

ANAL STAGE

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Anal Stage

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychoanalytic Theory, Developmental Psychology

1. Core Definition and Context

The **Anal Stage** is the second phase in Sigmund Freud's seminal theory of psychosexual development, following the Oral Stage and preceding the Phallic Stage. This developmental phase typically occurs between the ages of one and three years, coinciding precisely with the period when a child is generally subjected to the demands of toilet training, a critical social and psychological milestone. During this stage, the primary focus of the libido--the psychic energy associated with the biological drives--shifts from the mouth to the anal zone, making the control over elimination the central source of both tension relief and intense gratification.

In the psychoanalytic framework, development is inextricably linked to the successive localization of the sexual instinct (libido) onto various erogenous zones of the body. The anal stage specifically highlights the child's dawning awareness of control over bodily functions, which introduces the first major conflict between the child's innate biological urges (the Id) and the external demands of the environment and parents (the precursors to the Ego and Superego). The child experiences profound enjoyment, or carnal pleasure, derived from the sensation of voiding feces or, conversely, the act of retaining them. This phase is crucial not just for physical maturation but also for the establishment of early concepts related to power, independence, sadism, and ownership, as the child realizes they possess the ability to produce, retain, or destroy a tangible substance that is highly valued and often contested by the parents.

The successful negotiation of the Anal Stage, according to Freudian theory, requires a balance wherein the child learns to regulate their urges in socially acceptable ways without undue repression or excessive rebellion. If the environment is too demanding, punitive, or inconsistent, the child may experience fixation, leading to characteristic personality traits in adulthood. It is widely acknowledged within psychology that, while controversial, the concept of the anal phase fundamentally altered how clinicians and theorists viewed the developmental significance of early childhood experiences and the profound impact of bodily control on later psychological organization.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the Anal Stage originates directly from the foundational work of Sigmund Freud, particularly elaborated in his 1905 publication, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud observed that certain neurotic symptoms in his adult patients seemed to correlate with traumatic or unresolved conflicts centered around excretion and retention during early childhood. He hypothesized that the anal region functions as a powerful erogenous zone, capable of providing

deep sensory satisfaction independent of its purely biological function of elimination.

Historically, prior to Freud, childhood was often viewed as a period of asexual innocence, with little recognition given to the complex emotional and instinctual life of the infant. Freud's insistence that the sexual drive begins at birth and progresses through fixed, biologically determined stages was revolutionary and highly contentious. The Anal Stage marked a crucial theoretical transition because it moved the focus of libidinal investment from passive reception (Oral Stage) to active control and interaction with the environment. Freud meticulously detailed how the instinctual drive inherent in the stage--the sadist intuition--is initially directed toward the feces themselves (as possessions or objects of destruction) but later gets displaced onto other aspects of control, power, and interpersonal relationships, thereby shaping the emerging ego structure.

The term **Anal Phase** is often used interchangeably with **Anal Stage**, reflecting the period (phase) of life during which this specific libidinal investment (stage) is dominant. The theoretical development of this stage was reinforced by Freud's later work on character formation, where he definitively linked difficulties in the Anal Stage--particularly concerning cleanliness and obedience--to the development of the enduring anal personality traits of orderliness, obstinacy, and parsimony, solidifying the stage's importance in determining adult character structure.

3. Key Characteristics and Conflicts

The Anal Stage is characterized by several interrelated psychological and behavioral phenomena, all stemming from the dual potential for pleasure derived from both elimination (expulsion) and retention (withholding). This duality gives rise to the primary psychosocial conflict of the stage: the struggle for autonomy versus external control, primarily exerted by parents during toilet training.

The first key characteristic is the association of pleasure with control. Feces, in this stage, are seen by the child as an extension of the self--a product or a gift--which the child can manipulate. The ability to choose when and where to expel or retain this product gives the child a profound, albeit primitive, sense of power over the environment and the caregivers. This is the origin of the **sadist intuition** mentioned in the literature, which corresponds to the urge to own, control, and, potentially, deteriorate or destroy something of value (the feces or the parental expectations surrounding them). The child learns that their bowel movements can be used as a weapon of passive aggression or resistance against parental authority.

Secondly, the stage introduces the concept of two distinct behavioral fixations: **Anal-Expulsive** and **Anal-Retentive**. The anal-expulsive tendency results from a failure to properly internalize control, often due to overly permissive or inconsistent toilet training. The adult resulting from this fixation might be characterized by messiness, extravagance, impulsivity, and a lack of self-control. Conversely, the anal-retentive tendency arises when parents are excessively strict, demanding, or punitive during training. In response, the child learns to withhold, deriving satisfaction from

resistance and control. The resulting adult personality is rigid, overly organized, obsessive about cleanliness, and reluctant to share or let go of possessions or control.

