A Perspective on Freud's Theories in Relation to Self-harming Behaviour

Perspektif Teori Freud Berhubung Dengan Tingkah Laku Mencederakan Diri

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Self-harming is intentional self-destructive behaviour, although it is not necessarily suicidal. It is common not only in the West, but also in oriental countries like Malaysia. Many people question why adolescents harm themselves intentionally nowadays? What actually motivates them to do so? This conceptual paper explains the reasons behind such actions based on Freud's theories. According to Freud, the constructs of id, ego and superego interact to form a person's character. The id is our instinctual drive that ignores consequences when it acts, while the ego is our common sense faculty, responsible for working out proper plans that are acceptable to society. The superego is moralistic; its role is to prevent the id from prevailing when it thinks that it is wrong. In daily life, individuals strive to achieve homoeostasis whenever pain occurs through the distribution of these energies. As adolescence is a stage of overwhelming experience, in order to release the tension that arises, the id leads us into instinctual desire and problematic behaviour, such as self-harming. It is only through rigorous training that the ego can function well and overcome the driving force of the id to avoid any problematic behaviour. When the superego leads, adolescents will be seen as rigid and cannot tolerate any flaws in their life. In order to have a balanced and healthy personality, adolescents need to have a good blend of these three constructs. Thus, understanding what lies behind an action can enable us to have a deeper understanding of why adolescents engage in self-harming behaviour.

Keywords: self-harming behaviour, id, ego, superego, homoeostasis

Tingkah laku mencederakan diri adalah tingkah laku merosakkan diri dengan sengaja, walaupun ia tidak semestinya membunuh diri. Tingkah laku ini bukan sahaja perkara biasa di barat, tetapi juga negara-negara timur seperti Malaysia. Ramai orang tertanya-tanya mengapa remaja sengaja mencederakan diri pada masa kini? Apa yang sebenarnya memotivasikan mereka berbuat demikian? Kertas konsep ini menerangkan sebab-sebab di sebalik tindakan tersebut berdasarkan teori Freud. Mengikut Freud, karekter seseorang adalah hasil daripada interaksi konstruk id, ego dan superego. Id adalah kekuatan naluri yang mengabaikan kesan tindakan, manakala ego adalah akal fikiran, bertanggungjawab untuk merancang tindakan yang sesuai supaya dapat diterima oleh masyarakat. Superego pula adalah berkenaan dengan moral; peranannya ialah untuk menyekat id daripada bertindak sekiranya ia berpendapat tindakan itu adalah salah. Dalam kehidupan seharian, individu berusaha untuk mencapai keseimbangan melalui pembahagian ketiga-tiga tenaga tersebut apabila sahaja kesakitan dirasai. Peringkat remaja merupakan satu peringkat yang penuh dengan pengalaman. Untuk melepaskan ketegangan yang timbul, id membawa kepada keinginan naluri dan tingkah laku yang bermasalah, seperti tingkah laku mencederakan diri. Hanya dengan latihan yang gigih dapat membolehkan ego berfungsi dengan baik untuk mengatasi kekuatan naluri id demi mengelakkan tingkah laku bermasalah. Apabila superego memimpin, remaja akan bersifat tidak fleksibel dan tidak dapat bertoleransi dengan apa-apa kecacatan dalam kehidupan mereka. Untuk memperoleh personaliti yang sihat dan stabil, remaja perlu mempunyai gabungan ketiga-tiga konstruk dengan baik. Dengan memahami apa berlaku disebalik tindakan seseorang membolehkan kita lebih memahami mengapa remaja terlibat dalam tingkah laku mencederakan diri.

Kata kunci: tingkah laku mencederakan diri, id, ego, superego, keseimbangan

Self-harming involves an intentional act of self-injury without suicidal intent (Nock, 2010). It has become a key factor contributing to the rise in morbidity and mortality rates worldwide (World Health Organization, WHO, 2001). Evidence shows that the risk of repeated suicide attempts and suicide is higher among those who self-harm (Sankaranarayanan, Al-Amin, & Ghuloum, 2019). Studies in the 1980s showed that the risk of suicide was 25 times greater for those who self-harmed (Bergen et al., 2012). Children and adolescents who harmed themselves were approximately nine times more likely to die unnaturally from suicide (Morgan et al., 2017). Furthermore, Eddleston (2000) claimed that it was a major problem responsible for around 600,000 deaths in 1990.

