



CHLOE SMITH turns the tables on Freud to give her personal analysis of his motives

Sigmund Freud

The ambition theory

THROUGHOUT his life and until the present day, Freud has been both applauded and criticised by a catalogue of scholars and numerous dinner party guests. Freud wanted fame and he has got it. The question that this article addresses, however, is whether psychoanalysis has had to pay the price for Freud's single-mindedness.

Barry Richards identifies this relentless ambition in the following passage from his book *Images of Freud* (1989):

... [Freud] is most commonly depicted as a paterfamilias, sternly possessive of psychoanalysis as his intellectual child and refusing to tolerate others lending a hand in its development. (p.74)

Was Freud's ambition a hindrance to psychoanalysis? Was 'the intellectual revolution which alone might have rescued psychoanalysis from itself' (Webster, 1995, p.11) restricted by his need to claim all the glory?

It is not a coincidence that Freud's career began with a mistake. Perhaps this was because he was young and naive, but perhaps it wasn't. Freud was well educated with a strong scientific background, yet he was seduced by a 'discovery' that lacked any scientific basis. He witnessed the effects of cocaine as an antidepressant and effective anaesthetic and was sure that it was the discovery that would make his career. It didn't. To his despair, it was hijacked by a colleague, Carl Koller.

However, this despair did not last long — cocaine was subsequently discovered to be highly addictive and damaging. Freud had made a mistake that he was destined to repeat again and again in his career: he overgeneralised from a single fact. This time he was saved, but it was a close call.

When Freud was introduced to Charcot we see the beginning of his career in psychology. Whether driven by egocentric ambition or honest passion, Freud started to change the direction of psychology. This cannot be taken away from him, as Jeffery Masson noted:

Freud may have been wrong at the end, but ... he was profoundly and uniquely right at the beginning. (as cited in Webster, 1995, p.24)

Freud could offer medical knowledge to psychology, coupled with fierce determination. He soon became a strong figure. At first this drive was instrumental: he challenged contemporary beliefs and took psychology in a new direction. When working with Charcot, Freud first began addressing the importance of 'ideas' as the aetiology for hysteria. Charcot could not be persuaded to agree, causing a split between himself and Freud. This loss pushed Freud into a relationship with Breuer, whose ideas were closely aligned to Freud's. The collaboration on the case of Anna O is often cited as portraying psychoanalysis in its purest form.

The therapy that Anna O received was termed by herself 'my talking cure'. She went from being a highly disturbed young woman to being a 'leading social worker and feminist' (Appiganesi, 1992). This cathartic method, introduced by Breuer and later adopted by Freud, was to become Freud's bandwagon for success. He started

to question which ideas were repressed and why. He couldn't understand how seeing a dog could cause Anna to become hydrophobic, or why she should end up falling in love with Breuer.

Freud's conclusion was that the ideas we resist are usually sexual. He was excited by this and wrote to his wife Martha that 'this was it!', this was the theory that would make his career. It was this sexual obsession that led him to be deserted once again, this time by Breuer. Perhaps this is what Freud wanted — to go it alone and claim all the glory that he truly believed he would receive. His manic, childlike obsession, fuelled his need for fame and recognition. The result was the seduction theory.

On the basis of a limited number of case studies he concluded that 'hysteria' in adulthood was caused by the repression of sexual abuse in childhood. It was a relatively untouched area, and Freud truly believed in his work. He was passionate about his theory and defended it avidly.

Today it is widely believed that Freud was right about the seduction theory. Indeed '... some even go as far as to claim that every neurotic has been seduced as a child' (Badcock, 1988, p.163). Why, then, did he abandon a theory that was convincing, logical and believable?

At the time Freud was writing, hysteria was an overused diagnosis. To say that all hysterics were sexually abused would grossly overestimate the number of abusive parents. Freud knew this. Coming from a medical background, he may well have also known the possibility that a large proportion of 'hysteria' cases could be attributed to organic causes and might not be hysteria at all.

