Notes on the Life and Ideas of Sigmund Freud

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Abstract
This paper provides a brief summary of the most important events in Freud’s life and an overview of his main ideas about psychological development and psychoanalysis. It includes a list of his major contributions and a list of common criticisms of his theory.

Sigmund Freud was born in 1856 in Moravia (now known as the Czech Republic). His father, who was a wool merchant, was skeptical, liberal, and free-thinking. Freud said four events from his childhood held special significance for him:

1) He enjoyed the almost exclusive love of his mother, at least until his younger brother was born. Freud was jealous of his brother and had evil wishes toward him; when his brother died at age eight months, Freud felt very guilty. This event contributed to Freud's theory of family conflicts.

2) As a child, Freud happened to see his mother naked, and felt sexually aroused. This event contributed to his theory of infant sexuality.

3) At age seven or eight, Freud deliberately urinated in his parents’ bedroom. His father said "that boy will never amount to anything." After that Freud began having recurrent dreams of having great accomplishments and successes.

4) A Gentile man knocked Freud’s father's new fur cap into the gutter and shouted "Jew - get off the pavement." His father reacted by meekly stepping into the gutter to get his cap. This passive response damaged Freud's view of his father.

Freud’s family moved to Vienna when Freud was four. The social climate was pervaded by poverty, disease, racism, and sexual hypocrisy. Prostitution was common, but people in polite society pretended it did not exist. Even table legs were covered out of modesty, and were referred to as "limbs."

Freud did well in high school. He was impressed by Darwin's theory of evolution, and he decided to go into science, and then medical school. He saw the goal of science as gathering knowledge about human nature, not alleviating human suffering. Freud entered
the University of Vienna at age 17 and studied physiology (the study of humans as physical/chemical organisms). He had a photographic memory and got excellent grades. He fell in love with Martha Bernays, but poverty delayed their marriage for four years, during which time Freud wrote her over 900 love letters. They finally married in 1886.

In medical school Freud conducted research on brain anatomy and he also discovered the anesthetic properties of cocaine for eye surgery. At that time cocaine was easily available and was used to treat opium and tobacco addiction. Freud took cocaine himself and found he enjoyed its effects. When a friend began using cocaine daily to treat his pain due to a burned hand, and eventually became mentally ill, Freud saw the negative side of cocaine and advised against its use.

Freud began his private practice, and specialized in nervous disorders, using treatments such as baths, massage, and rest cures. In 1882 Freud met Josef Breuer, who had treated a 21-year-old woman (Anna O.) who developed psychosomatic symptoms (hysteria) after the death of her father. Breuer had her talk freely about her past and also used hypnosis. Anna's symptoms disappeared when she described her childhood memories, and she coined the term "the talking cure." Hypnosis was called the "cathartic cure." The case of Anna O. was very influential on Freud.

Freud also met Charcot, who demonstrated that he could use hypnosis to induce tremors, paralysis, and many other symptoms of hysteria. This proved there was a powerful psychological component to the physical symptoms. Freud decided that unconscious conflicts could cause symptoms.

Freud experimented with hypnosis and used forehead touching with the instruction "concentrate on a symptom and recall any memories that come to mind; suspend judgment; don't censor yourself." Eventually Freud abandoned hypnosis for the technique of "free association." He found that his patients always went back to early childhood memories and revealed child-like wishes and impulses. Freud decided that as adults we still have these infantile desires but that we repress them and keep them in check.

According to Freud, human behavior results from the operation of internal dynamic forces; the person is a closed system of energy (libido). Conflict between the id (instincts) and the ego (reality) is inevitable. Lack of enough satisfaction of impulses at a
particular stage results in fixation. The ego represses inappropriate impulses into the unconscious, but they cause pressure, which is felt as anxiety. These impulses may be displaced (resulting in a phobia); converted (resulting in somatic symptoms); or dissociated (resulting in amnesia). The surface manifestations of the underlying conflict are symptoms.

According to Freud, human behavior is never free, random, or spontaneous. It is determined and governed by our biological instincts. Balancing impulses and external demands is difficult, so normality and health is difficult to achieve. Unless instincts are gratified in early childhood, the child will have some degree of fixation. Later the person may regress to earlier patterns to achieve gratification.

There are five stages of personality development: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. In the oral stage the child receives gratification from sucking and the relief of hunger. An adult with an oral fixation is passively dependent. The anal stage concerns bowel and bladder control and the functions of retention and elimination. An adult with an anal fixation is overly concerned with security, orderliness, punctuality, and thrift. In the phallic stage the child becomes aware of genital differences. The boy sees his father as a rival for his mother's attention, and the girl desires her father's attention. The latency stage is the calm before the storm of puberty, and the genital stage is maturity heterosexuality. Sexual and aggressive drives (broadly defined) motivate all human behavior. Much of adults' behavior is meant to sublimate socially unacceptable drives, such as incest and murder.

