Free Associating In Tehran

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A renewed interest in the ideas and practice of psychoanalysis has developed in America in recent years. Some of this interest is due to the demands of professional societies, funding sources, and health care insurance companies for evidence-based psychotherapies, and this has necessitated that psychoanalytic practitioners and training institutes initiate sound research into the effectiveness of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy. An example of this new development can be seen in the recent article “A Quality-Based Review of Randomized Controlled Trials of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy” by Andrew Gerber and colleagues (2011), who reviewed 88 articles in peer-reviewed journals, where each article examined the overall effectiveness of psychoanalytic or psychodynamic psychotherapies.

There is, however, a second reason for the renewed interest in the ideas of psychoanalysis. The year 2009 marked the centenary of Freud and Jung’s visit to America. This event has been marked with several celebrations as well as scholarly works. One such
work is *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (Burnham, 2012), which examined the impact that Freud’s ideas had on American scholarship in light of Modernism (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES*; Teague, 2012).

Lawrence Samuel, in his book *Shrink: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in America*, has taken a different approach to examining the effect that Freud’s ideas had in America. Rather than review the development of psychoanalysis as a clinical technique or the effect that it had on American scholarly ideas, he has evaluated psychoanalysis’s contribution to 20th-century American culture, that is, how it has permeated American popular culture.

Whereas Oberndorf (1953) in *A History of Psychoanalysis in America* examined the development of the ideas of psychoanalysis from an insider’s perspective, the perspective of a practicing analyst, Samuel looks at psychoanalysis from the perspective of an outsider, someone who is not engaged in the application of Freud’s theories to help suffering patients. As such, Samuel avoids discussions about the validity of this or that theoretical development and focuses instead on how the notions of psychoanalysis have been understood by the general public. He writes about how psychoanalysis appears to the American public, not about what it actually is, and, as everyone knows, appearances can be deceiving.

The psychoanalysis that appears in literature, cinema, social commentaries, and the like is often so unlike what actually occurs in the analytic session or analytic training that it is, for analysts, quite laughable. Freud himself was quite upset when he found out what was happening to his ideas with the popularization of psychoanalysis in America.

For the most part, Samuel has used sources culled from journalism, newspaper articles, magazine opinion pieces, and transcripts of radio and television broadcasts to create his narrative. His source list is enormous and impressive; the notes themselves cover 23 pages, and the bibliography spans an additional seven pages. Even if Samuel’s narrative were not good, which it is, the book would be worth purchasing just for the massive amount of material that he has indexed.

What Samuel has done is craft a very interesting description of the love–hate relationship that the American public has with psychoanalysis. He documents journalists’ early fascination with Freud’s ideas and the waning and waxing of interest in psychoanalysis.

By looking at journalistic sources, Samuel has brought to light several aspects of psychoanalysis that might not occur to mental health professionals but that interested the public, such as, what it is like to be married to a psychoanalyst, the antipathy that Pope Pius XI had to psychoanalysis (Pius XI forbade priests, monks, and nuns from engaging in psychoanalysis either as analysts or as patients), and what is it like to vacation next to a psychoanalyst. He also examines the time when the terms and practices of psychoanalysis were not legally controlled and the resultant havoc that untrained practitioners had on their patients.
Samuel starts his narrative in the 1920s and essentially explores journalistic attitudes toward psychoanalysis decade by decade until the present day. Given the amount of material that he covers, he was bound to get some things wrong or overstate his conclusions. He succumbs to the tendency to use purple prose in a manner similar to journalistic excess. Sometimes this style is charming and at other times jarring, and it always points to his bias either for or against this or that idea in psychoanalysis:

Even worse, the psychoanalyzed seemed to have frozen personalities, a result of having achieved much-desired discovery of their “real self” and then, afraid of mucking up the works, suffering from “dry-rot.” (p. 35)

Having an actual analyst at a dinner party was the ultimate way to dish the psychoanalytic dirt, a way to find out if one’s problems (cloaked as someone else’s, of course) could be solved on the couch. (p. 78)

