composed of three elements known as the id, the ego, and the superego. These elements work together to create complex human behaviors (Freud, 1937). Each component adds its own unique contribution to personality and the three interact in ways that have a powerful influence on an individual. Each element of personality emerges at different points in life.

According to Freud's theory, certain aspects of your personality are more primal and might pressure you to act upon your most basic urges. Other parts of your personality work to counteract these urges and strive to make you conform to the demands of reality. Here's a closer look at each of these key parts of the personality, how they work individually, and how they interact.

The Id

The id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality. According to Gabriel Akume (2014), the id goes for instant gratification and satisfaction of the psychological needs irrespective of the moral or social implication.

The id is the only component of personality that is present from birth. This aspect of personality is entirely unconscious and includes instinctive and primitive behaviors. The id is driven by the pleasure principle, which strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs. If these needs are not satisfied immediately, the result is a state

of anxiety or tension. For example, an increase in hunger or thirst should produce an immediate attempt to eat or drink. The id is very important early in life because it ensures that an infant's needs are met. If the infant is hungry or uncomfortable, they will cry until the demands of the id are satisfied. Young infants are ruled entirely by the id; there is no reasoning with them when these needs demand satisfaction. (Practical Psychology, 2019).

Examples of the Id

Imagine trying to convince a baby to wait until lunchtime to eat their meal. The id requires immediate satisfaction, and because the other components of personality are not yet present, the infant will cry until these needs are fulfilled. However, immediately fulfilling these needs is not always realistic or even possible. If we were ruled entirely by the pleasure principle, we might find ourselves grabbing the things that we want out of other people's hands to satisfy our cravings.

This behavior would be both disruptive and socially unacceptable. According to Freud, the id tries to resolve the tension created by the pleasure principle through the use of primary process thinking, which involves forming a mental image of the desired object to satisfy the need. Although people eventually learn to control the id, this part of personality remains the same infantile, primal force throughout life. It is the development of the ego and the superego that allows people to control the id's basic instincts and act in ways that are both realistic and socially acceptable.

The Ego

The term ego is often used informally to suggest that someone has an inflated sense of self (Freud, 1937). However, the ego in personality has a positive effect. It is the part of your personality that keeps you grounded in reality and prevents the id and superego from pulling you too far toward your most basic urges or moralistic virtues. Having a strong ego means having a strong sense of self-awareness. According to Freud, the ego develops from the id and ensures that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world. The ego functions in the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind. The ego is the personality component responsible for dealing with reality.

Everyone has an ego. The term ego is sometimes used to describe your cohesive awareness of your personality, but personality and ego are not the same. The ego represents just one component of your full personality and is said to be the seat of man's rationality. (Akume, 2014). The ego operates based on the reality principle, which strives to satisfy the id's desires in realistic and socially appropriate ways. The reality principle weighs the costs and benefits of an action before deciding to act upon or abandon impulses. In many cases, the id's impulses can be satisfied through a process of delayed gratification—the ego will eventually allow the behavior, but only in the appropriate time and place.

Examples of the Ego

Imagine that you are stuck in a long meeting at work. You find yourself growing increasingly hungry as the meeting drags on. While the id might compel you to jump up from your seat and rush to the break room for a snack, the ego guides you to sit quietly and wait for the meeting to end.

Instead of acting upon the primal urges of the id, you spend the rest of the meeting imagining yourself eating a cheeseburger. Once the meeting is finally over, you can seek

out the object you were imagining and satisfy the demands of the id realistically and appropriately.

The Superego

The last component of personality to develop is the superego. According to Freud (1937), the superego begins to emerge at around age five. The superego holds the internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire from our parents and society (our sense of right and wrong). The superego provides guidelines for making judgments. The superego has two parts:

1. The **conscience** includes information about things that are viewed as bad by parents and society. These behaviors are often forbidden and lead to bad consequences, punishments, or feelings of guilt and remorse.
2. The **ego ideal** includes the rules and standards for behaviors that the ego aspires to.

The superego tries to perfect and civilize our behavior. It suppresses all id's unacceptable urges and struggles to make the ego act upon idealistic standards rather than on realistic principles. The superego is present in the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious.

If you give in to the urges of the id, the superego is what will cause you to feel a sense of guilt or even shame about your actions. The superego may help you feel good about your behavior when you suppress your most primal urges.

