Diagnosing Dr. House

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Dr. Gregory House can arguably be one of the most complex characters in the history of television. With his sharp wit, biting comments, unique philosophy and powerful skills of deduction, he provides a personality playground for the aspiring therapist. House’s interactions with colleagues, passion for his job as a medical doctor and his drive to solve puzzles can be deeply analyzed by several theorists, but psychoanalytic and existential theory would be best equipped to diagnose this master diagnostician.

In order to look deeper, one must first know the man. Dr. House has a complex background that aids in the explanation of his character. His father John was a strict military man that ran the home as if it were a barracks for war-bound troops. He would physically abuse House and demanded nothing but punctuality and efficiency. As a result of this upbringing, House turned into the strict opposite of his father and developed a laid back and almost sloppy approach to life. Conversely, House’s mother Blythe gave him affection, love and only hoped for his happiness. Because of this, House develops a relationship with his mother based on the fear of failing or disappointing her.

These traits followed House into his relationship with his ex-fiancé Stacey Warner. During this time, House developed a handicap of a leg constantly in pain due to muscle death. This pain resulted in House developing a much more biting attitude, an addiction to Vicodin and a separation with his fiancé. The pain from his leg had proved to be both a gift and a curse for House as it gave him a greater urge to solve medical puzzles, but also led him to partake in self destructive and almost masochistic
behavior such as medical experiments on himself, violating ethics to receive more Vicodin, and eventually drug induced hallucinations.

From the factors that created him, House developed a unique, almost Nietzschean philosophy on matters of moral, ethical and societal standards. House sees morals as hurdles in the way of solving a greater problem, ethics as unreasonable barriers created by institutions, and societal practices as exercises in idiotic conformity. House doesn’t use his diagnostic abilities for the sake of saving people, but rather for his own selfish desire to solve puzzles. House completely lacks any conventional bedside manner, and will use any treatment no matter what the risk to cure the patient’s illness.

House’s cynicism shows itself with his colleagues and subordinates as well. As the chief of diagnostic medicine, House has three doctors that report to him: Dr. Foreman, Dr. Taub, and Dr. Hadley. House uses his team to complete a differential diagnoses, and then either accepts the ideas or rejects them. The team is responsible for interacting with the patient, running tests, completing treatment, and essentially allowing House to remove himself from any contact with the individual being diagnosed. House rarely shows his approval for his team and is always quick to judge them or belittle their attempts or successes. He has an ability to read his team and make accurate inferences on their personal lives, and uses this ability as a control mechanism to keep them feeling inferior.

Other than his subordinates, House has two “friends” at the hospital. The first is Dr. Wilson, who is the only person to which House will open up and show vulnerability. Dr. Wilson is a very passive and submissive person and House will typically take
advantage of this for personal gain. However, House only seems to take these advantages in hopes that Wilson will learn to stand up for himself and make decisions. Wilson counters this by unexpectedly outwitting House, and teaching him that not all people are idiots. House typically talks to Wilson when he is stuck on a case and Wilson’s ability to care usually leads to an aspect of the problem House can’t see. Each member of the duo possesses a trait that completes the other and for this reason, the friendship remains intact.

House’s second “friend” is Dr. Cuddy, who is the hospital administrator, and a colleague from House’s time in medical school. Dr. Cuddy and House have a mild sexual tension between each other that is masked by each exacerbating flaws in one another. House belittles Dr. Cuddy for being more of a business woman than a doctor, and Dr. Cuddy criticizes House for never adhering to hospital procedure. However, this bitter exchange is only superficial as when each party is in need, the other is there to help. Dr. Cuddy will do anything in her power including violating her own ethics to help House solve a case, and House uses his ability to read people to show the ever confused Dr. Cuddy what she needs to do in her life to find fulfillment.

Each of these factors creates a dynamic for a unique individual that allows one to look deeply into the many aspects of that character’s life. While House appears to be empty, objective, and heartless, the lack of personality combined with his brilliance in inductive and deductive reasoning makes for a complicated character that intrigues the onlooker. It creates a need to find more in the character and causes one to question if that need will ever be fulfilled. Through the ideas and research of two prominent personality theories, we will attempt to dive deeper into the twisted mind of Dr. House.
The first approach applied will be that of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic theory revolves around the topological theory of mind and the focus of libidinal energy into everyday actions. The topological theory of mind consists of three distinct layers of the human mind: the conscious, which is are all mental actions that are actively being processed, the preconscious, which consists of information that is not initially available but can be actively brought into the conscious, and the unconscious which is the element of one’s mind that cannot be actively accessed without intensive therapy (Ellis & Abrams, 2008). Libidinal or sexual energy can manifest itself within these areas and influence our behavior.