According to Hawton, Saunders and O'Connor (2012), the majority of self-harming behaviour starts during adolescence. Most researchers postulate that adolescents are the largest group of people who indulge in self-harming behaviour, and the practice is a major public health problem in many countries (Morgan et al., 2017). Self-harming among adolescents has prompted many researchers to carry out studies in western countries as this behaviour has

become so serious that it has become an international concern. In Malaysia, the Government allocated RM 900 million for the years 2006-2010 to improve services for mental health, including those related to the prevention of suicide and self-harming (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006).

To date, the prevalence of self-harming across Malaysia has not been determined, and research into the practice has been fragmented as it has tended to focus on specific types of self-harming among certain ethnic groups (Armitage, Panagioti, Wirda Abdul Rahim, Rowe, & O'Connor, 2015). For example, a study conducted by Guan (2014) revealed that the prevalence rate of self-harming among Chinese adolescents in Penang was 56.81%, while in Kota Kinabalu the rate among adolescents regardless of ethnicity was even higher at 67.36% (Norsuhada Kamaludin & Guan, 2016). Both studies indicate that self-harming is common among adolescents in Malaysia.

Freud's Theory of the Id, Ego and Superego and Self-harming Behaviour

According to the theory of personality proposed by Freud (1923/1974), there are three main constructs that make up an individual's personality: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id corresponds to the instinct within an individual. Its main purpose is to satisfy its desire for pleasure and it cannot tolerate pressure. In order to satisfy a desire, psychic energy is discharged from the id, thus making one act blindly. For example, when an infant is hungry, the id acts impulsively and the infant's direct reaction is to cry until he/she gets milk. With the arrival of the milk, the infant's desire for pleasure is fulfilled. Conversely, if the infant is not fed immediately, a memory image of food is produced and he/she will keep on crying in order to reduce the tension caused by hunger.

The ego represents "reason" and "common sense." It acts as the middle man between the id and the environment. The function of the ego is to transform the id's instinctual wish into action in an appropriate manner. As the ego is governed by the reality purpose, its aim is to postpone the discharge energy of the id if the environment is not suitable. This means that the ego is able to suppress the id until it finds an appropriate environment for the id to be released. Thus the id's desire for pleasure is temporarily denied in the interests of reality. At this point, logical thinking (the ego) takes the place of wish-fulfilment (the id); realistic thinking (the secondary process) overrides the hallucinatory desire for wish-fulfilment (the primary process). This logical thinking usually employed in the application of appropriate problem-solving skills in daily life. If the adolescent's problem solving skills are good, the id succumbs to the ego, and negative actions towards others or self are delayed, and probably substituted with other positive actions; otherwise the id can be mediated through the ego by way of self-harming behaviour for those who do not have other coping strategies to achieve homoeostasis - a tension-free status. In serious cases, some may attempt suicide (Bryan, Bryan, Ray-Sannerud, Etienne, & Morrow, 2014).

The superego acts as the moral arm of the personality. It represents the conscience rather than the seeker of reality or pleasure. The resisting forces of the superego differ from those of the ego. If the idealized-cathexes (moral forces) of the superego thinks an intention is immoral, anti-cathexes (resisting forces) will be induced to block the discharge of instinctual energy. That is, the conscience of the superego opposes the id and tries to suspend the operation of the pleasure principle. It can also direct the discharge of energy through the ego if it thinks it is right (Gilliland & James, 1998). The superego is our sense of right or wrong and it provides guidelines for individuals to make judgments.

The resisting forces of the ego serve the purpose of delaying final action in order that the ego can work out a satisfactory plan. It needs to act as a middle man to ensure that the impulses of id are checked. For example, when one is hungry, the craving to eat is high (id), but one knows that one cannot steal to get food (superego), so one has to buy it (ego). The ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies.

