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What's Freud Got To Do, **Got To Do With It?**

Daniel Benveniste

What's Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) got to do with our modern world? We hear every day "Freud is old fashioned. We have medications for chemical imbalances. We have evidence-based treatments for mental illnesses. Freud was a cocaine addict, a sexist, didn't know about spiritual matters and covered up the truth about sexual abuse. He psychoanalyzed his own daughter and had an affair with his sister-in-law!"

Actually Freud was very interested in psychopharmacology, made early contributions to the field and was hopeful about its future. Describing the biochemical nature of the brain does not define our subjective experience nor does it limit us to biochemical interventions. Every mental state has its corresponding biochemical basis.

Evidence-based treatments typically employ a cognitive-behavioral theory and while very useful, they don't address unconscious motivations, or the meaningfulness of dreams, symptoms or repetitive behavior patterns.

Freud conducted experiments with cocaine on himself, his friends and family. He wrote scholarly papers on its effects but abandoned its use after a failed attempt to help a friend addicted to morphine. The friend became addicted to cocaine and died as a result.

Bruno Bettelheim, in a conference, was once challenged, "But wasn't Freud a sexist!" to which Bettelheim replied, "If it wasn't for Freud we wouldn't even be talking about sex." Psychoanalysis also integrated women into the profession decades before other health professions.

Freud was proud of his Jewish heritage, but was not a religious man. Nonetheless, he wrote extensively about religion, myth, ritual, and the development of the god concept in cultural evolution.

Freud was the first to propose the pathogenic nature of sexual abuse. He later modified his theory to recognize that sexual overstimulation can take place in the course of even normal childcare and also that the child's fantasies of sexual involvement with parents could, by themselves, be traumatic. He changed his view of the etiology of psychological trauma from a pathogenic event to a pathogenic experience of actual sexual abuse or a fantasy of such involvement.

Yes, Freud psychoanalyzed his daughter, Anna, and today that is regarded as a very bad idea. Though Freud regarded the analysis a success it must have been limited - but what analysis doesn't have its limitations.

Despite rumors there is little evidence that Freud had an affair with his sister-in-law,

Minna. But even if some day we should discover that there was an affair, it would not necessitate a change of even one word in Freud's 23 volumes.

So what's Freud got to do with the modern world? Well, he provided us with a way of seeing the human psyche that is just as useful and meaningful today as it was when he discovered it. He taught us that unconscious factors, repressed thoughts, conflicts, and impulses outside of our awareness can result in neurotic symptoms.

He introduced the revolutionary idea that psychological problems and the structure of the adult psyche have their roots in the early childhood experience of the body and early love relations within the family. Embedded in this notion is the idea that sucking at the breast, weaning, soothing, cleaning, affection, body play, toilet training, curiosity and socialization into one's gender are expressions of infantile sexuality. While shocking to some, how else could a child learn about the world except through his/her body? And what else could adult love relations be built upon except the early experiences of love in the family.

Freud showed us that dreams don't have generic meanings that can be revealed in old fashioned dream books and also that they are not meaningless images born of random electrical activity in the brain. Freud demonstrated that dreams have personal meanings pertaining to love and aggression, our early childhood experiences and our contemporary daily life and conflicts. Our dreams do not speak in a literal and rational language but in a figurative, metaphorical and symbolic language that is accessible to psychoanalytic interpretation.

Freud discovered that we guard secrets from ourselves behind coping strategies - defense mechanisms - and that when they become entrenched, they become psychological symptoms. Behind our symptoms, dreams, fantasies and other expressions of unconscious concerns, are our hurts, conflicts and forbidden desires. Psychoanalysis is a treatment strategy aimed at helping the patient to modify defenses, let go of symptoms and face reality.

Freud recognized patterns in patient dreams and discovered their curious parallels to ancient mythology. He saw mythology and much of religion as psychology projected out into the world and so psychoanalysis came to speak of the myth of Narcissus and Narcissism, the myth of Oedipus and the Oedipus Complex, the myth of the hero and the heroic ego, and the myth of Eros and the erotic. This perspective allowed clinical psychoanalysis to find poignant meaning in the lives of ordinary mortals as well as in the sacred texts of all religions.

Freud discovered that when he invited his patients to free-associate they all resisted the invitation but did so in a way unique to the individual's psychic structure. Defenses like intellectualization, projection, denial, splitting, acting out, projective identification, rationalization, humor, sublimation, reaction formation, altruism and so on are ways of managing impulses and unconscious strivings within, the demands of society without and the demands of the superego, which is an internalized ambassador for the demands of society. When we use defenses in the face of the analytic invitation to free-associate, we call them resistances. And with the interpretation of the resistance, the patient has the opportunity to look beneath the surface, face reality and perhaps let go of the symptom.

Thus we need to listen to what the patient is saying, how the patient is saying it and how the patient isn't saying something - how the patient is resisting talking about that which is difficult to talk about. If we can help the patient to speak about that which is difficult to speak of, the symptom may no longer be needed.

Freud discovered that the biggest resistance to speaking freely is the nature of the relation that the patient establishes with the therapist. This relation frequently has the quality of a repetition of important relations in the past, specifically relations to the parents. It is a relationship based in early childhood experience, which sets the stage for the symptom and when transferred into the therapeutic relation becomes a re-creation of the past in the present. Freud called this transferred relation "the transference". The transference is a bit of the symptom imported into the therapeutic environment. But the transference is not simply seeing the psychologist as a parental figure. It is also the patient configuring him or herself into a relationship anticipating critique, gratification, envy, competition, violation, abandonment, rivalry, or whatever else the internal script lays out. This script is the repetition compulsion, the cover story for the trauma beneath the surface. And when we get to the story under the story we begin to make the unconscious conscious.

What's Freud got to do with the modern world? Freud offers a lens on the modern world - a lens through which we discover a world of depth and meaning, even today!