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Ego Psychology

“Mind is the great lever of all things; human thought is the process by which human ends are ultimately answered.”

—Daniel Webster

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The reader will be able to:

1. Define the major defense mechanisms
2. Describe the process and significance of adaptation
3. Outline the ego psychological perspective of the origin of the psychic structures.

EGO AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS

It is Sigmund Freud’s daughter Anna Freud (1895–1982) who is often identified as the first voice of ego psychology. Encouraged by her father to extend the study and practice of psychoanalysis to children, she is best known for elucidating the defense mechanisms by which the ego masters the environment and the shaping forces of each individual’s psychopathology, the id and the superego. The names and definitions she assigned are still the benchmark terminology of psychoanalytic psychology: repression, suppression, denial, reaction formation, undoing, rational-

ization, intellectualization, sublimation, displacement, and several others. These mechanisms are defined and illustrated in Table 3-1.

Sigmund Freud maintained that repression was the predominant defense mechanism, that it was the chief tool available to the ego to defend itself against the environment and the impulses of the id. The major thrust of analysis, therefore, was to uncover and comprehend the content of the repressed material. Anna Freud's articulation of the richness of the defense mechanisms pointed analysts toward the examination of the dynamic processes operative within the ego itself. However, she maintained that analysis of the ego paled by comparison with analysis of the id.



MR. BROWN has *repressed* his envy of his brother and his resentment of his father. He has *identified with the aggressor* by adopting his father's line of work. His *superego*, however, makes him feel guilty about having succeeded in his Oedipal strivings for closeness with his mother, and his failures at work and school represent self-punishment.

ADAPTATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

The promulgation of ego psychological theory fell to a generation of analysts who were mostly refugees from Hitler's advance through Europe, and who had to postpone their major work until they could resettle in the 1930s. These included Ernst Kris, Rudolph Lowenstein, Rene Spitz, and chief among Freud's peers, Heinz Hartmann (1894–1970). A trainee of Freud's, Hartmann undertook the expansion of his mentor's model to explain some of its lingering questions: What was the origin of ego? How did ego tame id, which was powered by the potent energy of the drives? What was the purpose of the aggressive drive? What role did these structures and forces play in normal development?

For Hartmann, the unifying process of human psychological development was adaptation, a reciprocal relationship between the individual and his or her environment. The outcome of successful adaptation is a "fitting together" of the individual with the environment. Thus, conflict is neither the cause nor the outcome

TABLE 3-1 *Ego Defense Mechanisms Elaborated by Anna Freud*

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Repression	Involuntary exclusion from conscious awareness of conflictual or painful impulses, thoughts, or memories	Battered child has no memories from before age 7.
Suppression	Conscious exclusion from awareness of painful impulses, thought, or memories	"I choose not to think about that."
Denial	Failure to recognize external reality	Patient with malignant tumor insists she does not have cancer.
Reaction formation	Reversal of an impulse to its opposite	Jealous older sister becomes very affectionate and protective of newborn brother.
Undoing	Symbolic or actual negation of previous unacceptable thought or action	Woman has fleeting thought of killing her husband; unaware of it, she brings him a gift that night.
Rationalization	Elaboration of socially acceptable reasons to justify feelings or actions that are unconsciously determined	Embarrassed by his rival's intellectual superiority, boy criticizes the other's nerdy dress.
Intellectualization	Overuse of reasoning or logic to avoid awareness of feelings and impulses	Adolescent talks at great length about social issues to avoid confronting his own aggressive impulses.
Sublimation	Partial gratification of an impulse by altering the aim or object to make it socially more acceptable	Man channels aggressive urges into athletic competition.