Other examples of the superego include:

- (i). A woman feels an urge to steal office supplies from work. However, her superego counteracts this urge by focusing on the fact that such behaviors are wrong.
- (ii). A student forgot to study for a history test and feels an urge to cheat off of a student sitting nearby. Even though he feels like the chances of getting caught are low, he knows that cheating is wrong, so he suppresses the urge.

The Interaction of the Id, Ego, and Superego

When talking about the id, the ego, and the superego, it is important to remember that these are not three separate entities with clearly defined boundaries. These aspects are dynamic and always interacting to influence an individual's overall personality and behavior.

With many competing forces, it is easy to see how conflict might arise between the id, ego, and superego. Freud used the term ego strength to refer to the ego's ability to function despite these dueling forces. A person who has good ego strength can effectively manage these pressures, while a person with too much or too little ego strength can be unyielding or disruptive.

THE PSYCHOSEXUAL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT BY AGE

According to the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1937), children go through a series of psychosexual stages that lead to the development of the adult personality. Freud's stages of human development, which consisted of five psychosexual stages of development, described how personality developed over the course of childhood. He outlines the five stages of development as: Oral Stage, Anal Stage, Phallic Stage, Latent Period and Genital Stage (Kendra 2023).

THE ORAL STAGE

Age Range: Birth to 1 Year (Erogenous Zone: Mouth)

1. The oral stage is the first stage of personality development during which babies navigate their world and derive pleasure primarily through tasting things (Kendra 2023). During the oral stage, the infant's primary source of interaction occurs through the mouth, so the rooting and sucking reflex is especially important. The mouth is vital for eating, and the infant derives pleasure from oral stimulation through gratifying activities such as tasting and sucking. Because the infant is entirely dependent upon caretakers (who are responsible for feeding the child), the child also develops a sense of trust and comfort through this oral stimulation.

According to (Kendra 2023) the primary conflict at this stage is the weaning process—the child must become less dependent upon caretakers. If fixation occurs at this stage, Freud believed the individual would have issues with dependency or aggression. Oral fixation can result in problems with drinking, eating, smoking, or nail-biting.

In Freud's theory, the oral stage begins at birth and typically lasts until children are one year old. The oral stage is characterized by the pleasure center and libido being centered around the mouth. Since infants' primary way of interacting with the world is through their mouth, Freud thought this is where the libido is focused. With the rooting and sucking reflex, breastfeeding, biting, and tasting different foods, the oral stage is about satisfying the id's needs through the mouth.

Since infants' primary way of interacting with the world is through their mouth, Freud thought this is where the libido is focused. Freud believed that if a child at this age is not properly weaned (becoming less reliant on caregivers), then a fixation could occur. Fixation could also occur at this stage if an infant's needs for security, largely fulfilled through feeding, were not met. Freud thought that an oral-stage fixation could show up later as aggression or dependency, expressing itself through compulsive habits such as smoking, overeating, and excessive drinking.

THE ANAL STAGE

Age Range: 1 to 3 years (Erogenous Zone: Bowel and Bladder Control)

The anal stage, which Freud believed to take place when children are one to three years old, shifts the pleasure center from the mouth to the anus, where children find pleasure in defecating. Freud also believed that this is a period of independence (Kendra 2023). The child realizes that they are a person separate from their parents, with a growing list of individual needs and desires. Freud also thought that the ego, the sense of self in relation to the external world, develops during this stage.

During the anal stage, Freud believed that the primary focus of the libido was on controlling bladder and bowel movements. The major conflict at this stage is toilet training—the child has to learn to control their bodily needs. Developing this control leads to a sense of accomplishment and independence. According to Freud, success at this stage is dependent upon the way in which parents approach toilet training. Parents who utilize praise and rewards for using the toilet at the appropriate time encourage positive outcomes and help children feel capable and productive. Freud believed that positive experiences during the toilet training stage serve as the basis for people to become competent, productive, and creative adults. However, not all parents provide the support and encouragement that children need during this stage. Some parents punish, ridicule,

or shame a child for accidents. According to Freud, inappropriate parental responses can result in negative outcomes. If parents take an approach that is too lenient, Freud suggested that an *anal-expulsive personality* could develop in which the individual has a messy, wasteful, or destructive personality. If parents are too strict or begin toilet training too early, Freud believed that an *anal-retentive personality* develops in which the individual is stringent, orderly, rigid, and obsessive.