Within this theory, Freud also developed the tripartite theory of mind which stated that the mind had three additional structures named the id, ego and superego. The id is the home of libidinal energy and operates on the pleasure principle, in that it only works for pleasure and is completely devoid of any ethical or moral principle. The ego is the opposite of the id in that it operates on the reality principle and attempts to regulate the id's impulses to the demands of the outside world (Schultz & Schultz, 2004). Freud used the example of a man riding a horse to illustrate that the ego (man) controls the id (horse). The third and final mechanism is the superego, which regulates moral behavior and is responsible for emotions such as shame and guilt (Ellis & Abrams, 2008). The superego is formed in response to castration anxiety in the phallic stages and is an attempt for the individual to identify with their father to cope with their love for their mother (Oedipus complex). This fear creates a conscious for the individual leading to the ability to correct his or herself.
Freud also developed five stages of psychosexual development. The first is the oral phase that happened between birth and age two. In this phase the individual derives pleasure through the mouth through means of biting and sucking. This emotional pleasure received from focusing libidinal energy to part of the body is called cathexis (Ellis & Abrams, 2008). Freud stated that when libidinal energy is improperly fixated in this stage, the individual can develop an oral dependant or an oral aggressive personality. The oral dependant personality is dependent on others and is submissive to the demands of the world. In contrast, the oral aggressive personality is hostile, demanding, controlling and rude.

The second stage is the anal stage takes place between ages two and four and is the stage in which the child derives libidinal pleasure through the anus by means of controlling defecation. Freud saw this stage in which the ego develops as the individual is learning to conform to society by controlling feces (Ellis & Abrams, 2008). To Freud, feces was a type of gift that the child would give to his or her parents, and that being too stingy, or generous with this gift could lead to an improper fixation.

Freud’s third stage is the phallic stage. This stage develops between the ages of four and six and the focus of libidinal energy becomes the genitals. During this phase the child goes through what Freud has termed the “Oedipal/Elecktra complex.” In this complex, the child develops feelings for the parent of his or her opposite sex, and has to identify and ally with the parent of the same sex to relieve any anxiety brought forth from the attraction. When libidinal energy fixates incorrectly, a personality can develop that is overly sexualized, narcissistic and sexually promiscuous (Ellis & Abrams, 2008).
Freud also theorized that in males, a fixation can lead to a rebellious and radical attitude towards societal issues.

The fourth and fifth stages are the latent and genital stages. The latent stages lasts from ages six to twelve. In this stage, libidinal energy is repressed and the child learns to find pleasure in other activities and develop an identity of self. From this stage the child moves on to the genital stage in which the individual attempts to find a proper mate. Freud believed that only individuals who correctly resolved the earlier stages could reach the genital stage, and that those that didn’t typically remained with the traits that they received from previous fixations (Schultz & Schultz, 2004).

Freud’s theory applies to Dr. House on several different levels. First, one must address House’s id-driven personality. House appears to operate solely on the pleasure principle that Freud claimed governed the id. House has no regard for what the world around him demands and only focuses on what he can do, or what he can manipulate others into doing for the sake of solving his medical puzzles. While many would say House has a large ego, (an anagram for “Gregory House” is “huge ego, sorry”) Freud’s theory would say it would be difficult to find where the id ends and the ego begins. House shows typical ego defense mechanisms such as intellectualization and projection, but it seems that he uses these methods not to defend himself, but rather to defend a purpose or his dilemma. In a sense, House has lost his identity or self to the problems that he solves.

Since House is mostly id driven, it is understandable that he has little to no superego. House feels that morals tend to get in the way of progress and that emotions distort reality. He is quite similar to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in that he follows
a nihilist perspective in that everything lacks importance and that life is purposeless (Jocoby, 2009). To House, people do not have any unified meaning, and that they follow their own idiotic beliefs (similar to the Nietzschean idea of “God being dead.”). If Freud were to look into House’s upbringing, he would see that there was no attempt to resolve the Oedipal complex that gives birth to the superego. Instead of House, identifying with his father, he completely rebelled. It would be logical to infer that Freud's theory would state that this rebellion resulted in a loss of shame and societal standards, and thus created a man that has no use for them.

In terms of Freud's psychosexual development, House has seemed to have developed improper fixations in each stage. House appears to be an oral aggressive type personality as he is negative, sarcastic and otherwise verbally hostile. With this he also shows the textbook signs of being untrusting, manipulative and demanding (Ellis & Abrams, 2009). House demonstrates fixations in the anal stage showing anal expulsive traits of sloppiness and defiance. This is illustrated by House’s disobedience to hospital procedure and sloppy lifestyle. This personality trait coincides with House defying his father’s lifestyle at an early age, and thus explains House’s carelessness, disorganization and almost cruel nature. Interestingly enough, House has artistic qualities in that he is a talented musician and chef, which also ties into this aspect of Freud’s theory.

Since House lacks a superego, it is natural to infer that he has a fixation in the phallic stage. A phallic fixation leads to a personality that is narcissistic, egotistic and prone to sexual encounters for the sake of discharging emotional tensions rather than romantic love and affection (Ellis & Abrams, 2008). House’s narcissism is made evident
by his blatant disregard for the efforts of others and his delusion that he is the only
competent doctor in his field. Since his separation with Stacey, House frequently has
sexual encounters with prostitutes in order to pacify his sexual need.

