

Identification

Authored by
mohammad looti

September 30, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Identification*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=30829>

Identification

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Developmental Psychology

1. Core Definition

In the realm of psychoanalytic theory, **identification** is a fundamental psychological process initially conceptualized by Sigmund Freud. It describes a crucial developmental stage where an individual, typically a child, unconsciously adopts the characteristics, attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns of another person. This process is distinct from mere imitation, as identification involves a deeper, more profound internalization of another's traits, leading to a restructuring of the self. Freud posited that through identification, an individual integrates aspects of an external object, usually a parent or significant caregiver, into their own personality structure, fundamentally shaping who they become.

Central to Freud's understanding of identification is its role in the formation of the child's superego, which represents the moral component of personality. As children develop, they are believed to incorporate the moral guidelines, prohibitions, and ideals of their parents' superegos into their own. For instance, if parents exhibit honesty as a core value, the child, through identification, internalizes this principle, leading to a personal realization that honesty is important and lying is wrong. This internalization is not a conscious decision but an unconscious assimilation that forms the basis of the child's moral compass and sense of right and wrong, guiding their future behavior and self-perception.

Furthermore, Freud emphasized the significance of identifying with the **same-sex parent** during this developmental phase. A young male child, for example, is theorized to begin taking on characteristics of his father, adopting more "masculine" behaviors and associating himself with the father's roles and attributes. Similarly, a female child would identify with her mother, internalizing "feminine" traits and behaviors. This process is considered instrumental in the development of gender identity and in navigating the complexities of early familial relationships, particularly within the framework of the Oedipus complex. Through this identification, the child resolves their ambivalent feelings towards the parents and solidifies their place within the family structure and broader society.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of identification, as a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory, emerged from Sigmund Freud's extensive clinical observations and theoretical formulations concerning personality development and psychopathology. While the term "identification" itself derives from Latin roots meaning "to make identical," Freud imbued it with a specific psychological meaning that went beyond simple resemblance. He first extensively discussed identification in works such as "Totem

and Taboo" (1913) and "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921), further elaborating on its critical role in "The Ego and the Id" (1923). His conceptualization highlighted identification as a fundamental mechanism for structuring the ego and superego, differentiating it sharply from the more superficial process of imitation.

Freud's historical development of the concept was intrinsically linked to his theory of psychosexual development, particularly the phallic stage, which typically occurs between the ages of three and six years. During this period, children are said to experience the Oedipus complex (or Electra complex for girls), involving intense desires for the opposite-sex parent and rivalry with the same-sex parent. The resolution of this complex, according to Freud, critically depends on the child's identification with the same-sex parent. This identification serves as a defensive mechanism, allowing the child to resolve the anxiety associated with their forbidden desires by symbolically becoming like the feared rival, thereby gaining a vicarious sense of power and affiliation. This process facilitates the abandonment of the intense desires for the opposite-sex parent and the incorporation of parental authority into the self.

Over time, the concept of identification evolved within psychoanalytic thought to encompass various forms and functions. Freud distinguished between different types, such as primary identification, which is the earliest and most fundamental form of connection to the mother, preceding the differentiation of ego and object; and secondary identification, which occurs later and involves identifying with specific attributes of others. This distinction underscored the pervasive nature of identification throughout the lifespan, influencing not only early personality formation but also later social bonds, group dynamics, and the development of ideals and aspirations. The historical trajectory of the concept thus reflects its growing importance as a core explanatory principle for how individuals integrate external influences into their internal psychological landscape.

3. Key Characteristics

Internalization of Parental Characteristics: One of the most prominent characteristics of identification, as outlined by Freud, is the deep and often unconscious process through which a child internalizes the traits, values, behaviors, and even emotional responses of their parents or primary caregivers. This is not merely about mimicking actions but about adopting these attributes as integral parts of one's own personality. For example, a child may internalize a parent's patience, work ethic, or even their fears and anxieties, making these characteristics their own, often without conscious awareness of their origin. This profound integration means that the child begins to perceive themselves through the lens of these internalized parental figures, shaping their self-concept and interaction style.

Formation of the Superego and Moral Development: Identification is unequivocally linked to the

development of the superego, which acts as the conscience and moral guide of the individual. Through the process of identification, children absorb the moral standards, societal rules, and ethical principles held by their parents. This involves incorporating parental injunctions, prohibitions, and ideals, which then become the child's own internal moral compass. The superego, formed through this identification, provides a mechanism for self-observation, self-criticism, and the pursuit of ideals, guiding the individual's sense of right and wrong and influencing feelings of guilt or pride based on adherence to these internalized standards.