(continues)

TABLE 3-1*Ego Defense Mechanisms Elaborated by Anna Freud
(continued)*

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Symbolization	Representation of affect-laden person, thing, or thought in the form of another person, thing, or thought that has some similarity of association	Sometimes a cigar isn't just a cigar. . . .
Somatization	Expression of psychic conflict by production of physical symptom, sometimes symbolic of the conflict	Afraid of being bullied at school, child develops stomachache.
Displacement	Affect originally attached to one object is transferred to a more innocuous object	Man is embarrassed and angry for being criticized by boss at work; ashamed of his powerlessness to object in public., he comes home and kicks the dog.
Aim inhibition	Accepting partial gratification of an impulse	Man cultivates close friendship with woman who is sexually desired but socially forbidden to him.
Introjection (or internalization)	Assimilation of characteristics of an object into one's own ego/superego	Man envies his boss, so he adopts his politics and tastes.
Identification	Modeling of one's self on another person or group, but with less intensity and completeness than with introjection	Conscious emulation of an admired public figure
Identification with the aggressor	Incorporation of aspects of another person who is perceived as a serious threat or cause of frustration	Boy in Oedipal stage assumes characteristics of father.

(continues)

TABLE 3-1 *Ego Defense Mechanisms Elaborated by Anna Freud (continued)*

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Idealization	Overestimation of positive and underestimation of negative qualities of a desired object	Widower is unable to recall any of the things he ever resented about his wife.
Projection	Attributing one's own unacknowledged feelings or impulses to another person	Woman represses her own sexual hunger and dismisses all men as sex fiends.
Regression	Return to previous level of function or psychosexual stage	Five-year-old boy resumes bedwetting when sibling is born.
Splitting	Perceiving of objects as all good or all bad	Man can have sex with prostitutes but must treat wife as a chaste saint.
Dissociation	Splitting off of a group of thoughts or actions from conscious awareness	Fugue state
Isolation (of affect)	Repression of affect away from a thought, or a thought away from its affect	Medical student dissects cadaver without any feelings about death.
Fantasy	Mental elaborations that provide partial gratification of impulses	Man with erectile dysfunction daydreams about orgies.
Turning (aggression) against the self	Self-destructive thoughts or actions replace aggression toward other objects	Woman blocks anxiety over fight with husband by getting into minor auto accident.
Turning passive into active	Action in anticipation of being acted upon	Patient misses therapy session just before therapist's announced vacation.

of psychopathology, but a normal and necessary part of the human condition. In Hartmann's model, the ingredients of ego and id are present at birth in an undifferentiated matrix. Normative conflicts with the environment separate ego from id. Particularly, the infant expectedly experiences certain degrees of frustration, as his or her too-human mother fails to provide total and immediate satisfaction. In fact, if there remained total gratification, there would never be any need to differentiate self from other, to pursue autonomy; in short, no need for an ego.

Id, ego, and superego continue to separate by the process of *differentiation*. Within the ego, primitive regulatory factors are increasingly replaced or supplemented by more effective ones. The experiences of frustration, in the context of normative growth of brain and body, allow the developing ego to remember experiences long enough to delay gratification and anticipate the future. Part of the power the ego derives from the gradually differentiating matrix serves to gratify id desires, though not in the immediate and unrestrained terms of the primitive mind. In a reciprocal fashion, the memory of past gratification allows the ego to engage in delayed gratification. This process mandates the creation of an internal world of object representations; and this inner world facilitates further exercise of delayed gratification. As the structures ego and superego mature, the need for external fulfillment diminishes and autonomy increases.

Because psychic structures enable the individual to be less dependent on the environment, structure formation serves adaptation. Superego is one outcome of adaptation to the social environment, a product of continuing ego development. While ego development depends on the maturation of body and brain, to provide motor and cognitive control, superego development is more purely social and abstract. Although Hartmann did not reject castration anxiety as critical in superego development, he placed much more emphasis on identification and idealization. The infant first identifies with his or her parents as idealized figures who provide protection and gratification. Soon he or she discovers that fitting together is better served by some restraint of id urges and by modeling of the moral standards of the parents. These functions constitute the role of the superego.