Through the lens of a Freudian, Gregory House appears to be the embodiment of
every negative aspect of the theory. He is the embodiment of the id without the
restrictions of the ego or superego. He is negatively fixated in each psychosexual
stage, and lacks any ambition to resolve any of the libidinal conflicts. While this man
may be a nightmare best left un-interpreted for the Freudian, he may be a dream come
ture for an existentialist.

Existentialism is derived from the notion that the choices, actions and
responsibilities are solely based in the present and are not influenced by the past or
future. Concepts such as “destiny” or “pre-determinism” are not factors in life because
people have free will. The only inhibitions are the challenges of freedom, isolation,
meaning and death (Corsini and Wedding, 2008). These factors place a rather
unpleasant aura around freedom, defining it as more of a curse than a gift.

The first concept of the existential theory is freedom. The existentialists believe
that people are the authors of their own life and that with freedom gives the ability to
construct any reality that may be wanted (Friedman & Shustack, 2006). However, a
conflict lies in that this freedom is completely groundless and that people desire
structure in their lives, and cannot handle the responsibility of complete control (Corsini
& Wedding, 2008). Individuals need people and circumstances that serve as displacers
of responsibility to protect from the anxiety of freedom. Impulses, wishes, and
awareness are shaped from experiences and create decisions in which an individual may freely act. How one acts on these decisions, shape their personality.

Next is the fear of isolation. This fear is constructed by an individual’s futile desire of sharing their full consciousness and constant need to be integrated into a greater society. The fear of this isolation can cause individuals to engage in superficial relationships that use others for personal gain, rather than properly sharing their lifestyle (Corsini & Wedding, 2008). Those that are in a meaningful relationship use it as a means to adjoin their personality with that of their partner and sacrifice their responsibility to self. Each of these actions serves as a defense mechanism towards anxiety of self-solitude.

The third personality influence is the fear of meaninglessness. The question this dilemma asks is “How does a being who requires meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?” (Corsini & Wedding, 2008, p. 320). This urge to find meaning leads individuals to find patterns in life and broaden these patterns into values and organizational systems. New information is then assimilated into these constructed meanings and determines our methods and reasons for living (Friedman & Shustack, 2006). The presentation of new experiences causes anxiety at first, but as individuals face this anxiety, they develop a greater sense of personal meaning.

The final aspect of existential theory is the inevitability of death. To the existentialists, every individual has an inherent fear of death and will take the necessary means to cope with this fear, most of which are bred from denial (Friedman & Shustack, 2006). One such mechanism is the compulsive need for the individual to feel that they can transcend death by preparing for the future. These individuals will tend take a
generative stance towards life, ensuring that their heritage will be passed on through their successes and preparations thus becoming immortal through legacy. Another defense mechanism is the “belief in the existence of the ultimate rescuer” (Corsini & Wedding, 2008, p. 321) that allows the individual to feel that there is life after death, and an immortal savior will bring them eternal life. Each of these systems creates a defense for the individual’s psyche that relieves the fear of inevitable demise.

Existential personality theory attempts to explain how and why individuals act through assessing different fears brought forth by the bothersome gift of freedom. This theory, while philosophical in nature, is interesting as it is quite malleable for especially complicated characters. Since Dr. House has a unique philosophic nature that is rooted in the present without regard for the future, it appears that he may actually exceed the existentialist’s expectations of people’s fears.

House has no fear of freedom as he abuses his power of choice for what he perceives as being the greater good. He understands the responsibility of choice and he honestly doesn’t care. House believes that responsibility is similar to blame and that blame can be avoided if you are always “right” in what you do, or don’t care about the outcomes. In a sense, House is the embodiment of complete freedom because consequences don’t matter, and anything from the past can either be fixed or disregarded.

In terms of isolation, House is completely comfortable with his loneliness. This is illustrated by the way he handles the relationships with his peers. He treats Dr. Wilson as an inferior, refuses to accept the feelings that Dr. Cuddy has for him, and uses his team as instruments rather than individuals with feelings. House isolates himself from
society as he holds the existential belief that relationships are only for the sake of using one another and thereby pointless.

House’s character appears to show no concern for death and is an unashamed atheist. A prime example of this is an instance where House intentionally electrocutes himself and is resuscitated. The first words upon awakening are “I told you nothing was on the other side.” House battles death everyday through saving the lives of patients with rare diseases that no one else can solve. Because he consistently saves lives, he feels that he almost controls death, and will not be afraid when his hour has come.

The only existential quality that House hasn’t conquered is that of meaninglessness, in fact he is a dichotomy of meaning. On one hand, His deductive reasoning skills, ability to interpret behavior, and need to solve the puzzles of the world empower him through his mental and physical pain. However on the other, he cannot challenge himself with new views, thus inhibiting the anxiety that leads to personal growth. He can only stay in his comfort zones and has no need or desire to explore new ventures in life.

While we have attempted to look at Dr. Gregory House through the perspectives of psychoanalytic and existential theory, House is a human Rorschach test for the entire field of psychology. Whilst one theory may find a borderline psychopath, another may see a transcendental demigod. Some may say he is a tortured genius, whilst others say he is a genius that tortures. In any event, House presents a complex nature, a brooding wit, and unique lifestyle that perhaps only he can diagnose.
References


