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Psychological Science: Sigmund Freud – “A Dream of Undying Fame”

POSTED ON MAY 24, 2010 12:20AM

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Psychological Science: Sigmund Freud – “A Dream of Undying Fame”

Norman Costa

I invited Louis Breger, PhD to join me in this article devoted to a discussion of Sigmund Freud. After my two-parter, “Sigmund Freud – Personal and Scientific Coward?” [PART 1, PART 2], I received an email...
from Dr. Breger. A friend directed him to 3Quarksdaily.com, and my second article. He had a few things to say about my article, including a couple of critical comments.

I recognized, immediately, that Breger knew a great deal about Freud – far more than I. Breger has been Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, from 1970 to the present, (currently, Emeritus Professor.) In 1990, with a group of colleagues, Dr. Breger created the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis (ICP) where he was the Founding President from 1990 to 1993.

My interest in Freud is highly circumscribed. Breger is best described as a lifelong scholar of Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as a practitioner, a trainer, and a teacher. Breger directed me to his two books on Freud. The first is an analytical biography, “FREUD: DARKNESS IN THE MIDST OF VISION”, John Wiley & Sons, 2000. The second is “A DREAM OF UNDYING FAME: HOW FREUD BETRAYED HIS MENTOR AND INVENTED PSYCHOANALYSIS,” Basic Books, 2009. The more recent book, included in the title of this article, deals with the territory covered in my writing, and so much more.

After looking at the encouraging reviews of his books [DREAM, DARKNESS], I read “A DREAM OF UNDYING FAME.” It is an excellent, and very readable book. I recommend it to all interested in Freud, and the history of psychoanalysis. I've not yet read the biography, but I will.

Well, I couldn't let him get away after offering only a few comments. He has too much to tell us on the subject. He possesses a great deal of knowledge, and deeply informed views from a lifetime of work. So I asked Dr. Breger if he would contribute to my Monday Musings column on 3Quarksdaily.com. Very graciously, and generously, he agreed to write something for my readers. What follows is a discussion of his latest book and my two-part article on Freud. I will have a few comments following his well done and informative piece.

YOU WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.
I take the title of my new book from the Hawthorne quotation, paralleled, in a striking way, by Freud himself in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess – his “only other” and closest confidant through the 1890s — because it captures the essential motivation behind Freud’s drive for “eternal fame.” Let me begin with “the severe worries that robbed me of my youth.”

When Freud was a one year old, his mother gave birth to her second son, who died eight months later. He thus lost her, first to a sibling replacement, and then to her grief over the death of her new infant. Maternal losses were repeated over the next years with the births of five sisters and one brother so that, by the time he was ten, his mother had gone through seven pregnancies and there were six living siblings. It is hard to imagine that she had much time to tend to the young Sigi. In addition, his nursemaid, toward whom he felt real affection, was caught stealing and sent to jail. She vanished suddenly from his life in a way that a two-year-old would have no way of understanding. As if these traumatic losses of love and care were not enough, when he was three-and-a-half, his father went bankrupt and the family – who had been living in a one room apartment in the small town of Freiberg – was forced to move and he lost his uncle and aunt figures, his first playmates, and his familiar home.

His father never got back on his feet financially and the family lived in near poverty for many years. As Freud himself put it: I know from my youth that once the wild horses of the pampas have been lassoed, they retain a certain anxiousness for life. Thus, I came to know the helplessness of poverty and continually fear it. All of these events constituted a powerful set of traumas, compounded by the Antisemitism that was always prevalent in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All of this left the young Freud in a very helpless and vulnerable state.
These were the memories and emotions that he was recovering in his self-analysis in the late 1890s, but they were too much to assimilate, especially in a self-analysis with no helpful or supportive other person. It was at precisely this point that he turned away from his personal traumas and invented the theory that he later elaborated into the Oedipus complex. As he put it: A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, the phenomena of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood. He goes on to tell Fliess that, Later...my libido toward matrem was awakened on the occasion of a journey with her from Leipzig to Vienna, during which we must have spent the night together and there must have been an opportunity of seeing her nudam...you yourself have seen my travel anxiety at its height.

This passage is revealing in several ways. It is not an actual memory but a construction: we must have spent the night together and there must have been an opportunity of seeing her nudam. This contrasts with his report about his nursemaid, where there are actual emotionally laden memories. As he wrote, she provided me at such an early age with the means for living and going on living. As you see, the old liking is breaking through again today. In addition, there are the Latinisms – matrem and nudam – which distance the report from his feelings. And, there is the leap from this personal “memory” – which may not even have happened — to a universal law. Finally, there is the reference to his travel anxiety. If all anxiety is, at base, a fear of castration, as he later posited in his Oedipal theory, he might have been afraid that the powerful locomotive would harm him. Not so. He was afraid that the train would leave without him, that he would be separated from the parents that he depended on. This travel anxiety lasted all his life and, even as a famous and powerful adult, he would have to get to the railway station well in advance so that he wouldn't be left behind.