Unlike in the United States, analysts in China, almost all foreigners, are treated as rock stars, encouraging a growing number of Chinese to enroll in psychoanalytic training. (p. 219)

Although Samuel claims to value psychoanalysis, many of these comments reveal an attitude that is ambivalent at best and derogatory at worst. Readers should be aware that this work, as carefully researched as it is, is not a fair and unbiased account of the effect of psychoanalysis on American culture. Samuel often sacrifices a clear, objective evaluation of an issue for a sensationalistic “exposing” of a problem in the psychoanalytic field.

For example, his attempt to explain the antipathy that many academics in the field of clinical psychology felt toward psychoanalysis is interesting but not elaborated enough in the work. Although he does state that the problem that clinical psychology had with psychoanalysis was due to the fact that until recently psychologists were not permitted to become analysts and the fact that clinical psychology (indeed, all of psychology) struggled at the beginning of the 20th century to establish itself as a “real” science, he doesn’t discuss the essential differences between the Weltanschauung of psychoanalysis and American psychology: Psychoanalysis derives its method from Continental rationalism, whereas American psychology is for the most part based on British logical positivism, two different philosophical approaches that have rarely agreed.

This failure to understand the nature of the difference between American clinical psychology and psychoanalysis in conceptualizing the human condition should not be surprising in a work that relies so heavily on popular sources. Philosophical debates about ontological, epistemological, and ethical presuppositions do not sell magazines, newspapers, or books.

This is not to say that Samuel ignores the scholarly debate altogether. From time to time, he does bring in the “experts,” that is, scholars who argue for and against psychoanalysis, to explore why psychoanalysis became so popular in American culture, but
the sources of these opinions are often quotes from the popular media, which leaves the reader wondering why these “experts” are so strong in their affirmation or condemnation of psychoanalysis.

Anyone reading only this book will not understand that the vociferous debates between the natural science perspective of American psychology and psychoanalysis are based on a fundamental disagreement about the nature of psychological evidence. Whereas American psychology relies on observable behavior and measurable outcomes, psychoanalysis attends to reflective experience in ways similar to phenomenology.

Although Samuel clearly states that the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious is compelling, he fails to note that as with many successful theories, psychoanalysis offers a powerful semiotic system that can explain a wide range of seemingly diverse data. Psychoanalysis has succeeded in capturing the imagination of the American public because it explains in relatively easy-to-understand terms complicated aspects of human behavior and motivation. (American psychologists would say that the ideas of psychoanalysis are too easy to understand and too simplistic.)

Americans also have appreciated Freud’s reflective method for coming to terms with emotional difficulties as opposed to the observational approaches of classic behaviorism. Many Americans want a theory that allows them to look at themselves rather than one that looks at them. Susan Cain’s (2012) bestselling book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* reflects this need (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES*; Furey, 2012).

Samuel has done a very good job of showing how psychoanalysis became iconic in the American imagination and how certain elements of psychoanalysis have become cultural memes. If, for example, a cartoonist wants to show someone in psychotherapeutic treatment, he or she will show that person on the psychoanalytic couch with the analyst sitting behind the patient, making pithy comments. The fact that the psychoanalytic couch is almost never used in the practice of psychotherapy doesn’t matter. The couch has become the meme for psychotherapy, just as psychoanalytic terms such as *anal*, *envy*, *subconscious*, and *complex* have all entered into common language and point to the collective acceptance of many of the basic ideas of psychoanalysis. (The fact that *complex* is a term created by Jung, not Freud, isn’t important here. In the minds of the American public, all psychodynamic theories belong to Freud.)

Despite the misgivings of American psychologists, for many Americans psychoanalysis, in its many forms, satisfactorily explains their and others’ psychological experiences. Perhaps Freud and his psychoanalytic theories have had an acceptance by the American public because the American public is persuaded that Freud was right after all.
References