When negative thoughts on the action of the id arise, the superego says "No," while the ego says "Wait" and probably tries to devise something better for the id. The ego comes in to ensure that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable to society. According to Freud, people who have strong superegos spend much of their energy defending themselves against the id. As a consequence, they become "rigid." The superego can be nurtured by our parents and the society in which we grow up. In daily life if we were to be ruled entirely by the id (pleasure), our behaviour would become disruptive and socially unacceptable.

Adolescents indulge in self-harming behaviour more often than other age groups. According to Erikson (1963), there are eight stages of man, with puberty and adolescence representing the fifth stage (identity-versus-role confusion). Fox et al. (2015) suggested that this stage is the most dangerous, supported by the prevalence of self-harming at this stage: sensation-seeking is at an all-time high, yet the underlying brain circuitry is engaged in the inhibition of inappropriate desires, emotions, and actions (Borschmann et al., 2017). While seeking their identity, adolescents also want to achieve competence and gain independence for themselves by breaking ties with their parents. Individuals at this stage have to face the reality that their parents can no longer provide a protective screen of thinking for them in a way that they once did. This loss exposes the youngsters to the cold draught of reality as they face the world. In resolving the conflicts that occur in daily life, the id may at any time be triggered and cause problematic behaviour if not handled carefully.

Freud's theory of id, ego and superego explains that whenever tension and pain exist, an individual will act on something to achieve homoeostasis, which is a state of tension-free comfort. Adolescents not only experience psychological problems that build within them, they also need to handle many external problems such as those related to family, school, and friends. In a meta-analysis study of risk factors for self-harming, Fox et al. (2015) reported that individuals who self-harm demonstrate higher levels of emotional dysregulation and negative affect. Emotional dysregulation and negative affect are the means for them to achieve physiological and emotional homoeostasis. It is clear that when adolescents experience pain without appropriate intervention, they are left to achieve homoeostasis on their own. As a result, when they cannot handle problems well, adolescents utilise a range of techniques, which includes fighting, scolding, and indulging in self-harming behaviour in order for them to feel better (Fox et al., 2015).

The dynamics of a person's character, whether essentially impulsive, realistic or moralistic, are dependent on changes in the distribution of the three energies. When

the ego overpowers, the id weakens; if the ego weakens, the id overpowers and the impulsive wish reigns again. The development of personality during adolescence is influenced by environment, heredity, and the maturational process.

Adolescence is the growth and exploration stage. Physically young people might be strong, but psychologically they are vulnerable. The biological, psychological, and social factors that cause changes in the lives of adolescents interact strongly with their infantile feelings (Briggs, Lemma, & Crouch, 2008), resulting in confusion about social conflicts and the demands made on them. They need to adjust according to various significant segments in their lives. For example, adolescents are expected to respect their parents at home, to do well in school, and to behave well in their community. All these segments create tension within them as they are bombarded with many "shoulds" and "should nots" by society. Expectations from environment, family, school, religion, peers, and surroundings all call for different manners and values, so that the adolescent's instinctual drives may contribute to their identity problems. Internal Conflict often arises when "shoulds" and "should nots" are imposed without them being fully comprehended, resulting in adolescents becoming clannish, intolerant, indecisive, vulnerable, and self-conscious.

At the same time, most adolescents are afraid of rejection by significant others, especially their peers. They want recognition from their peers and depend on them for affection and self-esteem. Typically, they are also afraid of not fitting in with their peers. Identity to them is vastly important (Erikson, 1963). Thus, social influences, such as those of deviant peer groups who regularly practice self-harming as a means to achieve homoeostasis feature heavily in development until adulthood (Borschmann et al., 2017). Thus, identity, even though a task extending over a lifetime, becomes a crisis during adolescence. The issues of achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion may at any time cause repetition of problematic behaviour such as self-harming.

