Using Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory

*The Family*

Psychoanalytic Theory is more interested in understanding the origin of personal problems rather than the origin of personal strengths because this theory wants to offer ways of overcoming personal problems. And it is important to remember that we all have personal problems of some sort because we all have had some harmful emotional experiences growing up, regardless of how loving our family might be. In other words, having personal problems is part of being human.

*Repression and the Unconscious*

We might not know the specific source of our emotional problems – we might not even know we have such problems – because we tend to repress our most distressing experiences, push them into the unconscious, which is the psychological storehouse of painful experiences we don’t want to remember. Put simply, we all tend to push out of sight those experiences we feel we can’t handle. The clearest sign that an emotional problem is being repressed is the repetition of self-destructive behavior, such as choosing unhealthy friends or romantic partners, displaying inappropriate social behaviors (for example, habitually dominating conversations or throwing temper tantrums in response to disagreements), engaging in unwarranted violent behavior, engaging in substance abuse, and the like. Most of these destructive behaviors show up in the way we relate to others, for psychoanalytic theory holds that we enact, or “play out,” our emotional problems with other people. The recurrence of a disturbing dream might also be a clue to the existence of an unconscious problem, as might a tendency to behave in a defensive manner when certain topics come up in conversation.

*The Defenses*

 The defenses are the means by which we keep ourselves from becoming conscious of the experiences we’ve repressed. Many of our defenses develop during our childhood as ways of protecting ourselves emotionally. However, as we grow older our defenses become more destructive than helpful because they keep us from understanding – and therefore from healing – our own psychological wounds. The most common defenses include the following.

*Denial –* We are in denial when we believe than an unpleasant situation doesn’t exist or an unpleasant event never occurred.

*Avoidance –* We are practicing avoidance when we stay away from people, places, or situations that might stir up repressed experiences.

*Displacement –* We are displacing when we take out our negative feelings about one person on someone else so e can relieve our pain or anger without becoming aware of the real cause of our repressed feelings.

*Projection –* We are projecting when we believe, without real cause, that someone else feels the same way we feel or that someone else has the problem that we ourselves have but want to deny.

*Core Issues*

 Whether or not we realize it, we all have at least one core issue (also called core conflict). A core issue is the underlying cause of sort of recurring self-destructive behavior, whether that behavior is something as mild as being habitually late for important appointments (for example, job interviews) or something as serious as being habitually involved with abusive romantic partners. While most of us have experienced, on occasion, the problems listed below, they are considered core issues only if they are responsible for most or all of the emotional difficulties we have as adults. Examples of core issues include, among others, the following.

*Low Self-Esteem –* Low self-esteem is the belief that we are less worthy than other human beings and, therefore, don’t deserve attention, love, or any other form of life’s rewards. In fact, we often believe we deserve to be punished by life in some way.

*Insecure or Unstable Sense of Self –* Our sense of self is insecure or unstable if we are unable to sustain a feeling of personal identity, unable to sustain a sense of knowing ourselves. This core issue makes us very vulnerable to the influence – for good or ill – of other people, and we may have a tendency to repeatedly change the way we look (our clothing, hairstyle, and the like) or behave as we become involved with different individuals or groups.

*Fear of Abandonment -* Fear of abandonment is the nagging belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical abandonment) or don’t really care about us (emotional abandonment). Sometimes fear of abandonment expresses itself as *fear of betrayal*, the nagging belief that our friends and loved ones can’t be trusted: for example can’t be trusted not to laugh at us behind our backs or not to lie to us or, in the case of romantic partners, can’t be trusted not to cheat on us by dating others.

*Fear of Intimacy –* Fear of intimacy is the unshakeable and overpowering feeling that emotional closeness will seriously damage or destroy us and that we must, therefore, protect ourselves by remaining at an emotional distance from others.

*Oedipal Fixation –* We all pass through a natural period of oedipal attachment to a parent of the opposite sex during youth, but it is outgrown as we mature emotionally. An oedipal *fixation* (or *complex*) is a dysfunctional bond with a parent of the opposite sex that we don’t outgrow and that doesn’t permit us to mature into adult relationships with others.

*Dream Symbolism*

Unlike most other critical theories, psychoanalytic theory has its own system of symbols that can be of use especially if we are interpreting a literary work as if it were a dream. For psychoanalytic theory, certain objects tend to have symbolic meaning for most human beings, whether we are aware of this meaning or not, and these symbols often show up in our dreams. The most common symbols include the following:

*Water –* Water can symbolize the unconscious, the emotions, and/or sexuality (which may or may not include reproduction) – all of which are, like water fluid (without fixed form), often unpredictable, and frequently deeper than we may realize.

*Buildings –* Usually, buildings symbolize the self, as if our body were the “building” in which we lived.

*Basements –* Because buildings usually symbolize the self, basements are often associated with the unconscious as the place where we repress unpleasant memories. (Both basements and the unconscious keep things below the surface.)

*Attics –* Analogously, attics are often associated with the intellect or the conscious mind, though in some dreams (especially dreams in which there are no basements), attics can, themselves, symbolize the unconscious as the place where we repress unpleasant memories. (We store things out of sight in attics just as we keep them below the surface in basements, in other words, just as we repress memories in the unconscious.)

*Male Imagery –* Male imagery consists primarily of *phallic symbols*, for example towers, guns, serpents, swords, or anything that can be associated with the penis. (If it stands upright, goes off, or has a serpentine form, it might be a phallic symbol.)

*Female Imagery –* Most frequently, female imagery consists of anything that can be associated with the womb, for example, caves, walled-in gardens, or containers.

Of course, there are so many factors affecting our emotional development at any given point in our youth that different individuals can respond to similar family situations in very different ways. Nevertheless, for psychoanalytic theory the relationship among the basic concepts discussed above can be expressed in a formula that goes something like this.

1. A distressing event or situation that occurs in our youth is *repressed* into our *unconscious* because we don’t feel we can face it consciously.
2. We keep that repressed experience buried in our unconscious through the use of *defenses.*
3. If the experience buried in our unconscious affects us powerfully enough, it will become a *core issue*, that is, a fundamental part of our personality that determines many of our feelings and a good deal of our behavior.
4. Core issues, especially when we remain *unaware* of them, result in the repetition of certain *self-destructive* *behaviors* and may show up in the recurrence of *disturbing dreams*.

Tyson, Lois. *Learning for a Diverse World: Using Critical Theory to Read and Write about*

 *Literature.* New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.