

A life on the margins

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IT'S funny to reflect on how I became attached to the 'idea' of Freud. These days I'm engrossed in questions of identity and otherness, in both psychosocial and psychoanalytic terms. This has led me to explore how psychoanalysis arose out of a specific set of conditions linked to major cultural and political shifts in European society, and particularly to changes in the position of Jews at the end of the 19th century (Frosh, 2005).

Freud's Jewish identity was crucial to the invention of psychoanalysis: both accepted and rejected, both emancipated and excluded, educated and denied status, Jews of Freud's time and class stood on the outside looking in, wishing for entry but also turning an ironic, acerbic eye to the goings-on of their supposed superiors. In this sense, psychoanalysis was specifically Jewish (as indeed it was in terms of the ethnicity of its early adherents). Freud claimed that being Jewish meant that he 'found [him]self free of many prejudices



STEPHEN FROSH on the tension between order and disorder in his and Freud's careers.

which restrict others in the use of the intellect; as a Jew I was prepared to be in the opposition and to renounce agreement with the 'compact majority' (Freud, 1961, p.368). Psychoanalysis is built on this principled investment in speaking what it sees as the truth; an aspect of the analytic attitude that at its best leaves no assumption unchallenged, no common-sense explanation undisturbed.

As has become increasingly clear through much modern scholarship (e.g. Yerushalmi, 1991; Gilman, 1993), the idea that the specific conditions of emergence out of which psychoanalysis arose might in some meaningful way lead it to be considered a 'Jewish science' is not far-fetched, despite the opprobrium that this notion has gathered through its use by the Nazis as a term of abuse. Some of the particular assumptions of psychoanalysis, whilst not tied uniquely to Jewish ethical and practical concerns, nevertheless have profound Jewish connotations. For example, the model of mental health adopted by Freudian psychoanalysis resonates strongly with Jewish ethics as well as with the broader modernist promotion of reason over recalcitrant, often irrational experience.

This attachment to Jewish ethics and ideals can be seen in Freud's links to the Jewish 'lodge' in Vienna, the B'nai Brith, which was the scene of his early lectures on dreams and to which he remained grateful throughout his life. In 1926, paying tribute to him on his seventieth birthday, Ludwig Braun, the representative of the Vienna B'nai Brith, produced a stirring testimony to the esteem in which

Freud was held. Categorising psychoanalysis as 'genuinely Jewish', he 'went on to define the meaning of Jewishness as being comprised of an independence of spirit, the willingness to do battle with an unjust society, and a vision of the whole of nature and humanity. All, he suggested, were intimate aspects of Freud's personality and liberally infused in his work' (Diller, 1991, p.170).

Freud himself, later (in 1935), claimed that he had always felt linked to the B'nai Brith over this issue of ethical ideals, even though he had ceased to work actively with the organisation decades before: 'The total agreement of our cultural and humanitarian ideals, as well as the same joyful acknowledgement of Jewish descent and Jewish existence, have vividly sustained this feeling' (Klein, 1985, p.86). The ideals often thought of as intrinsic to Jewish ethics – a life of service, integrity and honesty, intellectual clarity and balanced respect for others, alongside a capacity for clear recognition of differences and of the competing capacities for construction and destructiveness endemic to the human condition – are so close to those of Freudian psychoanalysis as to make it obvious why the latter might have been born out of the former.

So, with this strong identification between Jewish identity and psychoanalysis in mind, it is ironic that my own engagement with psychoanalysis started with the impact of a charismatic, aristocratic English teacher at school, whose enthusiasm for leading his young charges into speculations about anality and phallic symbols meant that literature became spellbinding for what

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it hid as well as for what it might be made to reveal (Stuart, 1979). What was exciting was not the link between psychoanalysis and Jewish identity, though maybe there was an unconscious resonance that drew me to it through this route, but the thrill of something grand and at the same time disreputable, exciting, difficult and dangerous. Using psychoanalytic ideas, one might ask questions that actually allow one to find something out – something that all adolescents want, yet fear.