Adolescence is known to be a time of overwhelming adjustment, with puberty being a great experience in an individual's life. It can also be a very frustrating time for many as they try to adjust. Their growth towards adulthood mandatorily forces them to deal with such changes. Even though all of us experience failure to some extent in our lifetime, such setbacks may have greater impact during adolescence. As they stand at the threshold of adulthood, all the major developmental processes of adolescence are being played out via these episodes. The process of growing into adulthood does not happen smoothly as infantile desires do not go away, and many old mechanisms need to be revived.

Erikson (1963) explained that almost all adolescents need to re-fight many of the battles of earlier years in search of ultimate identity. Their moods usually swing. As a result, reoccurring negative feelings (such as sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, pressure, frustration, and hopelessness) become the most common psychological problems of the adolescent years. These problems are exacerbated when adolescents do not get support from their parents and siblings. They need to find ways to reduce the negative emotions so that they can cope with life to achieve homoeostasis.

In a system where the ego is functioning well within a good blend of the three main constructs (id, ego, and superego), the personality is considered healthy. Thus,

Freud believed that in order for the secondary process (realistic thinking-ego) to function efficiently, it is necessary to check the object-cathexes (id) and the idealized-cathexes (superego) by erecting anti-cathexes (resisting forces) against them, otherwise these cathexes (driving forces-id) will tend to distort the reality principle of the ego by contaminating it with wishful and moralistic thinking.

Throughout their lives, human beings make an effort to obtain physiological and emotional homoeostasis in the environment they live in. Equilibrium may be formed from many habitual displacements, sublimations, and compromises until a stabilized personality is established. Having a stabilized personality in this sense means that one has more or less permanent reactions for dealing with circumstances including tensions and frustrations.

Self-harming Behaviour in Relation to Gender and Age

Self-harming has greatly increased in frequency among adolescents in the past few decades, and a further rise was seen in cases involving female adolescents in the UK in the 1990s (Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012). Judging from hospital statistics, females indulge in self-harm more than males (Hawton et al., 2012). This also seems to be the case in Malaysia: Armitage et al.'s (2015) systematic review suggested that self-harmers admitted to hospital for self-harm were prominently female. This is probably because the majority of female adolescents keep frustrations within, which results in the build-up of tension. Keeping frustrations within disrupts the homoeostasis involving the id, the ego, and the superego. Thus as a means of expressing their feelings, female adolescents turn frustrations inwardly, and resort to self-harm. Thus, self-harming has become an outlet for instinctual drives (Borschmann, et al., 2017).

A review of the literature shows that self-harming increases when adolescents reach puberty, but decreases gradually as one grows older. In a review paper, Hawton et al. (2012) mentioned that while the onset of self-harming tended to coincide with puberty, it had ceased by early adulthood in most cases. This is because as one grows older, the ego weighs all the costs of self-harming and finally abandons the impulses that it finds inappropriate. As one grows older, some degree of constancy and equilibrium are usually attained. However, it must be emphasised that not everyone develops the same patterns of personality, and there is no particular "cut off" age for the development of a stabilized personality. It all depends on the way individuals are brought up, their environment, their resilience, and their problem-solving skills.

Freud (1920) believed that the greatest personality changes take place during the first twenty years of life. During this period a person matures and learns to adjust to external and internal frustrations and personal inadequacies, so as to acquire skills and knowledge to resolve conflicts in life (Hall, 1979). For this reason, Hall (1979) opined that the experiences of the first twenty years teach us how to compromise to some extent, which, if not satisfying, at least helps us to endure pain or anxiety. Hall (1979) emphasised that the most effective way to cope with tension is by utilising the secondary process of the ego, which consists of realistic thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving. Thus training and experiences received during the first twenty

years are important to nurture the said skills. When one grows older, with intellectual maturation, training and experience, one should be able to solve most of the problems in a realistic and satisfying manner. Hence, it is important to structure prevention and treatment programmes that are effective in treating self-harming adolescents.

