Freud, forgotten Neurologist

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Abstract

For a five-year period before Sigmund Freud embarked on his original studies of psychological mechanisms, nomenclature, and psychoanalysis, he had extensive neuropathological training under von Brücke and executed research into neuronal cytoarchitecture and neural tracts. Influenced by Charcot and Theodor Meynert he carried out and published important clinical studies on aphasia and cerebral diplegia. He strived to carry his scientific discipline into his psychoanalytical work. As a Neurologist his role is underestimated.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is remembered for his original studies on psychological mechanisms, nomenclature, and psychoanalysis. There is an abundant literature1 about his work on a variety of clinical and neuropathological topics.2 This important period (1882-1889) of the Freud oeuvre has been largely neglected.

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neuropathological expertise3 from Theodor Meynert (1833-1892) and Hermann Nothnagel (1841-1905). In 1889 he was appointed to the academic post of Privatdozent, Lecturer in Neuropathology. In Innovative studies on the medulla, published in Brain, he used gold chloride to stain neural tracts and axis cylinders. In three papers he demonstrated the structure and function of the tracts between the cerebellum, inferior olivary nucleus and tract, the inferior cerebellar peduncle and the medulla oblongata.4 This work was held in high regard.

At this time he also developed an interest in the possible benefits of cocaine, which proved disastrous, and the source of much subsequent criticism although with ophthalmologist Carl Koller (1857-1944) he had shown its value as a local anaesthetic in eye surgery.

Awarded a travelling scholarship, he studied at the Salpêtrière Hospital under Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) for 19 weeks between 1885 and 1886. There, the great Neurologist hugely inspired him. Charcot’s lecturing bravura and his insights into hysteria5 and hypnosis directly determined Freud’s later preoccupation with psychological mechanisms.

On return to Vienna he married Martha Bernays in 1886, and to improve the financial needs of his family, at Brücke’s suggestion, he left research to begin practice as Consultant Neurologist in nervous diseases, especially hysteria, at Berggasse 19, Vienna. Martha bore six children; the youngest was Anna Freud (1895-1982), a distinguished psychoanalyst in her own right.6

A Neurologist, trying to find treatment for patients with neurotic or hysterical symptoms, Freud came to believe in the repression of subconscious mental processes. He lectured in 1886 at the Vienna Medical Society endorsing Charcot’s views; but his unconventional ideas were not well received.

One of his most important neurological texts (though it sold only 257 copies) was: Zur Auffassung der Aphasien: eine kritische Studie (‘On aphasia; a critical study’, 1891)7 that reviewed the existing literature, criticising its anatomical approach. He discussed Broca’s (1861) and Wernicke’s (1874) respective demonstrations of expressive and receptive aphasia; he coined the term ‘agnosia’ for disturbances of recognition of objects, then called asymbolia. At that time, existing theories of aphasia relied on anatomical localisation which Freud disparaged, preferring a broader, neurolinguistic appraisal. He believed that a lesion in one part of the cortical region might cause change in another part of the cortex, perhaps presaging Geschwind’s disconnection syndromes. The learning of language seemed to occur in the mind rather than in a restricted locus (‘gap’) in the brain.

In detailed letters to his friend Wilhelm Fliess (1858-1928) and to his wife he described his migraine.8 He asserted that stimuli precipitated migraine by irritation of the meninges — an idea close to modern theories of the dural plasma extravasation and vasodilatation related to 5-HT1 receptors on its mechanisms.9

From the Neurology Department at the Institute for Children’s Diseases, in the same year as his ‘On aphasia’, he published his monograph on the nature and course of cerebral palsy, including Little’s disease, based on 35 personally studied cases. This led to his becoming a leading authority. Indeed, his last work in Neurology entitled Die Infantile Cerebralähmung (Infantile Cerebral Paralysis, 1897)10 was the most exhaustive, influential disposition for many years.

Together with his private practice, he continued his clinical work at the Institute for Children’s Diseases, enabling him to support his young family while he pursued his greater interest in clinical psychopathology through his practice with neurotic patients. We can see how many of his protein projects overlapped in time and how he had acquired analytical scientific reasoning, which he tried to apply to more subjective psychological investigations. But objective, measurable, and testable hypotheses were not the stuff of psychology, as its modern, often opaque jargon betrays.

With Josef Breuer (1842-1925), also a former student of von Brücke, he explored the manifestations of hysteria. Breuer had treated the famous patient, Bertha Pappenheim—or ‘Anna O’, who suffered many hysterical symptoms. Instead of using Charcot’s hypnosis they encouraged ‘The talking cure’ or ‘chimney sweeping,’ with abreaction, which seemed beneficial. They published their findings in Studien über Hysterie (1895) — the beginning of psychoanalysis. This was advanced in his The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), which although initially ignored, he thought his best book. He worked at intervals with Alfred Adler and C.G. Jung but neither could accept his notions of infantile sexuality, and they chose to pursue their studies independently.

A massive literature11 attests to his psychoanalytic theories: the notions of infantile sexuality, the interpretation of dreams, the id and ego principles, and other original concepts many of which have persisted in contemporary psychiatry and in daily language.12

I crave readers’ indulgence if in what follows I speak of well known, admitted facts; the context necessitates this method. Freud’s research in Neurology, mainly between 1882 and 1889 had yielded important results. Consequently he tried to find a physiological and materialist basis for his theories of the psyche,13 but these of necessity were subjective. When Freud originated psychoanalysis he wanted it to be a science. In this he acknowledged that the neurological influence
of Brücke, Meinert and Charcot had coloured his subsequent thinking in his pioneering if controversial concepts in psychiatry. His subsequent thinking in his pioneering if of Brücke, Meinert and Charcot had coloured his work in Neurology is unchallenged.

Disputes about religion, war and pacifism also occupied him. In a letter to Albert Einstein in the early 1930s, Freud observed that ‘man has in him an active instinct for hatred and destruction.’ He contrasted this ‘instinct to destroy and kill’ with an instinct ‘to conserve and unify,’ an instinct for love.

Biographical note

Freud was born to Jewish parents, Jacob and Amalie in May 1856 in Freiburg, Moravia, the first of seven children. In 1860 the family moved to Leopoldstadt in Vienna.19

Freud was a clever pupil at the local Gymnasium. From the age of eight he was reading Shakespeare and, despite the influence of an education in Greek and Latin, he later commented in a letter to Martha Bernays: ‘I am taking up again the history of the island, the works of the men who were my real teachers all of them English or Scotch;’

He surrounded himself by his collection of mummy cases, paintings, treasured books on the cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome, and his famous consulting couch.

In 1923, a diagnosis of verrucous squamous carcinoma of the palate had been made. He was subjected to over 30 operations by Hans Pichler (1877-1949) and an eminent Armenian American dentist, Varaztad Kazanjian (1879-1974), and endured a cumbersome prosthesis worn to replace his resected jaw and palate.

Perhaps the last word on the integrity and legacy of Freud can be left to Albert Einstein after a long correspondence (Dec 1932):

“You have earned my gratitude and the gratitude of all men for having devoted all your strength to the search for truth and for having shown the rarest courage in professing your convictions all your life.”

REFERENCES

21. *Founder of the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families at Hampstead in 1952

Figure 1. Freud blue plaque

Figure 2. Freud’s couch [Note picture of Charcot’s demonstration above couch.]

Figure 3. 20 Maresfield Gardens, London from https://londonist.com/2015/08/five-things-you-have-to-see-at-the-freud-museum