

It's Time to Reinvent Freud

By Richard A. Shweder

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There is a panic inherent in the anticipation of professional extinction that is the dread of Freud's disciples these days.

The announcement by the Library of Congress that it would shelve an exhibition titled "Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture" coincided with the winter meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, prophetically titled "Is There a Place for Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture?" — thereby confirming the fear of many psychoanalysts that the answer may be "no."

The library's half-hearted decision to put the great guru in cold storage left some analysts in a sweat, feeling defensive, unloved and full of self-doubt about their prospects in the intellectual and economic marketplace. The delay is probably less important than it seems. The authority of curators to be unchallenged arbiters of taste has evaporated over the past decade. In this age of "identity politics" and hotly contested points of view, the very idea of "public culture" has become an oxymoron.

And one does not need a degree in economics to figure out that if exhibitors cannot be highly selective, discerning and partial, then any display or narration about a controversial subject is probably going to be too expensive to mount. The library was just spineless and poor.

The declining mental health of our nation's psychoanalysts, however, is a real matter for concern. Is there a place for psychoanalysis in contemporary culture? What should we tell them to do about their dread?

For starters, let's not deny their reality. Freud has many intellectual enemies. And they are far more numerous and varied than the 42 critics (including Gloria Steinem and Oliver Sacks) who signed a petition urging

the Library of Congress to shower the Viennese doctor with venom rather than just glory.

Here is the short version of the enemies list. Sociobiologists don't like Freud because they think family members have no sexual interest in one another. Cognitive scientists don't like Freud because they think the "unconscious mind" is a rapidly firing network of widely distributed neurons, with no mind of its own. Behavioral geneticists don't like Freud because they really think biology is destiny and that early childhood experience has very little to do with your life.

Why our psychoanalysts are so anxious.

Postmodernists don't like Freud because they think that interpretation is merely free association, while Freud believed that by studying free association he might uncover the true meaning of a "text." Feminists don't like Freud because they think he discounted reports of sexual abuse, disparaged the female body and collaborated with his buddies against his female clients. They think Freud was a patriarch.

Even academic psychologists and philosophers of science don't like Freud. The academic psychologists think that the study of the mind has nothing to do with sex, religion, literature, mythology or the history of civilizations, while Freud, bless his heart, made those topics the core of his curriculum. And the philosophers of science come in two kinds: those who think Freud's tenets are untestable and hence unworthy of scientific consideration, and those who think his tenets are testable and have been shown to be false. So the rap on Freud is not very good.

The word is out in the medical world. It takes too long to "know thyself." Increments of personal insight are hard to measure or reimburse. Moreover, medical interns get nervous when they have to speak to

their patients. They know all too little about the body and even less about a broken heart, or the history of civilization, which is why we need Prozac. Freud once wrote: "However philosophy may bridge the gap between physical and mental, it still exists for practical purposes, and our practice on each side of it must differ accordingly." Freud may have underestimated our practicality and overestimated our sense of purpose, but he was right to worry that the marriage of psychoanalysis to medicine would one day end in disaster.

He might even have been pleased to discover that in contemporary American culture the major interest in psychoanalysis is found in schools of theology and on Broadway. Psychoanalysis has a popular appeal, not because it is a form of medicine or alternative therapy but because it is a secular religion that tries to address the deeper meanings of life. This is a time for psychoanalysis to discover its true identity. It is time for a divorce from medicine. It is time for a remarriage with theologians.

Freud taught that to be happy one must maximize pleasure (the id), be moral (the superego) and survive (the ego). I am not worried about the survival of psychoanalysts. I think their fears of extinction are largely irrational. I just hope they have the guts to do the right thing. □

Richard A. Shweder, professor of human development at the University of Chicago, is currently a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.