Freud characterized the anal stage as a shift of erogenous zones from the mouth to the anus and a focus on successful toilet training.

THE PHALLIC STAGE

Age Range: 3 to 6 Years (Erogenous Zone: Genitals)

The next stage of psychosexual development according to Freud is the phallic stage, characterized by a change in sexual impulse from the anus to the genitals. Freud (1937) believed the phallic stage begins when children are about three and continues until they are six. Freud's theory was that the phallic stage is also when the controversial Oedipus and Electra complexes develop.

Freud suggested that during the phallic stage, the primary focus of the libido is on the genitals. At this age, children also begin to discover the differences between males and females. Freud also believed that boys begin to view their fathers as a rival for the mother's affection. The Oedipus complex describes these feelings of wanting to possess the mother and the desire to replace the father. However, the child also fears that he will be punished by the father for these feelings, a fear Freud termed *castration anxiety*. The term Electra complex has been used to describe a similar set of feelings experienced by young girls. Freud, however, believed that girls instead experience *penis envy*.

Eventually, the child begins to identify with the same-sex parent as a means of vicariously possessing the other parent. For girls, however, Freud believed that penis envy was never fully resolved and that all women remain somewhat fixated on this stage. According to (Kendra 2023) Psychologists such as Karen Horney disputed this theory, calling it both inaccurate and demeaning to women. Instead, Horney proposed that men experience feelings of inferiority because they cannot give birth to children, a concept she referred to as *womb envy*.

Masturbation and a focus on the genitals are sources of pleasure during the phallic stage. In addition to the pleasure of masturbation, children may become aware of the opposite sex for the first time. Freud believed that this awareness of sexual differences could cause attraction and rivalry as well as jealousy and fear. His theory was that this can result in the Oedipal complex for boys and the Electra complex for girls.

Considered the most controversial of Freud's theories, the Oedipal complex describes when a male child desires their mother. The Electra complex describes female children who desire their father. Following the myth of Oedipus, in the Oedipal complex, boys wish to marry their mother but, realizing their father is too strong a foe, align themselves with him instead. In the Electra complex, Freud thought that girls, wishing to marry their father, align themselves with their mother as a way of indirectly possessing their father. Freud also believed that girls develop penis envy during this stage and, unlike boys, remain at least partially fixed in this stage throughout their lives.

Masturbation and a focus on genitals are sources of pleasure during the phallic stage. Freud believed that an unresolved phallic fixation could have a negative outcome later in life for men and women. Self-centeredness, a low sense of self-worth, and shyness are

some of the traits Freud thought characterize those stuck in the phallic stage. He believed that it could show itself in women as flirtatious, promiscuous behavior and relationships with unloving men.

THE LATENT PERIOD

Age Range: 6 to Puberty (Erogenous Zone: Sexual Feelings Are Inactive)

The latent period is a time of exploration in which the sexual energy is repressed or dormant. This energy is still present, but it is sublimated into other areas such as intellectual pursuits and social interactions. This stage is important in the development of social and communication skills and self-confidence. As with the other psychosexual stages, Freud (1937) believed that it was possible for children to become fixated or "stuck" in this phase. Fixation at this stage can result in immaturity and an inability to form fulfilling relationships as an adult.

Freud described the time between when children are six through puberty as the latent period, when the id is suppressed by the ego. He characterized this stage as the child relating to the community by adopting values, developing social skills, and forming relationships with people outside the immediate family. The ego and superego play a significant role in this phase, directing sexual energy towards different outlets. Hobbies, school activities, and learning all take center stage. Freud believed that this is when children develop the strongest relationships with others of the same sex, focus their energies on these friendships, and acquire new knowledge and experiences.

Like the other stages, Freud believed fixation was possible in this stage, resulting in immaturity and an inability to develop close interpersonal relationships with others as an adult.

THE GENITAL STAGE

Age Range: Puberty to Death (Erogenous Zone: Maturing Sexual Interests)

The onset of puberty causes the libido to become active once again. During the final stage of psychosexual development, the individual develops a strong sexual interest in the opposite sex. This stage begins during puberty but lasts throughout the rest of a person's life. Where in earlier stages the focus was solely on individual needs, interest in the welfare of others grows during this stage. The goal of this stage is to establish a balance between the various life areas.