Intriguingly, this has some parallels with the British scene of psychoanalysis, which had very different origins to that of Europe: origins in the Society for Psychological Research and in the genteel, literary and if anything anti-Semitic enthusiasms and blind spots of the Bloomsbury group (Frosh, 2003). It is as if the very pragmatic approach of British philosophy and psychology was always on the lookout for something eccentric that might help make sense of the irrational and also allow a kind of vicarious thrill; this might even explain the otherwise hard-to-understand welcome British psychoanalysts gave to the bizarre and extreme formulations of Melanie Klein.

These two strands – the powerful personal identification with Freud as someone working on the margins, not quite accepted but also an object of fascination, and the grand cultural sweep of psychoanalytic concerns that raise the ‘big questions’ about life and death, sex and destructiveness – have governed my own interest in the application of psychoanalysis to psychology. This is not a one-way business, in which psychoanalysis is somehow the ideal object that can always be seen as trumping psychology. For many years, I have taught psychoanalysis in a university department of academic psychology; I also worked for a decade as a psychologist in an institution (the Tavistock Clinic) best known for its psychoanalytic work. Yet I have never quite wanted to be fully ‘in’ and ‘of’ psychoanalysis, no doubt partly because of insufficiently analysed unconscious hostility towards any group that might have me (a psychoanalytic as well as a Groucho-Marxian truism), but also because of my sense that it is the critical capacity of Freud that most needs to be retained, rather than his (and later analysts’) anxious investment in maintaining the institutions and practices of psychoanalysis at all costs.

What arises from this is not only a political aversion to the creation of

psychoanalysis as a ‘truth’, but also a very pragmatic, psychology-fuelled interest in mundane issues such as validation: how can one trust any psychoanalytic claim?

Alongside this, however, I have a continuing strong belief in the value of Freud’s capacity to provoke identifications and to raise questions that are fundamental to psychological and social concerns. The result is a standpoint, indeed a career, which is spent in various margins: not quite respectable in psychoanalysis, because I am not a psychoanalyst; not quite central in psychology, because I inhabit the weird and wild world of psychoanalytic speculation as a way of maintaining an interrogation of psychology’s lack of emotional depth.

It seems to me that in the period over which I have been working as an academic psychologist (about 25 years), these margins have become rather less uncomfortable than they were before.

Academic psychology, particularly since it developed a serious attitude towards qualitative research and since the growth of discursive and narrative approaches, is now much more respectful of some concerns shared by psychoanalysis. These include, for example how to collect and interpret meaningful data about personal experience, how to employ the subjectivity of an investigator in the service of research, and how to address the limits of people’s capacity to tell a story about themselves (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005; Wetherell, 2005; Emerson & Frosh, 2004). For its part, psychoanalysis has become more self-critical with regard to its evidential basis, more aware of social and cultural issues, and much more sophisticated in its exploration of its own psychological assumptions and therapeutic processes (e.g. Fonagy *et al.*, 2002; Frosh, 2006). In my own field of psychosocial studies, the stringent focus on the ‘psychological’ and ‘social’ self as integrated rather than opposed entities, raises questions about how identities are forged out of identification and encounters with others. These are questions of representation, recognition, fantasy, agency and desire that are enriched by engagement with psychoanalytic thought.

But although it is exciting and welcome to see the way some psychoanalytic and psychological concerns are converging, for me it remains the oppositional stance of psychoanalysis, its critical capacity, which continues to make it a source for thinking

that troubles the assumptions of other psychological theories. As it happens, a large part of the institutional history of psychoanalysis has been connected with the playing out of this critical urge against an alternative wish to be accepted and safe. In some ways psychoanalysis is the most ordered, conservative of disciplines, with its formal attire, closely monitored boundaries and hierarchical structures of authority; in other ways it is the most seditious, the most explosive, with its claim that desire occupies a prime space in all our psychic lives. The tension here reflects another tension, this time between the scientific, ‘colonising’ aspect of Freud and his more expressive openness to irrationality: what this teaches is how the truth of the human subject always, thankfully, seems just to slip away; that as we speak of it in order to control it, there is a spark of resistance generated, a little irony that makes a stain on our nice, pure theories. Much of the creativity of Freud and psychoanalysis lies in this encounter between order and disorder, between the wish to control through knowledge and the impulse to celebrate the subversion perpetrated by unconscious life.

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