

**Essay Title:** Outline and evaluate the psychodynamic approach in psychology.  
(16 marks)

The foundation of psychodynamic thinking in psychology was laid by Sigmund Freud. Freud discovered (or invented) the notion of the unconscious which lies at the root of his hugely influential psychoanalytic method. Freud's theories revolve around three central ideas: that personality has a discernible structure; that it is constructed by the passage through psychosexual stages; and that the unconscious conflicts of this process are mediated by psychological processes he called defence mechanisms.

*An interesting and well-developed introduction outlining the key elements of psychodynamic psychology.*

According to Freud, personality has three components. The id is pure erotic energy: It is governed by primal urges that Freud called drives, and seeks nothing but pleasure. The ego is governed by the reality principle and is tasked with taming the id. The ego is conscious and aware of the demands of others outside of the self. It does not exist in the infant who is a creature of the id alone. But it arises in response to the control over desires exercised by others, especially parents. The superego is conscience, that inner voice that tells us when we have transgressed the bounds of acceptable behaviour: It is the internalised parent and comes into being reluctantly in response parental discipline.

*A well-detailed and accurate summary of Freud's theory of personality is presented.*

The road to conscience passes through the psychosexual stages: oral, anal, phallic, and genital. In each stage, the child has its desires for bodily pleasure denied and redirected by its parents until they focus exclusively on the appropriate sexual outlet. The driver of this complex process is the Oedipus complex in which boys relinquish their desire for their mother, and internalise the fear of castration by their father as the cautionary voice of conscience. This process is traumatic, and cannot be confronted directly, and so the ego establishes defence mechanisms, like repression and denial, to mediate the psychological terrors it generates.

*An effective use of specialist terminology demonstrates a clear understanding of Freud's psychosexual stages of development.*

As strange as Freud's ideas may seem now, they have been enormously influential in both the practice of psychology and in our understanding of how culture operates. The evidence for these ideas is almost entirely clinical rather than empirical, and its scientific credibility is questionable.

*An effective evaluation point*

But few would deny that there are, in fact, unconscious motivations and demonstrable defence mechanisms, and these existential realities have allowed Freudian theory to maintain some hold on psychotherapeutic techniques, like psychoanalysis, which is still used to treat patients today. Furthermore, there is empirical research to support the efficacy of psychoanalysis. Biskup et al. (2005) reported a naturalistic study of 36 patients that demonstrated that at the end of psychoanalytic therapy, 77% of the patients showed clinically significant improvements. Bachrach et al. (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of every major study of the efficacy of psychoanalytic treatment and found that all the studies show that psychoanalysis is an effective treatment for many patients.

Freud's theories are very much products of their time and place. Their obsession with the Oedipus complex is intensely androcentric, and many would claim this makes them irrelevant to an understanding of women. But female psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein and Nancy Chodorow have shown that even gender-biased theories can be adopted to provide useful insights into human behaviour. However, the culture-bias of psychoanalytic theory is perhaps more profound. All of Freud's patients came from the Viennese middle-class, and his universal generalisations were based on this highly unrepresentative sample. He called his therapy "the talking cure", and there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is only suitable for cultures where the discussion of personal problems is encouraged. This is more a practical limitation than a conceptual one, but it casts some doubt on the effectiveness of any therapeutic approach based on psychoanalytic ideas.

[594 Words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark Band 4**

This essay demonstrates an exceptionally clearly understanding and appreciation of psychodynamic psychology. The knowledge is excellent, and the evaluation is thorough, effective, interesting and focused on the demands of the question. The evaluation draws on suitable issues and debates, and research evidence to provide an interesting commentary.

*drawing on the real-world application of Freud's ideas to treatments.*

*Evidence is present to further develop the discussion.*

*A discussion centred on the idea of gender bias and androcentrism is presented well but could be elaborated further to outline why this is a limitation.*

*An effective evaluation of Freud's therapy and issues of cultural bias are explored.*