If the other stages have been completed successfully, the individual should now be well-balanced, warm, and caring. Unlike many of the earlier stages of development, Freud believed that the ego and superego were fully formed and functioning at this point. Younger children are ruled by the id, which demands immediate satisfaction of the most basic needs and wants. Teens in the genital stage of development are able to balance their most basic urges against the need to conform to the demands of reality and social norms. In his theory's fifth and final psychosexual stage, Freud believed the genital stage starts at the onset of puberty and continues on into adulthood.

Freud believed that with the start of puberty comes a reawakened, active libido and sexual attraction. Freud theorized that as opposed to the phallic stage, which was focused on self-pleasure, the pleasure during the genital stage is focused on heterosexual pleasure. Freud believed that the proper expression of sexual instinct was through heterosexual relationships and sexual intercourse. By extension, if fixation or conflict developed during this or an earlier stage, Freud thought perversions might develop, preventing those sexual relationships. Someone fixated on the oral stage, for example, would find more pleasure

in kissing and oral sex than through intercourse. According to Practical Psychology (2020), this phase differs from the others in that Freud felt the ego and superego to be fully developed by this point. Unlike when they were younger and controlled mainly by the id, by puberty, teens are able to check their desires, keeping them within society's standards and expectations.

CRITICISMS OF THE PSYCHOSEXUAL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Despite its prevalence and influence, Freud's theory of psychosexual stages has received numerous criticisms. Scientific researchers and feminist theorists have criticized his theory for various reasons. For one, Freud's theories are difficult to test scientifically, and some research has found the theories to be not fully plausible (Fisher & Roger 1977). Freud himself never performed empirical studies, relying instead on anecdotal accounts from his adult patients. Finally, his focus on male development, as well as the penis envy theory, has led a number of feminist scholars to declare his theories to be unsubstantiated and entirely incorrect. Concepts such as the libido are impossible to measure, and therefore cannot be tested. The research that has been conducted tends to discredit Freud's theory. Future predictions are too vague. How can we know that a current behavior was caused specifically by a childhood experience? The length of time between the cause and the effect is too long to assume that there is a relationship between the two variables. Freud's theory is based on case studies and not empirical research. Also, Freud based his theory on the recollections of his adult patients, not on actual observation and study of children (Fisher & Roger 1977).

COUNSELLING IMPLICATION OF FREUD'S DEVELOPMENT THEORY

While few people are strong proponents of Freud's theory of psychosexual development even today is that, his work made important contributions to our understanding of human development. Perhaps his most important and enduring contribution was the idea that unconscious influences could have a powerful impact on human behavior. Freud's theory also stressed the importance of early experiences in development. While experts continue to debate the relative contributions of early versus later experiences, developmental experts recognize that the events of early life play a critical role in the developmental process and can have lasting effects throughout life.

A significant contribution of the psychoanalytic model is delineation of the stages of psychosexual and psychosocial stages of development from birth through adulthood. By taking a combined psychosexual and psychosocial perspective, counselors have a helpful conceptual framework for understanding developmental issues as they appear in therapy. The key needs and developmental tasks, along with the challenges inherent at each stage of life, provide a model for understanding some of the core conflicts clients explore to make appropriate interpretations. A major function of interpretation is to accelerate the process of uncovering unconscious material.

The analyst listens for gaps and inconsistencies in the client's story, infers the meaning of reported dreams and free associations, and remains sensitive to clues concerning the client's feelings toward the analyst. Organizing these therapeutic processes within the context of understanding personality structure and psychodynamics enables the analyst to formulate the nature of the client's problems.

CONCLUSION

Freud believed that personality developed through a series of childhood stages in which the pleasure-seeking energies of the id become focused on certain erogenous areas. An erogenous zone is characterized as an area of the body that is particularly sensitive to stimulation. During the five psychosexual stages, which are the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stages, the erogenous zone associated with each stage serves as a source of pleasure.

Psychosexual energy, or the *libido*, was described as the driving force behind behavior. Psychoanalytic theory suggested that personality is mostly established by the age of five. Early experiences play a large role in personality development and continue to influence behavior later in life. Each stage of development is marked by conflicts that can help build growth or stifle development, depending upon how they are resolved. If these psychosexual stages are completed successfully, a healthy personality is the result.

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