

# ORAL CHARACTER

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## ORAL CHARACTER

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychoanalytic Theory

### 1. Core Definition

The **Oral Character** is a fundamental construct within **psychoanalytic theory**, positing a specific pattern of enduring personal traits and behaviors that are determined by psychic drives originating in the oral stage of psychosexual development. This earliest developmental phase, spanning from birth to approximately eighteen months, is defined by the infant's life centering entirely around the mouth and its functions, which serve as the primary source of gratification, interaction, and tension reduction. The quality of experiences encountered during this stage--specifically the satisfaction or frustration of oral needs--is believed to determine whether the child develops a developmental arrest (fixation) at this level, resulting in characteristic adult behaviors that symbolically or literally represent a continued search for oral pleasure.

Since the oral stage is divided into two distinct periods--the oral sucking period and the oral biting period--psychoanalytic classification recognizes different types of oral character, each reflecting the specific emotional conflicts and prevailing libidinal drives of that sub-stage. These characterological expressions are seen as residual manifestations of oral sexuality, persisting long after the stage has concluded, and profoundly influencing the individual's approach to relationships, giving, taking, and aggression.

### 2. Theoretical Origin and Development

The concept of the Oral Character stems directly from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, who theorized that the development of personality is intrinsically linked to the shifting focus of the libido across various erogenous zones. The oral stage is deemed crucial because it sets the precedent for how the individual manages dependency, trust, and the fundamental dichotomy between receiving and giving. Successful navigation of this stage, marked by adequate yet not excessive gratification, permits progression to subsequent stages without significant fixation.

If, however, the infant experiences conflicts, such as extreme neglect leading to frustration or, conversely, overindulgence leading to excessive dependence, the psychic energy becomes "arrested" or fixated at the oral level. This fixation generates powerful unconscious drives that manifest as adult character traits. These traits, whether optimistic and generous or pessimistic and demanding, are viewed as defenses or symbolic attempts to resolve the unresolved tensions established during the initial phase of life.

### 3. The Oral Sucking (Dependent) Character

The first period, known as the **oral sucking period**, typically extends from birth to about eight months. During this phase, the infant is utterly dependent and derives basic pleasure primarily from feeding and the close attachment to the mother. The emotional environment during feeding is paramount; if the process is emotionally and physically satisfying, the individual retains a healthy capacity for normal oral satisfaction later in life, manifesting in activities like pleasure derived from eating, kissing, or moderate habits such as smoking or occasionally chewing on an object.

The fixation associated with this period results in the dependent character type, which psychoanalysts link to the dichotomy of gratification versus deprivation. Individuals who experienced full satisfaction during nursing may identify with the "giving" mother and develop positive, altruistic traits, including **optimism**, self-assurance, and generosity, alongside a normal degree of narcissism. Conversely, individuals who experienced frustration--such as a mother's cold, mechanical attitude or tension during the weaning period--may develop severe neurotic traits centered on perpetual dependence. These individuals often exhibit profound **pessimism** and constantly demand that others cater to their immediate needs, showing an unwillingness or inability to give anything in return.

### 4. Manifestations of Oral Sucking Fixation

Fixation at the oral sucking stage leads to various enduring habits and compulsive behaviors designed to replicate the primary source of infantile pleasure. These residual expressions of oral sexuality can range from common nervous habits to severe psychological symptoms, all aimed at stimulating the mouth or engaging in repetitive oral activities.

**Compulsive Habits:** Persistent thumbsucking, chronic chain smoking, excessive talkativeness, or tics involving the mouth.

**Pathological Regression:** Severely regressed schizophrenic patients may exhibit extreme oral symptoms, such as verbigeration (the monotonous, senseless repetition of words or phrases) and voracious eating habits, which may align with symptoms of bulimia.

**Stuttering:** Difficulty in speech articulation is sometimes traced back to unresolved oral tension and fixation.

**Oral Sexual Compulsions:** A compelling need for oral sexual contact is also viewed as an adult manifestation of arrested oral drives.

### 5. The Oral Biting (Aggressive) Character

The second sub-stage, the **oral biting period**, typically lasts from the eighth to the eighteenth month and marks the initial emergence of aggressive drives and psychological independence.

During this time, the child begins to cease identification solely with the mother and develops a sense of separate identity. This period is characterized by **ambivalence**, as the child experiences both love (when needs are satisfied) and hate (when satisfaction is refused or delayed). Cruelty and aggression make their first appearance, often expressed by biting the breast or bottle nipple, particularly when the child feels anger or insecurity related to the stress of weaning.

Fixation during this aggressive stage results in the **Oral Aggressive Character**, characterized by sadism and hostility. These individuals channel the biting and devouring impulses into various adult behaviors, often utilizing the mouth metaphorically or physically to express dominance, anger, or destruction. The resulting personality is often highly critical, verbally cruel, and prone to antagonistic behaviors.

## 6. Manifestations of Oral Biting Fixation (Oral Sadism)

The expressions of the oral biting drive are forms of **oral sadism**, representing delayed or fixated aggressive impulses. These manifestations can be mild, forming nervous habits, or severe, impacting interpersonal relationships through hostility and destructive tendencies.

**Habitual Aggression:** Nervous habits such as persistent nail biting, spitting, sticking out the tongue, or compulsive chewing of hard objects like pencils, pipes, or gum.

**Verbal Cruelty:** A common, neurotic manifestation is the habit of making caustic, cutting, or "biting" remarks, using language as a weapon to inflict emotional pain upon others.

**Sexualized Aggression:** In intimate contexts, the tendency of lovers to nibble or gently bite various parts of each other's bodies is viewed as a normalized, subdued expression of the underlying oral aggressive drive.

**Extreme Pathology:** The most severe and primitive forms of oral aggression are linked by psychoanalytic theory to historical phenomena such as the biting manias of the Middle Ages, cannibalistic rites found in certain primitive tribes, and rare cases of mental disease involving a compulsion to devour human flesh.

## 7. Further Reading

[Oral stage \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Verbigeration \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Bulimia nervosa \(Wikipedia\)](#)