

Ego Psychology

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Ego Psychology*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38503>

Ego psychology is a school of psychoanalysis rooted in Sigmund Freud's structural id-ego-superego model of the mind. An individual interacts with the external world as well as responds to internal forces. Many psychoanalysts use a theoretical construct called the ego to explain how that is done through various ego functions. Proponents of ego psychology focus on the ego's normal and pathological development, its management of libidinal and aggressive impulses, and its adaptation to reality.

History

Sigmund Freud initially considered the ego to be a sense organ for perception of both external and internal stimuli. He thought of the ego as synonymous with consciousness and contrasted it with the repressed unconscious. By 1911, he referenced ego instincts for the first time in *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* and contrasted them with sexual instincts: ego instincts responded to the reality principle while sexual instincts obeyed the pleasure principle. He also introduced attention and memory as ego functions.

Freud began to notice that not all unconscious phenomena could be attributed to the id; it appeared as if the ego had unconscious aspects as well. This posed a significant problem for his topographic theory, which he resolved with the publication of his essay *The Ego and the Id* (1923). In what came to be called the structural theory, the ego was now a formal component of a three-way system that also included the id and superego. The ego was still organized around conscious perceptual capacities, yet it now had unconscious features responsible for repression and other defensive operations. Freud's ego at this stage was relatively passive and weak; he described it as the helpless rider on the id's horse, more or less obliged to go where the id wished to go (Meissner, 159).

Not long after *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1926) published *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*. In this essay, Freud revised his theory of anxiety as well as delineating a more robust ego. Instead of being passive and reactive to the id, the ego was now a formidable counterweight to it, responsible for regulating id impulses, as well as integrating an individual's functioning into a coherent whole. The modifications made by Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* formed the basis of a psychoanalytic psychology interest in the nature and functions of the ego.

Following Freud, the psychoanalyst most responsible for the development of ego psychology was Heinz Hartmann (1958). Through his assiduous study of ego functions and how an individual adapts to his or her environment, Hartmann created both a general psychology and a clinical instrument with which an analyst could evaluate an individual's functioning and formulate appropriate therapeutic interventions. Mitchell and Black (1995) write "Hartmann powerfully affected the course of psychoanalysis, opening up a crucial investigation of the key processes and vicissitudes of normal development. Hartmann's contributions broadened the scope of

psychoanalytic concerns, from psychopathology to general human development, from an isolated, self-contained treatment method to a sweeping intellectual discipline among other disciplines (p. 35)."

Hartmann (1958) believed the ego included innate capacities for such things as perception, attention, memory, concentration, motor coordination, and language. Under normal conditions, what Hartmann called an average expectable environment, these capacities developed into ego functions and had autonomy from the libidinal and aggressive drives; that is, they were not products of frustration and conflict, as Freud (1911) believed. Hartmann recognized, however, that conflicts were part of the human condition and in the process of ego development certain functions often became conflicted by aggressive and libidinal impulses. According to Hartmann, the task of the psychoanalyst was to neutralize conflicted impulses and expand the conflict-free spheres of ego functions. By doing so, Hartmann believed psychoanalysis facilitated an individual's adaptation to his or her environment.

Subsequent psychoanalysts interested in ego psychology emphasized the role of defenses, early-childhood experiences, and the importance of socio-cultural influences. First, Anna Freud (1966; (first edition 1936)) focused her attention on the ego's unconscious, defensive operations and introduced many important theoretical and clinical considerations. She believed the ego was predisposed to supervise, regulate, and oppose the id through defenses and that this activity could be observed by the psychoanalyst in the manifest presentation of the patient's associations. The analyst needed to be attuned to the moment-by-moment process of what the patient talked about in order to identify, label, and explore defenses as they appeared. For Anna Freud, interpreting repressed content was less important than understanding the ego's methods by which it kept things out of consciousness.

Next, René Spitz (1965), Margaret Mahler (1968), and Edith Jacobson (1964) studied infant behavior and their observations were integrated into ego psychology. Their research described and explained early attachment issues, successful and faulty ego development, and psychological development through interpersonal interactions. In particular, Spitz identified the importance of mother-infant nonverbal emotional reciprocity; Mahler refined the traditional psychosexual developmental phases by adding the separation-individuation process; and Jacobson emphasized how libidinal and aggressive impulses unfolded within the context of early relationships and environmental factors.

Finally, Erik Erikson provided a bold reformulation of Freud's biologic, epigenetic psychosexual theory through his explorations of socio-cultural influences on ego development. For Erikson, an individual was pushed by his or her own biological urges and pulled by socio-cultural forces.

In the United States, ego psychology was the predominant psychoanalytic approach due mostly to the influx of European psychoanalysts, including all the prominent ego psychologists, during and

after World War II. Ego psychology, however, gradually became conflated with the hegemonic influence of the American Psychoanalytic Association and the theory came to be viewed as conservative, oppressive, and focused too narrowly on oedipal conflicts. It was challenged by W.R.D. Fairbairn's object relations theory, Melanie Klein's theory, and then by Heinz Kohut's self psychology. (Ego psychology should not be confused with self psychology, as the two are distinctly different models of the mind with differing clinical methods.)