Freud thought that psychopathology resulted from sexual problems. Thirteen of his patients said that a parent had attempted or achieved their seduction as children: "The cause of hysteria is a passive sexual experience before puberty, i.e., a traumatic seduction." Freud later decided these childhood seductions had in fact never occurred, but were at first fantasies, and then the reversal of a desired role (this was called the "seduction theory"). Freud called the memory of psychic trauma in childhood the "precious metal" hidden in the ore of memory.

Freud also described the importance of dreams, saying they contain "the psychology of the neuroses in a nutshell." He called dreams "the royal road to the unconscious." He said that dreams have both a manifest content and a latent content;
dreams express wishes. His view that dreams can be seen as metaphors for symptoms led to his theory of dream interpretation. The latent meaning of dreams is disguised; for example, a wish may appear as its opposite. Unpleasant dreams may result from a desire for punishment.

According to Freud, no dreams are non-sexual; even dreams which appear innocent represent the fulfillment of sadistic, perverse, or incestuous impulses. In dreams the male genital organ is symbolically represented by objects that are long and upstanding, such as sticks, poles, trees, guns, swords, pencils, tools, snakes, etc. The female genital organ is symbolized by pits, caves, jars, boxes, pockets, rooms, books, churches, etc. Solitary playful activities in dreams, such as painting or playing the piano, represent masturbation. Having a tooth pulled represents castration. Rhythmic activities such as dancing, riding, or climbing represent sexual intercourse.

Freud's concept of psychic determinism was based on the idea that nothing is random; there are good reasons for our behavior, though we may not be consciously aware of the reasons. Unconscious motivations are revealed in parapraxes (slips of the tongue, mis-readings, errors, jokes, memory lapses, omissions, absences, angry responses, and faulty actions). Parapraxes reveal what Freud called the "psychopathology of everyday life."

Freud called his psychotherapy process "psychoanalysis," and used the techniques of free association, dream analysis, and analysis of the parapraxes. He developed a theory of the erotic life of childhood, though he did not want to believe in it (nor did his patients or colleagues) since it was so shocking.

Freud said that neurosis is a psychological disorder characterized by anxiety that results from sexual problems. The sexual problems result from fixations in childhood sexual development. Being sexual was problematic for young adults in Europe in the 1890s. Men who patronized prostitutes were vulnerable to disease, and masturbation was thought to lead to neurasthenia and eventually impotence. Both masturbation and sexual abstinence could result in an anxiety neurosis.

It was thought that women who marry impotent men develop a hysterical neurosis. Coitus interruptus (which was commonly practiced as a means of birth control) could also result in neurosis. Freud considered it a near miracle that any adults are
healthy sexually. He assumed unhealthy sexuality included practices such as masturbation, sexual perversions, and fetishism. He thought that these sexual fixations are traceable to blocks in early childhood development.

Freud decided to psychoanalyze himself, and during most of the 1890's he himself suffered from a powerful psychoneurosis. He decided that although parents may have incestuous desires, much more widespread are the wishes of children to sleep with their parent of the opposite sex. Thus Freud developed his concepts of the Oedipus and Electra complexes.

In one of his cases, while using hypnosis and free association, a female patient talked about her father, then "woke" from hypnosis and hugged Freud. It was not unusual for female patients to fall in love with him, while male patients went through a phase of hating him. Freud decided the patients were acting out their feelings toward other people in the therapy hour, and he developed the concept of transference.

During these productive years in his work, Freud had six children. He was interested in art and collected antiquities. He lectured often, but was ostracized because of the sensational nature of his theories. He became better known when he published The Interpretation of Dreams, although it only sold 123 (of the 600 copies printed) in the first six weeks after its publication; but he was no longer ignored.

According to Freud, we all have fantasies of wish fulfillment, which are expressed in both dreams and daydreams. Some people make their dreams reality. Freud said that the artist transforms wishes into art, while the neurotic transforms them into symptoms.

In 1902 Freud formed the Wednesday Circle, a weekly meeting which included Adler, Stekel, and later Jung. Mrs. Freud served cigars and black coffee at the meetings. Freud often smoked as many as 20 cigars a day. This group enlarged and became the International Psychoanalytic Association. In 1909 Freud was invited to deliver the Clark Lectures in America, and the tour was moderately successful. Then Freud returned to Vienna and continued his private practice.

Freud gave each patient exactly 55 minutes, and often saw twelve patients a day. He had patients lie on a couch, partly as a remnant of hypnotic technique, and partly because he did not like to be stared at. He considered himself a blank screen, or a mirror, and revealed nothing of himself to patients. His special way of listening was called "even
attention" or "hovering attention," with a non-judgmental, accepting attitude. He said the analyst should use his unconscious to listen to the patient's unconscious. The goal of analysis is to understand the workings of the patient's mind. The analyst listens, makes connections, and gives the patient interpretations of what the patient's unconscious communications mean.