In drive theory, the drives shape and guide the structures. In ego psychology, the relationship is more complementary. Ego and superego divert libidinal energy away from purely sexual aims by

means of sublimation and other mechanisms. Where primitive libido aimed just for erotic gratification, the maturing ego could seek affection, entertainment, and enlightenment. Similarly, aggression is redirected from the desire for destruction of others and is internalized to serve ego. Its power is used by superego to restrain destructive pursuit of id impulses; it is lassoed by ego and transformed into competitiveness and other more adaptive manifestations. Modification of innate aggression proceeds by several means:

- Displacement—Aggression is redirected to more acceptable objects such as criminals or the rival soccer team.
- Sublimation—Aggression is completely divorced from an obvious object and diverted to an acceptable aim; energy may be exerted chopping trees or hauling trash.
- Fusion with libido—Healthy adult relationships include both pulling together and pushing apart and ideally the libidinal element predominates. Satisfying sex may include some teasing; an admiring relationship with a mentor may involve competition.

Evolution of Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are tools for adaptation to the environment by either *alloplastic* means (changing the environment) or *autoplastic* ones (changing the self). Alloplastic solutions require the cooperation or subservience of elements outside the self and are thus often thwarted. The mature, confident ego is more apt to attempt autoplastic solutions, which are more likely to be successful. The child who persists in demanding attention from an unresponsive parent is certain to be frustrated. If he or she learns to entertain himself or herself and to find pleasure in friends, gratification is at hand.

In the earliest stages of ego development, the role of the defenses is to minimize pain and distress and to gratify id wishes. Later, they serve to contain and master id's conflicts with reality and with superego. Eventually, though, many applications of the defense mechanisms lose their purely defensive function. The mechanisms that began as reflexes can come to change personality.

Identification is the principle example, though hardly the only one. As noted above, in the infant, identification protects

against the powerlessness of being a victim of one's environment. Later, it promotes the development of superego function. In the social realm, the child who identifies with his or her peers learns how to blend into the group and achieves the libidinal gratification of belonging. But even at this early stage, identification achieves its own rewards independent of defensive purpose. Identifying with an admired teacher promotes the development of intellectual or artistic skills that provide satisfaction outside the context of drive gratification or defense against distress. This transformation of ego functions outside the defensive realm allows ego psychology to explain nuances of personality development with a richness not available to drive psychology.



MS. GRAY learned early from identification with her mother that sexual behavior could bring some form of intimacy and support from men. As an adult, she is able to attract men easily. At times, she does so to defend against loneliness, but at other times she can mobilize this capacity to provide entertainment and even fulfillment. Even while intellectually aware of its destructive consequences, she identifies this aptitude with some pride as part of her self definition.

There is also a *conflict-free sphere* of ego development. Certain capacities have an inherent capacity for expression and growth, promoting adaptation to the environment without need to invoke conflict. Apparatuses that exist within the undifferentiated matrix come under control of the ego. In the motor sphere, these capacities include grasping, crawling, and walking. In the mental realm, they encompass perception, object comprehension, thinking, language, and memory. These faculties, though not defenses, are indispensable for coping and for growth. Their development is fueled by the inherent satisfaction and pleasure the ego gleans by exercising them.

ORIGINS OF EGO

Hartmann and his contemporaries described the structure and function of id, ego, and superego and postulated their developmental origins in retrospect. Rene Spitz was a successor to Hartmann and elaborated in more detail the development of ego using direct observations of children.

Spitz began by considering the role of perception in the infant. For the baby, sensation is all visceral and poorly differentiated. Self and other, inside and outside, are initially fused; sensations are poorly discriminated from each other, if at all; experiences are either all good or all bad and very intense. Experience with a partner, usually mother, allows for some modulation of the intensity. Repeated experiences establish memory traces. Interaction with mother allows the child to put these memories to work in the service of the ego; he or she learns to become an agent in his or her world, not just a passive recipient of its gifts or pains. Spitz identified three organizing principles in the development of the ego:

1. The smiling response—Usually at about age 3 months, the child begins to smile in the presence of pleasant stimuli. The singular perceptual mode of earliest life is replaced by dialectical perception, the earliest separation of inside from outside. Recognition of specific faces is evidence of the establishment of memory traces. The ability to connect the face of the present with the memory of pleasure in the past is the manifestation of an ability to form associations. The rudimentary ego is able to shift from passive and random behaviors to active and directed ones. Here begins social relations
2. Stranger anxiety—At about 8 months, most children express distress in the presence of unfamiliar others. This feature is possible because the child can now specify the affective connection to the familiar parent. Additionally, anxiety is no longer just an unavoidable response to current distress, but has begun to serve a signal function. Even though the stranger is not inflicting pain or discomfort, the young ego experiences anxiety as a signal that some affliction may be in the offing.
3. Semantic communication—Most children can speak at about one year of age, but it is not until about six months later that they can formulate words with the specific intent to communicate something to another. One of the earliest ways this function is evident is in the ability to say “no.” Doing so, the child takes the first steps in identification with the aggressor, turning passivity into active control. Learning to communicate by speaking, the child comes to relinquish the fantasy of perfect nonverbal communication

with a symbiotic partner. In doing so, the child takes his or her first steps toward a full social life.

ADULT DEVELOPMENT

The ego in this psychology was not just a more complex entity than in the drive model, it was also a more vital and organic one, growing and changing even in adult life. Since elements of the environment are critical in the formation of the ego in the first place, it stands to reason that they will continue to exert influence on the ego long after childhood. Two theorists made particularly lasting contributions to the theories of adult development: Erik Erikson and George Vaillant.

Erikson and the Epigenetic Model

Erik Erikson (1902–1994) was an artist and teacher when he met Anna Freud in his mid-twenties. Encouraged by her to study psychoanalysis, he became interested in the influence of society and culture on child development. In developing his theories, he did not stop with the evolution of the ego, but elaborated ego's maturation through the span of life. Erikson's definitions of the eight stages of human development have become famous even outside psychodynamic circles. (See Table 3-2.)

From his observations, Erikson posited a succession of life crises, an epigenetic scheme of development:

1. *Basic trust vs. basic mistrust*—For the first year of life, the child learns that the world is a trustworthy place and that he or she is also trustworthy. Failure to achieve this end leaves the developing child with a sense of insecurity and an inability to trust others.
2. *Autonomy vs. shame and doubt*—From about ages 1 to 3, the developing nervous system affords the opportunity to walk, retain feces, and exert all sorts of self-control. The child can practice leaving mother and returning. But these attempts are not always successful, and failures can lead to self-doubt and shame.
3. *Initiative vs. guilt*—From about ages 3 to 6, the growing child attempts to exert influence and follow the leads of curiosity, using his or her budding cognitive and motor skills. The

TABLE 3-2 *Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development*

<i>Life Crisis</i>	<i>Usual Age</i>	<i>Summary</i>
Basic trust vs. basic mistrust	0–1 year	World is a reliable place; I am reliable vs. World is dangerous; I cannot trust myself
Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	1–3 years	I can exert myself and accomplish things vs. I am incompetent and unsuccessful
Initiative vs. guilt	3–6 years	I can follow my curiosity and exploit opportunities vs. It is wrong for me to explore or to initiate
Industry vs. inferiority	6–12 years	I can take pleasure in my achievements vs. I am not as capable as my peers
Identity vs. identity diffusion	Adolescence	I can define myself as an independent person vs. I can only define myself in terms of the expectations of others
Intimacy vs. isolation	Young adulthood	I can achieve emotional closeness with others vs. Getting close is more risky than it is worth
Generativity vs. self-absorption	Middle adulthood	My contributions live on through future generations vs. There is no meaning beyond my finite life
Integrity vs. despair	Late life	I accept what life has dealt me and I accept responsibility for my choices vs. I regret that things were not different, and I fear impending death

social environment is, however, becoming increasingly important, and when the child violates rules, he or she may feel guilt about the transgression. Of course, this life crisis is exactly contemporary with Freud's Oedipal period. The desire to possess mother and to annihilate father are manifestations of initiative, and the superego, born at this time, is the structural container for guilt. Erikson redefines the essential dynamics of the Oedipal drama to put a greater focus on the role of the social environment.

4. *Industry vs. inferiority*—During the latency years, about ages 6–12, the child is turning away from parents and to-

ward peers as objects of identification. He or she will seek to excel at sports, school, or other childhood endeavors. The reward is the satisfaction of accomplishment and success. The risk is failure; the child who is benched at softball or who scores a "C" on a math test may learn to feel inferior.