Anyone who experiences traumas such as these adapts to them as best as his childhood capacities allow. Freud mainly withdrew into the world of books and reading; in the small apartment — populated by his failed father, his nervous, demanding mother, and all those noisy babies — he escaped into his mind. As he put it in a later essay, I used to find, the present time seemed to sink into obscurity and the years between ten and eighteen would rise from the corners of my memory, with all their guesses and illusions, their painful distortions and heartening successes — my first glimpses of an extinct civilization, which in my case was to bring me as much consolation as anything else in the struggles of life.

He immersed himself in this ancient world and was particularly drawn to military heroes: Hannibal, Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Cortez, and Oliver Cromwell. These identifications lasted all his life; they foreshadowed his drive to achieve fame as a scientist, lay behind his sweeping theoretical pronouncements, his style of doing therapy – the analyst as all-knowing authority – and the way he shaped the psychoanalytic movement. He made it into something of a cult, with himself as leader, surrounded by his loyal lieutenants.
And where did Josef Breuer fit into all this? Breuer – 14 years older — was a highly successful Viennese physician and brilliant scientist. When Freud set up his new medical practice, the older doctor saw the promise in this gifted young man, took him under his wing, gave the impoverished Freud a monthly stipend – which Breuer never expected to be repaid — and they became friends and co-workers. The most significant gift that Breuer gave to his struggling young protégé, however, was his description of a young “hysterical” woman – Bertha Pappenheim, later “Anna O.” – whom he had treated some years earlier. Breuer and Bertha together developed what she named the “talking cure”, later called by Breuer the “cathartic method”, which launched psychoanalysis.

In the mid-1890s, Freud persuaded Breuer to collaborate on the Studies on Hysteria, a book that is the real beginning of psychoanalysis, both as a method of treatment and a theory. A close reading of the Studies reveals the differences between Freud and Breuer. Freud is looking for a grand theory that will make him famous and, because of this, he is always fastening on what he thinks will be a single cause of hysteria, such as sexual conflict. He also finds it difficult to deal with the deaths and losses that so many of the patients have experienced since they resonated too closely with his own traumas. What is more, he ignores or minimizes the contributions of others in the field. Breuer, on the other hand, writes about the many factors that produce symptoms, including traumas of a variety of kinds. He also gives others, such as Pierre Janet, credit and argues for “eclecticism”; he is open to many different ways of understanding and treating hysteria. Despite his considerable accomplishments, he was known for his “excessive modesty,” the welfare of his patients was more important to him than recognition or fame.

In the lectures delivered at Clark University in 1909, Freud was still giving Breuer credit as the originator of psychoanalysis. But, in 1914, with an international psychoanalytic organization in place, he turned on his former benefactor and spun out a tale so that he could take sole credit. In his essay On the History of the Psycho-analytic Movement, he speculated that, toward the end of Breuer’s treatment of Bertha Pappenheim, she displayed an erotic transference and Breuer could not handle this and fled from her. This tale was elaborated over the years by Freud and, later, by Ernest Jones in his authorized biography of the Master. More recent research has revealed that it never happened. Bertha did not have a sexual transference and Breuer did not flee. In fact, he remained involved in her treatment for several additional years. The point of Freud’s story is to make Breuer seem like a coward while Freud, had he been the physician, would have been a hero and not run away.

Freud’s betrayal of his kindly benefactor was the first of many incidents in which he turned on friends and fellow psychoanalysts and spread rumors that maligned them when they did not hew to the party line: when they disagreed with him or raised questions about his theories. Alfred Adler, Wilhelm Stekel, C. G. Jung, Otto Rank, Sandor Ferenczi, and a number of others were all treated this way; they became the objects of his unending hatred. He also had to break away from Breuer
because his modesty did not qualify him as a heroic model and, perhaps of greater significance, he was a reminder of the time in Freud’s life when he was dependent on this older man.

Now, to turn to Dr. Costa’s two articles, which overlap in several ways with the ideas presented in my two books on Freud. His most important argument is that Freud was wrong to abandon the seduction theory: the belief that “hysteria” was the result of patients, mostly women, being sexually molested as children. For actual sexual abuse, Freud substituted his concept of sexual or libidinal drive, which he later elaborated into the theory of the Oedipus complex. He argued that his patients had not been molested but that their accounts of such experiences were the result of their fantasies and wishes. This led to a denial of women’s experience and a blaming of them – or their “drives,” “Id,” and “pleasure principle,” — all of which set psychoanalytic theory and therapy on misguided paths for a great number of years.

