

Myth busting - Freud

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Watch out for fraudian analysis.



Freud and his followers have been thoroughly discredited for decades now and among professionals their ideas are considered 'pre-scientific'. So why is Freudian psychoanalysis now taking the place of Astrology to woo-woo the general public?

Paraphrasing Peter Watson, in these days of MRI 'enlightenment', it's hard to avoid the conclusion that Freud simply "made everything up." So why do people still quote Freudian terms over dinner and subject their friends or colleagues to 'armchair analysis' when asked for an opinion or advice? Why do internet sites still talk about the 'ego' when science has proven there is no such thing?

Professionals may be curious how this pseudoscience has managed to stick around for so long when everything we know about it seems to indicate that it should be about as commonly practised as alchemy these days. Many find its continuing presence online, among the intelligentsia, and its refusal to completely disappear a bit embarrassing and think it gives psychiatric science a bad name.

What's more, it's dangerous in the same ways that diagnosis-by-astrology can be dangerous -it can create high anxiety in an unbalanced 'victim' (even causing suicide), and it prevents people from seeking the real help or guidance they may need from genuine counsellors (whom it must be remembered, have spent seven years and about \$40,000 studying before they are allowed to practice.)

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This is like going to all the trouble of becoming a medical doctor and then observing everyone going to the village witchdoctor for magic spells instead. Nobody would claim to be a medical doctor without putting in the required years of study, so why does psychiatric science attract the woo woo brigade and such lack of respect? Many blame Freud, who may have done the profession deep harm with his nonsense. Most blame irresponsible or illiterate media, like internet sites offering 'information' proven wrong in the 1940s.

The popularity of 'psychoanalysis' betrays the 'literacy lag', between huge amounts of research leading to genuine knowledge, and the lack of newly-proven facts being clearly explained to the general public. This happens in all fields, for example there are still plenty of Astrologers out there whom people believe despite the fact Astronomers and Cosmologists now teach real science about the stars and planets.

Intelligent, literate people read scientific research. Everyone else reads the equivalent of the Beano; popular internet opinions disguised as 'facts'. And they fall for it, hook, line and sinker. That's why thousands of people believe they can 'do psychoanalysis', blissfully unaware that they are betraying their ignorance of the field in much the same way Astrologers do.

Real science is hard work and has big words in it. It doesn't always agree with what people believe or think they know. Astrology, homoeopathy, and psychoanalysis, can be explained in simple 'pseudoterms' that everyone can understand with just enough medical keywords to sound realistic. It's easy to sound like an expert spouting pseudoscience, you don't have to spend years studying or large amounts of money to convince people -especially insecure people- that you know all about the mind. 'Freudian analysis' also makes for good chat up lines, gives people a sense of control over others just like Astrology does, and is a great way to put people down or bully them if you don't like them. Another popular reason is you can make a fast buck. So-called 'psychoanalysts' make as much money as psychics.

How do we spot the frauds? Firstly it's not difficult -they give themselves away by using Freudian terms, most notably 'ego' (by which they mean self-opinion or big-headedness), 'projection' (by which they mean source monitoring error -even though they don't know what one is-), 'defenses' (by which they mean Freud's (-not Roger's-) defense mechanisms), and 'personality traits' (yes, we know they don't exist either). These are the popular terms on internet sites claiming to 'inform' on such matters. Most people will accept information as real without even knowing who wrote it, especially if the site has the word 'psychiatry' in the title. They'll also talk about personality 'traits' as though such things exist.

Secondly, they fall for the two most common errors genuine counsellors are taught to avoid in first year -(1) extrapolation from the one to the many (eg, if you have difficulty socially and feel embarrassed with one person, they'll assume you have difficulty socially and feel embarrassed with ALL persons), and (2) source monitoring error (they interpret all their own beliefs about what they think a person is like as being facts 'read' from that person).

Psychoanalysis as a concept is pretty uncommon for serious neuroscientists to study nowadays; the consensus in mainstream science is that (a) it's unfounded and (b) has been supplanted by workable theories and methods supported by MRI evidence. But we cannot get rid of this trend any more than we can 'get rid of' Astrology or Homoeopathy or Fundamentalism. People believing that they have understanding and power reduces their own anxiety, even if what they believe is nonsense. All we can do is encourage the study of genuine science, popularize methods that DO work, and avoid involvement with woo woo.