5. *Identity vs. identity diffusion*—During puberty and adolescence, the teen is asking, "Who am I?" and constantly revising the answer. A common solution during these years is to assert one's independence by acting, dressing, and talking like everyone else in one's peer group. Identification is an important tool for establishing identity, but it raises the threat of diffusing that sense of individuality.
6. *Intimacy vs. isolation*—In young adulthood, the task is to attain a sense of emotional, sexual, and spiritual maturity with a view toward social responsibility. But intimacy carries risks. People are often hurt in trying to establish closeness with others, and if they fail to adapt successfully, they may be inclined to retreat into emotional isolation.
7. *Generativity vs. self-absorption*—Middle age is marked by a different kind of questioning, centering on one's place in the larger scheme of life. Generativity is a sense of living on through succeeding generations without becoming overly involved. At the opposite pole is a view that one's life is completely self-contained and finite. Most often, this crisis is played out in raising one's children, but generativity can be accomplished through philanthropy, teaching, entrepreneurship, or other avenues.
8. *Integrity vs. despair*—In the closing phase of life, one ideally comes to a sense of balance between owning responsibility for his or her choices and accepting the fate that one has been dealt. Erikson's descriptions of integrity, drawn from observations across cultures, render a richly-textured view of spiritual connections with past and future. The task of achieving this goal is daunting and one is threatened with a sense of futility and isolation in the face of impending mortality.

Erikson's model takes ego psychology's basic tenet of adaptation and expands it in the realm of the social environment. It also adds a longitudinal dimension, making for a more flexible, or-

ganic map of human development. Some noteworthy features of the epigenetic scheme further amplify its explanatory power:

- No crisis is resolved completely in one direction or the other. An adult who lacks any sense of mistrust would be easily exploited. One who lacks any guilt could be sociopathic. The balance between the poles of any life crisis is a central element of individual personality.
- Crises persist beyond their most relevant phases. Initiative vs. guilt, for example, is the signal crisis of the Oedipal period, but adults frequently struggle with issues along the same axis. At each stage, one is still juggling remnants of previous crises.
- The resolution of each crisis depends powerfully on the interpersonal environment. The infant who is not fed when hungry cannot learn basic trust. Betrayed by a cherished lover will impair a young adult's capacity to develop intimacy. A society that ridicules elders makes it hard for one to achieve integrity.



MS. WHITE was raised in an environment that fostered a strong sense of basic trust. Elements of her history indicate that she achieved most of the elements of autonomy, initiative, and industry fairly well. Her current stage of midlife is the time for the struggle of generativity vs. self-absorption, and she is indeed striving to define the most adaptive way to be a mother without submerging her own identity. In the midst of this struggle, issues of identity and intimacy, which had previously been negotiated, return in her social withdrawal and her confusion about how to relate to her husband.

MATURATION OF DEFENSES

Erikson's model popularized the notion that psychological development is a lifelong process. His scheme drew on the existing principles of ego psychology, augmented with observations of children and adults in different cultures. A complementary model was developed by George Vaillant (1934–), who examined the patterns of defense mechanisms employed over the lifespan. His methodology was notable. He followed a sizable cohort of healthy young adult men over decades from their 20s into late adulthood and interviewed them in depth to determine what defense mech-

anisms they employed most commonly and what the consequences were of different patterns of defense.

From his observations, he clustered the defense mechanisms according to the stages of life at which they were most appropriately or most adaptively employed.

- Immature defenses include projection, passive aggression, acting out, hypochondriasis, and retreat into fantasy. These defenses are normative in early life. In adulthood, they are characteristic of many personality disorders.
- Intermediate (or neurotic) defenses include dissociation, displacement, isolation of affect, intellectualization, repression, and reaction formation. They are common to middle childhood and adolescence. In adulthood, they are most commonly employed in moderately disabling conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder, simple phobias, and dysthymic disorder.
- Mature defenses, characteristic of healthy adults, include altruism, sublimation, anticipation, and humor.