Role in Gender Identity and Same-Sex Parent Association: A critical characteristic of Freudian identification is its specific emphasis on the child adopting the characteristics of the **same-sex parent**. This is seen as a pivotal step in resolving the Oedipus complex and establishing a clear gender identity. For boys, identification with the father signifies the assimilation of masculine attributes and social roles, while for girls, identification with the mother leads to the adoption of feminine characteristics. This association is crucial for the child to successfully navigate their psychosexual development, move beyond early emotional conflicts, and integrate into societal gender roles, thereby securing their sexual identity and future relational patterns.

Unconscious and Affective Nature: Unlike conscious learning or imitation, identification is largely an unconscious process driven by powerful emotional dynamics. It often arises from a child's desire to be like a loved or feared parent, to gain protection, to overcome feelings of helplessness, or to resolve internal conflicts. The emotional investment in the relationship with the identified object fuels this deep assimilation. This unconscious nature means that the individual may not be aware of the exact origins of certain personality traits or moral dictates, perceiving them simply as inherent aspects of their own self, which underscores the profound and lasting impact of identification on personality structure.

4. Significance and Impact

The concept of identification holds immense significance within psychoanalytic theory, serving as a cornerstone for understanding personality development, moral formation, and social integration. Its most profound impact lies in explaining how individuals acquire their sense of self, their gender identity, and their internal moral framework. Through identification, the external world, particularly the crucial figures of parents, is internalized, transforming external demands and ideals into internal psychological structures. This process is not merely passive absorption but an active, albeit unconscious, engagement that allows the developing individual to navigate complex emotional landscapes and establish a coherent personal identity, moving beyond initial dependency to a more autonomous, yet socially connected, self.

Moreover, identification plays a critical role in mediating the individual's relationship with society and culture. By internalizing parental values and societal norms through the superego,

identification serves as a primary mechanism for socialization. It enables children to learn acceptable behaviors, understand social roles, and develop a sense of belonging within their family and community. Beyond the family unit, identification extends to broader social contexts, where individuals may identify with groups, leaders, or cultural ideals, thereby adopting collective identities and contributing to social cohesion. This broader application highlights identification's enduring relevance in explaining how shared values and cultural traditions are transmitted across generations and how individuals forge their social bonds and allegiances.

The legacy of Freud's concept of identification extends far beyond classical psychoanalysis, influencing various subsequent psychological theories and therapeutic approaches. While some of its specific tenets, particularly those tied to the Oedipus complex, have faced criticism and revision, the fundamental idea that individuals internalize aspects of significant others to form their personality remains a powerful and widely accepted notion in developmental psychology. Concepts such as role modeling, social learning, and the formation of attachment bonds all bear the imprint of Freud's original insights into identification, underscoring its foundational impact on our understanding of how human beings become who they are through their relationships with others and their surrounding world.

5. Debates and Criticisms

While the concept of identification is central to Freudian psychoanalysis, it has not been without significant debates and criticisms, particularly concerning its universality, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical verifiability. A primary area of contention revolves around the Freudian emphasis on the Oedipus complex and its resolution through identification with the same-sex parent. Critics argue that this model is overly prescriptive, gender-essentialist, and heteronormative, failing to account for the diversity of family structures, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Modern developmental psychology often provides more nuanced explanations for gender identity formation, emphasizing social learning, cognitive processes, and individual experiences over a singular, biologically determined resolution of unconscious drives.

Furthermore, like many psychoanalytic concepts, identification is often criticized for its lack of empirical testability. The deeply unconscious nature of the process makes it challenging to observe or measure directly through scientific methodologies, leading to concerns about its scientific validity. Critics argue that much of the evidence for identification relies on clinical interpretation and anecdotal accounts rather than rigorous experimental data. This difficulty in operationalizing and empirically validating the concept has contributed to its diminished standing in some corners of contemporary academic psychology, which often prioritizes falsifiable hypotheses and quantitative research methods.

Beyond methodological concerns, the theoretical framework underpinning identification has also

drawn scrutiny. Some object to the deterministic nature of Freudian theory, which suggests that early childhood experiences, particularly those related to parental figures, irrevocably shape an individual's personality. Post-Freudian and other psychodynamic theorists, while acknowledging the importance of early relationships, often present more flexible models of development that emphasize continuous growth, resilience, and the capacity for change throughout the lifespan, rather than a fixed outcome determined by the resolution of a specific childhood complex. These criticisms have led to a re-evaluation and adaptation of the concept of identification within various psychological schools, integrating it with insights from object relations theory, attachment theory, and social learning perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals develop their sense of self in relation to others.

Further Reading

[Identification \(psychoanalysis\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Sigmund Freud - Wikipedia](#)

[Superego - Wikipedia](#)

[Oedipus complex - Wikipedia](#)

[Electra complex - Wikipedia](#)

[Psychoanalysis - Wikipedia](#)