I agree with Dr. Costa that the abandonment of the seduction theory was a gigantic mistake, but would expand his critique in several ways. Costa is right to emphasize the damage done by discounting patient’s accounts of sexual abuse, and of downplaying the extent of such abuse, which we now know is widespread. But this is not the only kind of childhood experience that leads to neurosis. Freud himself suffered a series of overwhelming events as a young child, centered on maternal loss. And others suffer abandonment and neglect, physical and emotional abuse, emotional mis-attunement, as well as the traumas that can lead to PTSD: wars, natural disasters, poverty, discrimination, and debilitating illnesses. What Freud abandoned was not just “seductions” but reality, all the things that happen to people, especially when they are small and vulnerable, that they are unable to cope with, and that leave their scars – in the form of anxiety, depression and other symptoms — on the adult personality.

Dr. Costa calls Freud a “scientific coward” for his turn away from sexual abuse and I agree with him. He contrasts Freud’s work with that of his contemporary Pierre Janet, who did a form of psychotherapy with similar patients and never discounted the importance of trauma and what he labeled “double consciousness,” which we would now call “dissociation.” Janet is little known today and Costa gives him his due while Freud worked hard to ignore or downplay his contributions. Costa is also right to see Freud as enormously ambitious and to note how this led him to change his theories, not on the basis of new evidence, but because it would make him appear to be a great man. He also says that, “Freud and his theories became a cult of discipleship,” — as I document in my books, and as Erich Fromm pointed out 50 years ago — despite the claims of Freud and later psychoanalysts that they were “scientists.”
essential idea: that the abandonment of the seduction theory came out of Freud's self-analysis. Unfortunately, since he is focused solely on sexual abuse, he believes that Freud must have been sexually molested by his father. The only evidence for this is one remark that Freud made in a letter to his friend Fliess that, if hysteria was due to sexual molestations, his own neurotic symptoms — which were considerable — and those of his siblings, must have been due to sexual abuse by their father. This was a typical Freud speculation — his work is full of such "constructions" and "reconstructions" — that fit the ideas he was playing with at the time but had no basis in reality. Neither he, nor his sisters and brother, ever showed any signs that they were sexually abused.

Once again, it is important to emphasize that there are many kinds of trauma and abuse in childhood and Freud's exclusive focus on sexuality — whether real or imagined — came out of his search for a single, sweeping theory that would make him famous. As I have pointed out, Freud did get very close to his traumatic early losses in his self-analysis, but they were too overwhelming to deal with — they made him feel like the poor, helpless little boy he had been — and he fled to theories that made him into Oedipus: a powerful man and the son of a king. In addition, his conception of a sexual drive as the sole cause of neurosis was at the heart of a grand theory that he believed would make him famous.

As an aside, I do not find Dr. Costa's speculations about Freud's identification with Hamlet persuasive, though the related point that Freud was more a writer of literature than a scientist is worth stressing.

One final point concerns the evaluations of Freud's theories by his colleagues and, particularly, by Breuer. Dr. Costa accepts Freud's story that his colleagues completely dismissed his ideas and repeats the story that Breuer was "especially cruel" because he told Freud privately that he "didn't believe" his theory of sexual causation. Freud was the kind of thin-skinned man who required complete agreement; anyone who raised questions or disagreed in the slightest was seen as an enemy. As Sulloway and others have documented, the truth was that there was a mixed reaction to Freud's early contributions: some in the field were critical and some valued them. It was just a few years later, in 1904, after all, that Freud drew together a group of followers and began what would become organized psychoanalysis, which rapidly expanded into a worldwide movement.

As to Breuer, a close reading of the Studies, and Hirschmüller's biography, reveals that Breuer always valued Freud's contributions, including the role of sexuality and sexual repression. He just didn't believe that this was the only cause of neurotic symptoms. As he said in a 1907 letter to a colleague, "Freud is a man given to absolute and exclusive formulations: this is a psychical need which, in my opinion, leads to excessive generalization." Similar assessments were voiced by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler and the American psychologist/philosopher William James.

Freud made many valuable contributions that still inform our understanding of psychological disturbance and its treatment. At the same time, his work is marred in the ways that both Dr. Costa and I have described. It is the task of contemporary workers in the field to take a more balanced and critical approach to both theories and treatment methods.

References:


In my psychological science series on 3Quarksdaily.com, I explore fundamental principles of science. Psychological test theory, definitions of measurement, the philosophy of science, systematic observation, and mathematical argument were some of the topics. Dr. Breger’s writing, here, and my articles on Freud, bring us to another fundamental issue.

The scientist interacts with [experimental] research in a way that 'disturbs' the process, and leaves an indelible mark upon the results. This was formalized in Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty for quantum mechanics. The Uncertainty Principle has not been formalized for psychological science. By analogy, though, it is not difficult to see how the makeup of the scientist influences the research for good and for ill.