Charles Brenner (1982) attempted to revive ego psychology with a concise and incisive articulation of the fundamental focus of psychoanalysis: intrapsychic conflict and the resulting compromise formations. Over time, Brenner (2002) tried to develop a more clinically-based theory, what came to be called "modern conflict theory." He distanced himself from the formal components of the structural theory and its metapsychological assumptions, and focused entirely on compromise formations. It is, in essence, ego psychology by another name.

Other ego psychologists, such as Paul Gray (2005) and Fred Busch, have argued for an increasingly nuanced and sophisticated concept of the ego. In particular, Gray argued that there has been a "developmental lag" in psychoanalysis; that is, when Freud shifted from the topographic to the structural model, a corresponding shift in technique, made necessary by the new model, was slow to develop.

Ego functions

Reality Testing: The ego's capacity to distinguish what is occurring in one's own mind from what is occurring in the external world. It is perhaps the single most important ego function because it is necessary for negotiating with the outside world. One must be able to perceive and understand stimuli accurately. Reality testing is often subject to temporary, mild distortion or deterioration under stressful conditions. Such impairment can result in temporary delusions and hallucination and is generally selective, clustering along specific, psychodynamic lines. Chronic deficiencies suggest either psychotic or organic interference.

Impulse Control: The ability to manage aggressive and/or libidinal wishes without immediate discharge through behavior or symptoms. Problems with impulse control are common; for example: road rage; sexual promiscuity; excessive drug and alcohol use; and binge eating.

Affect Regulation: The ability to modulate feelings without being overwhelmed.

Judgment: The capacity to act responsibly. This process includes identifying possible courses of action, anticipating and evaluating likely consequences, and making decisions as to what is appropriate in certain circumstances.

Object Relations: The capacity for mutually satisfying relationship. The individual can perceive himself and others as whole objects with three dimensional qualities.

Thought Processes: The ability to have logical, coherent, and abstract thoughts. In stressful

situations, thought processes can become disorganized. The presence of chronic or severe problems in conceptual thinking is frequently associated with schizophrenia and manic episodes.

Defensive Functioning: A defense is an unconscious attempt to protect the individual from some powerful identity-threatening feeling. Initial defenses develop in infancy and involve the boundary between the self and the outer world; they are considered primitive defenses and include projection, denial, and splitting. As the child grows up, more sophisticated defenses that deal with internal boundaries such as those between ego and super ego or the id develop; these defenses include repression, regression, displacement, and reaction formation. All adults have, and use, primitive defenses, but most people also have more mature ways of coping with reality and anxiety.

Synthesis: The synthetic function is the ego's capacity to organize and unify other functions within the personality. It enables the individual to think, feel, and act in a coherent manner. It includes the capacity to integrate potentially contradictory experiences, ideas, and feelings; for example, a child loves his or her mother yet also has angry feelings toward her at times. The ability to synthesize these feelings is a pivotal developmental achievement.

Conflict, defense, and resistance analysis

According to Freud's structural theory, an individual's libidinal and aggressive impulses are continuously in conflict with his or her own conscience as well as with the limits imposed by reality. In certain circumstances, these conflicts may lead to neurotic symptoms. Thus, the goal of psychoanalytic treatment is to establish a balance between bodily needs, psychological wants, one's own conscience, and social constraints. Ego psychologists argue that the conflict is best addressed by the psychological agency that has the closest relationship to consciousness, unconsciousness, and reality: the ego.

The clinical technique most commonly associated with ego psychology is defense analysis. Through clarifying, confronting, and interpreting the typical defense mechanisms a patient uses, ego psychologists hope to help the patient gain control over these mechanisms.

Criticisms of ego psychology

Many authors have criticized Hartmann's conception of a conflict-free sphere of ego functioning as both incoherent and inconsistent with Freud's vision of psychoanalysis as a science of mental conflict. Freud believed that the ego itself takes shape as a result of the conflict between the id and the external world. The ego, therefore, is inherently a conflicting formation in the mind. To state, as Hartmann did, that the ego contains a conflict-free sphere may not be consistent with key propositions of Freud's structural theory.

Some have also accused Hartmann of proposing a conformist psychology in which the ego is considered most healthy when it adjusts to the status quo. Hartmann claimed, however, that his

aim was to understand the mutual regulation of the ego and environment rather than to promote adjustment of the ego to the environment. Furthermore, an individual with a less-conflicted ego would be better able to actively respond and shape, rather than passively react to, his or her environment.

Also, Jacques Lacan, a prominent French psychoanalyst, had a certain disdain for ego-psychology. He took issue with the movement insofar as his form of psychoanalysis focuses on the unconscious, rather than the ego. It also splits the ego and theorizes how one never has a true relation to their ego because it is an illusory relationship to an ideal image, and is a product of the unconscious itself.

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