However, instead of sticking to the seduction theory as an explanation for some but not all neuroses, Freud abandoned it. It was not the large-scale, reputation-making discovery that he wanted, and so he shunned it. I think this is the point where Freud starts to weaken. He sacrificed the respectability of psychoanalysis for the sake of his own



gain. I am not alone in thinking this: 'I think that in the beginning Freud really believed in analysis', but when his ambition took over he was 'still attached to analysis intellectually, but not emotionally' (Ferenczi, as cited in Webster, 1995, p.212).

If Freud was to maintain any sort of respect, he needed to be able to abandon the seduction hypothesis in a discreet and credible way. He did this by postulating that patients, instead of reporting actual seduction, were in fact reporting fantasies of seduction. He took away the notion of childhood innocence, replacing it with the idea of lust, anger and sexuality. He was met with resistance, but so came the beginnings of a truly unique theory.

Once again we see Freud making enormous claims based on limited research, allowing himself to be swept away by little more than a hunch. However, Freud was not about to lose the chance of fame. His theory was cunning and had an intrinsic defence.

Freud proposed that during childhood we progress through a natural pathway of stages. During these we encounter sexual frustrations, desires for our opposite-sex parent, hatred for our same-sex parent, and either fear of castration or penis envy. All of this occurs before the age of six. We then proceed into the latency stage, where until puberty we remain free from any sex drive and memories of our earlier sexual feelings. If we have not passed through the previous stages successfully (i.e. we have become fixated with one), we will later suffer regression and memories that cause neurosis.

Freud's theory caused a revolution that shocked the world. He linked successful childhood with a successful mind. He gave childhood a distinctive purpose — a child is not just a 'little adult' as John Locke claimed. This was a well-received concept; but typically of Freud he did not stop at this, instead becoming obsessed with the idea of childhood sexuality. He used it to explain far more than was conceivable, and by doing so he jeopardised psychoanalysis. But as I said earlier, Freud had a way of

ensuring his success.

When Freud was met with resistance, he claimed that it was because people were trying to repress the very ideas that he wanted to highlight — the concept was too painful for people to accept. In fact Freud was gaining support for parts of his theory — and rightly so.

Unfortunately for psychoanalysis, Freud did not like this 'pick and mix' approach to his work. He did not want other scholars modifying his work, claiming that 'perhaps I was better off on my own' (as cited in Appignanesi, 1992, p.113). Webster (1995) has explained the effects of Freud's stubbornness:

For because their theoretical rebellions against Freud have been conducted within a larger pattern of submission to Freud's authority, these thinkers have never been able to bring about the intellectual revolution which alone might have rescued psychoanalysis from itself. (p.11)

Freud wanted to be accepted entirely or not at all. He was dissatisfied by people agreeing with some of his theory and rejecting other parts. The ideas of the id, ego and superego, and the idea that we are driven by unconscious forces, were all met with enthusiasm. He suggested that we do not really know ourselves or our motives and that we are not autonomous; he must be credited for doing that. But Freud also said less believable things. To infer, as Freud did, so many things from a minimal number of case studies was naive and damaging. His speculation suffered the same as any other unsubstantiated theory. Did he believe that a theory generalised to the whole population, that very few could identify with or relate to, could be accepted without question? I do not believe that he did. Instead I think that he relentlessly tried to cover up the weaknesses in his theory:

This myth of the hero was one which Freud himself constantly created, sometimes by destroying or suppressing

the evidence which might conflict with it. (Webster, 1995, p.126)

Freud was a slave to his ambition and he frequently changed his theory to feed it, to the extent that '[i]f ideas and hypotheses coming from different periods in Freud's work are simply put together, the result in many cases is nonsense' (Wollheim, 1971, p.9).

We can see the transformation of his ideas from those in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) to those in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) (as noted by Robert Nye, 1992). When he later moved into his explanation of the death instinct, life instinct, reality principle, pleasure principle and morality principle, we can recognise what Freud has left as his legacy. His instincts were usually correct and are still discussed today. His theories can be easily criticised, but it still remains that he made an important contribution to both historical and modern psychology.

Perhaps Freud's enormous fame was more due to his mistakes than to his successes; other historical figures in psychoanalysis have received much less recognition. But it could be argued that Freud was the weakness that could have caused the downfall of a very good theory. A theory whose greatest strengths lie, I believe, in those who have carried it forward despite the stigma that Freud gave to it.

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References

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