In studying research methods we learn the dispassionate ideal of scientific inquiry. Science is a methodical, incremental plodding toward a fuller understanding of nature, including ourselves. Speculative liberties given to the scientist are minimal at best.

The reality is that science can be jumpy, speculative, and discontinuous. The choice of a research area can be motivated by a life long passion or curiosity, professional competition, burst of creative energy, need for adulation or power or financial independence. These do not proscribe good research or good science, necessarily. Good science can come out of idiosyncrasy, deficit, insecurity, ambition, and overcompensation – even neurosis. Science and the search for knowledge can be very messy.

But, if we abandon the ideals of systematic observation, loyalty to our recorded data, organizing information into a body of knowledge, and respect for our colleagues, we can end up wasting our time, or worse. We can take ourselves and others down a path that could be disastrously harmful to all of us.

I hope you learned at least as much as I had. Please contribute your own thoughts in the comments, below.

Thank you Dr. Breger for being very generous with us.
"For sheer elegance, wit and worldly wisdom when it comes to reading, editing, presenting the real news of the world... for liveliness, cosmopolitanism, range of scientific, philosophical, and literary curiosity in harvesting big and provocative ideas... for consistency of character and manners, ever above the ordinary... 3 Quarks stands alone. If 3 Quarks Daily were a person, wouldn’t it be Proust?"

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steve3  What happens to a DREAMer deferred? Does it stick with the Democrat party, or demand to be heard?
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josh wilbur  Thanks Brooks, I'll check out Public Domain Review and Nautilus. I'm also a Wikipedia addict: so many great entries and
Let's pretend we live in a place where there are no federal or state know-it-alls. Wouldn't it make sense to have both alternatives offered to...

Joshua, thanks for this. I agree with you about algorithms: You can make them work for you rather than the other way around.

I agree.

Claims that we are heading into a new ice age are exaggerated at best. The temperature rise due to man made climate change is much more than enough to...

There's absolutely no evidence that human carbon pollution has averted another ice age, which in any case would have come on over a period of...

Or you could have been headed for this, take your pick... “Ice Age struck indigenous Australians hard...”...

Many thanks for your comment, Azra apa! I wouldn't mind another visit to beautiful Swat just to write that piece! And this time I'd pay close...

Interesting piece. And a reminder that the vandal often ends up defacing his own house.

Australia is currently experiencing a prolonged heat wave with record breaking temperatures and large areas reaching almost 50 degrees Celsius (that's...

If this has been going on for the last 150 years then how worried should one be, seriously? Maybe global warming DID prevent an Ice Age after all....

That's funny! (And short enough to not get too irritating.) Years ago, I went to a Yale Drama School production of a Shakespeare play I hadn't read,...

Glenn Greenwald Retweeted Matt Taibbi @mtaibbi · 18h The CDC should probably build a 48-hour quarantine room for future Russiagate bombshells. In a...

Agree completely, and until the reckoning with 2008 and the destruction of the fictive kinship of America, the rancor will worsen.

What a casually dismissive and nonsensical comment. I'm curious: what exactly did you find in the piece that was “fanciful”? I couldn't find any...

OT, but here is a way we might bridge that divide...
A Dream of Undying Fame is something of a rare and amazing thing -- a weighty but short book about Sigmund Freud. Few tasks in biography can be more difficult than penning a brief book about Freud, one of the twentieth century's most iconic figures as well as a prolific producer of books, articles and concepts. Freud was complicated and fascinating, a man identified with probing into the deepest recesses of the psyche, but who kept his own interior life shrouded in mystery. He revolutionized the A Dream of Undying Fame is something of a rare and amazing thing -- a weighty but short book about Sigmund Freud. From the dawn of human consciousness, dreams have always fascinated us. Do they mean something? Do dreams help us see into the future? These questions have intrigued us for centuries. Sigmund Freud was one of the first people to examine dreams seriously and interpret them in the context of our waking lives. In Dream Psychology: Psychoanalysis for Beginners, the Austrian psychoanalyst, Dr Sigmund Freud shares his exciting early discoveries that there was indeed a connection between his patients' dreams and their mental disturbances. The collaboration between Sigmund Freud and physician Josef Breuer led to the joint publication of the "Studies on Hysteria" in 1895. Once published, Freud gave in to his own fears, doubts, and ambitions (which were very much the result of his difficult childhood), and pulled away from Breuer, minimizing his contributions. An acknowledged expert on Freud, Breger delves into the tumultuous professional rapport that Freud shaped with Breuer. Indeed, in "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement", Freud actually rewrote history to effectively diminish Breuer's
groundbreaking discovery of psychoanalysis, thereby improving his own standing in the field. "A Dream of Undying Fame" closely considers how an emerging theory is intricately linked to the personalities behind it.