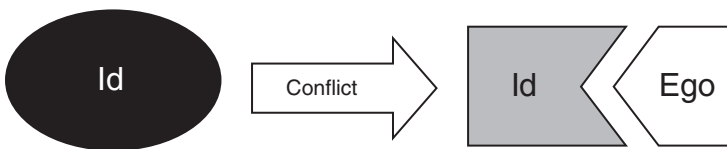
Vaillant's contributions were twofold. First, he undertook an empirical investigation of the evolution of ego function that returned results consistent with the predictions of the prevailing theory. Second, he integrated the cross-sectional descriptions of the defenses that had been used since Freud's time with the longitudinal perspective of Erikson and others.

REFINEMENT OF THE THEORIES

In Freud's formulation, the original psychic structure was id alone. From id's attempts to master the environment, and from the conflicts deriving therefrom, ego arose, at the expense of id strength and energy. In this model, id's drive demands were the source of all mental activity. It explained much, particularly the neurotic symptoms of the patients the early analysts saw. But it failed to account for functions later noted in direct observation of normal children, and it required great logical stretches to explain the problems of patients with more pervasive distortions of perception and response.

Hartmann, noting that elements of ego function, such as perception, were present at birth, postulated instead the undifferentiated matrix. Through both conflict and conflict-free develop-

Sigmund Freud's Model



Heinz Hartmann's Model

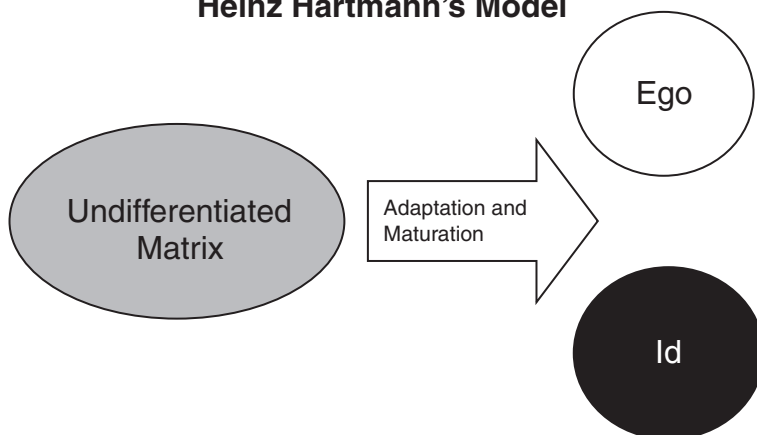


FIGURE 3-1 ■ Origin of the Ego

ment, ego and id differentiated from the matrix. (See Figure 3-1.) This model accounted better for what observers were seeing in children, and it provided an internally consistent general philosophy of normal development and function. Additionally, it offered less-tortured interpretations of the more complicated problems that patients brought to analysts as psychoanalysis became a more popular intervention.

Ego psychology used the language of Freud's original drive/structure model and maintained most of its core assumptions. It stretched the explanatory capacities of the model and allowed for the treatment of cases previously impervious to psychoanalysis. Because these patients exhibited more interpersonal problems than strictly intrapsychic ones, and because the model

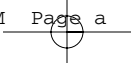
of ego development was contingent on interactions with the personal and social environment, theorists were now presented with a range of questions about the nature of human interaction and its role in development and pathology. The door was opened to schools of thought that described something broader than a one-person psychology. Even while ego psychology was developing further in the 1930s, the schools of interpersonal psychoanalysis and object relations were branching off.

Learning Points

- Anna Freud named and described the major psychological defense mechanisms, which are still broadly accepted.
- Heinz Hartmann described psychological development from the perspective of adaptation, the employment of the defense mechanisms to allow the ego to fit together with its environment. Ego psychology focuses on this process as the central element of normal function and psychopathology.
- Ego psychological theory maintains that an undifferentiated matrix of psychic structure is present from birth, and that id, ego, and superego differentiate from it.
- There is a conflict-free sphere of development that encompasses the achievement of capacities such as motor skills and intelligence.
- Ego development continues beyond childhood. Erikson and Vaillant have described the evolution of ego functions throughout life.

RECOMMENDED READING

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AUTHOR QUERIES

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