For psychoanalysis to be successful, patients should be reasonably well educated and reliable. Freud said that although insight is essential, it is not sufficient; giving only interpretations would be like giving menus to starving people, when what they need is food. To make progress, patients must accept the interpretations and work through the transference neurosis. Freud’s approach to psychotherapy was relatively brief; he saw most of his patients for only two or three months.

Freud said that homeostasis is the mental activity that attempts to reduce tensions to the lowest possible level. The pleasure principle is the idea that pleasure is the reduction of tension, and displeasure is the increase of tension. He said the fundamental aim of all instincts is to revert to an earlier state. The repetition compulsion is the drive to repeat fixed patterns of behavior. In their daily life patients re-enact old patterns of relating to their parents. We seek in a mate someone who relates to us the way our parents did. The goal of analysis is to convert repeating into remembering. The patient is instructed to put off major decisions until after therapy, since otherwise old mistakes would be repeated.

Freud saw life as conflict. There is conflict between the individual and society; we are animals, with base instincts, but society makes us pretend we are civilized. Freud rejected any belief in God or an afterlife. He said religion was developed as a way to keep us in line. But even religious traditions reveal unconscious sexual impulses, such as church steeples (which are obvious phallic symbols). He noticed that in some Asian and African religions there is actual worship of stone phalluses placed in damp, cave-like, feminine grottos.

There is also conflict within the individual, among the three parts of the mind or personality: id, ego, and superego. The id is the reservoir of instinctive impulses; the ego is influenced by the external world; and the superego is the inhibition of instinct. Repression is essential, since we cannot let our instincts rule us, but sometimes they rule
us anyway, as when symptoms surface.

In the neurotic person the ego is weakened by conflict. In the psychotic person the ego has let go of all responsibility. The analyst must join forces with the patient's ego. The patient develops defense mechanisms to guard against their unconscious and to resist progress in psychoanalysis. It does not help just to get rid of symptoms; the patient's personality structure must change; this is a more difficult goal and takes longer. But as analysis continues and the transference is resolved, neurotic symptoms should disappear. Patients should get to where they can express their motivations directly, instead of indirectly via symptoms.

The goal of psychoanalysis was never self-improvement or fulfillment, but rather the more modest goal of improving the patient's ability to love and work. Freud said the goal is to "turn neurotic misery into common unhappiness." He also limited the use of psychoanalysis to a few neuroses, such as hysteria, phobias, and obsessional neurosis.

Freud wrote 24 books, and re-worked his theory in his later life. In 1923, at age 67, he detected a painful growth on his right jaw and palate, probably due to his cigar smoking. He had difficulty swallowing and working due to the intense pain. Freud endured 33 operations with stoical fortitude. When the Nazis arrived in Vienna in 1938, Freud left and settled in London. The jaw cancer slowly progressed, and he had to wear a large prosthesis which blurred his speech. He refused all pain medication until just before he died on Sept. 23, 1939, at the age of 83. Freud's brilliant theories, innovative therapeutic techniques, and profound insights into the human psyche opened up a whole new field of psychological study. He was an original thinker who radically altered prevailing views of human nature. While many of his ideas are no longer accepted, he is owed respect for his creativity and his energetic exploration of the human psyche.

Major Contributions of Freud
The idea that all behavior is caused (determined), and hence lawful.
The idea that the search for causes of behavior is the central task of psychology.
The idea that psychological insights can be useful in relieving suffering.
The emphasis on the durable effect of childhood experiences and trauma.
The idea of unconscious motivation as a cause of behavior.
The description of the defense mechanisms, which reduce anxiety.
The description of a set of tools for personal analysis: self-examination, reflection, and noting recurrent patterns of thought and behavior.

Common Criticisms of Freud's Theory
Many aspects of the theory are difficult or impossible to test scientifically, so it is difficult to know how valid they are.

It over-emphasizes the influence of biological instincts (particularly sexuality) on the person.

Freud generated universal statements about human nature based on a small number of case histories.

There is little explanatory and predictive power to concepts such as the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, and sublimation.

Freud's ideas regarding the Oedipus complex, the stages of psychosexual development (oral, anal, phallic, latency, genital) and the personality model (id, ego, superego) have not been supported by scientific research.

Today Freud's theory of dream interpretation is generally considered invalid.

Few people are appropriate for psychoanalysis, since they should be very verbal, psychologically minded, intelligent, affluent, and capable of self-reflection.

Psychoanalytic theory leaves no room for environmental manipulations.

The theory emphasizes talking about feelings to the neglect of acting on feelings.

The theory stresses understanding at the expense of action.