The third critical characteristic is the internalization of social demands. Toilet training represents the first time society, through the parents, imposes a demand on the child to postpone instinctual gratification for the sake of social propriety. The management of this demand is fundamental to the development of the Ego and the early foundation of the Superego, initiating the crucial transformation from the purely pleasure-seeking Id to a functioning, socialized individual capable of delayed gratification.

4. Manifestations and The Anal Personality

The failure to successfully navigate the inherent conflicts of the Anal Stage--a phenomenon Freud termed fixation--leads to the development of the **Anal Character** or **Anal Personality** in adulthood. Fixation occurs when a significant amount of the individual's libidinal energy remains bound up in the conflicts of that specific stage, thereby influencing their later behavior and temperament. This personality type is classically defined by a triad of traits that are direct psychological derivatives of the primary conflicts experienced during the second year of life.

The first trait is **Orderliness** (or meticulousness). This is a direct reaction formation against the childhood impulse towards messiness and soiling (anal-expulsive tendencies). The adult compensates by becoming excessively neat, punctual, precise, and often obsessive-compulsive. The need for absolute control over the external environment mirrors the original struggle for control over internal bodily processes.

The second trait is **Parsimony** (or stinginess/avarice). This trait is a derivative of the pleasure derived from retaining and hoarding feces (anal-retentive tendencies), which were initially treated as valuable possessions. This impulse is later sublimated into a preoccupation with money, possessions, and resources. The anal character may find it difficult to spend money, share possessions, or be generous with time or emotional energy.

The third trait is **Obstinacy** (or stubbornness/willfulness). This stems directly from the infantile pleasure of defiance and resistance during the toilet training power struggle. The child learns that withholding can be an effective tool for expressing defiance against authority. In adulthood, this manifests as a strong, often irrational, resistance to change, a tendency toward inflexibility, and difficulty in compromising or submitting to the will of others.

While Freud described these traits as pathological when severe, he also argued that a moderate investment of anal stage energy, when successfully sublimated, contributes positively to qualities such as efficiency, organization, perseverance, and conscientiousness, which are necessary for adult productivity.

5. Applications in Clinical Psychoanalysis

The concepts derived from the Anal Stage remain foundational within classical psychoanalytic practice. Clinicians often use the stage's framework to understand adult symptoms related to control, aggression, organization, and interpersonal conflict, particularly those resembling obsessive-compulsive disorder or severe personality rigidity. During therapy, symptoms such as excessive hoarding, chronic procrastination, or intense emotional rigidity may be traced back to unresolved conflicts between the Id's desire for immediate gratification and the harsh demands of early toilet training.

In a clinical setting, material related to the Anal Stage often surfaces through discussions of money, time management, cleanliness, and the patient's relationship with authority figures. The patient might exhibit behaviors reflecting the original anal conflict--for example, treating the analyst's time as a possession to be hoarded or attempting to control the therapeutic environment through passive resistance or extreme compliance. Recognizing these transference patterns allows the analyst to interpret the underlying fixations and help the patient integrate the repressed aggressive and libidinal impulses associated with the stage.

The stage also informs the psychoanalytic understanding of **sadism** and **masochism**. The original sadistic impulse to control and dominate the valuable product (feces) and the person who demands its control (parent) forms the template for later aggressive behaviors. When this aggression is turned outward, it manifests as sadism; when turned inward, it contributes to masochistic tendencies, such as self-punishment or seeking painful situations, reflecting the child's internalized conflict and guilt over their aggressive urges.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound influence on 20th-century psychology, the Anal Stage, like the entire theory of psychosexual development, is subject to significant academic and empirical criticism. The primary critique is the lack of empirical, scientific evidence to validate the existence of fixed, biologically determined stages of libidinal energy localization or the direct causal link between toilet training practices and specific adult personality traits. Critics argue that the theory is retrospective and relies heavily on interpretation rather than verifiable, predictive data.

A second major criticism centers on the concept of **psychic determinism** inherent in the model. The theory suggests that adult personality is rigidly determined by events in the first few years of life, which diminishes the role of later experiences, cultural variation, and conscious choice in shaping the individual. Furthermore, the emphasis on instinctual (sexual) drives as the sole motivators for development has been challenged by later psychological schools, such as object relations theory and cognitive development theory, which prioritize interpersonal relationships and cognitive structures, respectively.

Cultural relativity also poses a problem. Freud's observations were rooted in the specific social norms of middle-class Vienna at the turn of the 20th century, where rigid and early toilet training was common. In cultures where toilet training is handled differently or begins much later, the specific dynamics and conflicts described by the Anal Stage may not manifest in the same way, suggesting that the stage's influence is cultural rather than universally biological. Modern developmental psychologists often integrate the themes of autonomy, control, and early shame/doubt (as presented in Erik Erikson's theory, which parallels the Anal Stage) but discard the purely libidinal focus and fixed-stage pathology of the Freudian model.

Further Reading

[Psychosexual Development \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Sigmund Freud \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Anal Retentiveness and the Anal Character \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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