Moyer (2005) stated that self-harming is an integral part of adolescents' lives. It helps them to achieve what they want and to ease the tension and pain. Thus, even though it is a destructive type of behaviour, the positive outcomes of attaining the final goal must also be considered. That is why counselling intervention is important especially in modern society where both parents are working. Youth counselling should include prevention and intervention programmes that help adolescents to be more aware of constructive ways of attaining their desired goals, especially for adolescents in their first twenty years. There is some evidence of effective interventions such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, Sand Play and Art Therapies, and Mentalisation-Based Therapy aimed at reducing self-harming during adolescence in the West (Borschmann, et. al., 2017). To date, such prevention programmes focusing on self-harm have yet to be implemented in Malaysia. Perhaps it is time for the Ministry of Education to do so in order to prevent such behaviour becoming more prevalent.

Freud (1920) stated that a person with a strong ego will have a weak id and superego. Hence, counselling intervention should focus on work with adolescents to devise strategies and alternatives to prevent them succumbing to their self-harming tendencies. Equipping adolescents with problem-solving skills will empower them and help them to manage their emotions, and reduce their stress levels. Counselling in this sense needs to pave the way for them to find an alternative solution to self-harm, so that the ego will not fall back on instinctual forces where the infantile wish-fulfilment construct reigns again.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In short, Freud regards self-harming as a method to satisfy innate drives. Personal and external problems all become new struggles during adolescence. Acts of self-harming help individuals to calm down and reduce feelings of anxiety and stress arising from self, family discordance, friendships, and society (Levenkron, 2006). It is a way of dealing with very difficult emotions that build up and people who inflict physical harm on themselves are trying to maintain psychological integrity (Moyer, 2005). Many authors, therefore, agree that self-harming is concentrated on a selected part of the body in order to spare the entire body from destruction (Moyer, 2005).

There is no health without good mental health. Good mental health is the most basic thing in life. As adolescents are the custodians of the future, it is crucially important to produce adolescents with good mental health, who can contribute to the "betterment of the family, the society, and the nation at large." (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006). This examination of self-harming has shed light on ways to prevent such behaviour (and its worst consequence, namely suicide), and ultimately to fulfil one of the objectives of the Malaysian National Philosophy of Education by producing individuals capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this paper is the need for the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to pool their expertise and design programmes that can be embedded in the curriculum so that all adolescents will have the opportunity to learn the skills for promoting good mental health. These programmes can include training in assertiveness, self-sufficiency, self-respect, self-esteem building, confidence-boosting, anger management, stress management, resolving conflicts skills, social and communication skills, problem-solving skills and relapse-prevention skills, coping strategies, relaxation techniques, self-efficacy strategies, strategies to combat stress and guidance for the promotion of positive mental and social health.

Adolescents who engage in self-harming are normal students. Some of them are even high achievers. Self-harming has been used as a coping strategy. Therefore, it is important not to label adolescents as "crazy", or "mad" or "lunatics" or to discriminate against them, otherwise the resultant social stigma will make it very difficult for them to seek treatment voluntarily.

Another recommendation of this paper is that clinicians and counsellors routinely work with adolescents and assess them for symptoms of self-harming behaviour. These professionals must be able to identify adolescents who harm themselves. They should also receive special training in order to acquire the specific skills and knowledge necessary for dealing with at-risk adolescents. Just like any other chronic disease, self-harming does not go away by itself. In fact, if left untreated, it may have devastating consequences.

As for the impact on the family, this paper urges greater emphasis on quality parent-child time at home. In modern, materialistic society most families are dual income families resulting in many parents not having time for their children. Thus, in many cases self-harming is hidden from parents for years. Hence, parents are encouraged to spend more time with their children especially during adolescence. This will ensure emotional security and prompt them to confide in their parents should any problems arise. Effective parenting has never been more important in raising balanced and holistic kids. Proper parenting shapes future generations, thus impacting the world in a positive way. It is vital that parents themselves take the initiative to acquire proper parenting skills as this is a very important but most rewarding task.

A final word of caution - effective parenting skills are not sufficient, given the complexity of today's society. Schools, NGOs, mental health professionals and society in general need to join forces with parents and work hand in hand to combat the increase in adolescent self-harm.

Acknowledgements

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