

2.9 – Sigmund Freud Documentary

Part One

JAMES MAAS:

Of all the great figures in psychology, perhaps Sigmund Freud is the most important.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

We all speak Freud. Every time we turn around and say, "Oh, he's so anal", or "that person is a control freak," or talk about Freudian slips, or even speculate about the meaning of our dreams.

SCOTT BARON:

He was intellectual. He was an eccentric. At times, he was an abuser of substances.

HAROLD P. BLOOM:

I think history has been complex in its relation to Sigmund Freud. He's both valued and devalued. He's idealized and he's denigrated.

NARRATOR:

In 1938, in his last year of life, Sigmund Freud was old and sick. But his mind was still sharp.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[text of dialogue] I discovered some important new facts about the unconscious. Out of these findings grew a new science, psychoanalysis.

NARRATOR:

And with psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud opened the doors to the unconscious, forever changing the view the human mind.

[SIGMUND FREUD: Exploring the Unconscious]

NARRATOR:

The late 1800s marked the end of the Victorian Age, a period of extreme puritanical restrictions. Any expression of human sexuality was considered an outrage. Respectable women only went to their doctors with a chaperone. Personal matters were never discussed in polite society. Professional therapists didn't exist. And people with psychological problems had nowhere to go.

Mental patients were treated like outcasts. They were put in asylums and received antiquated, and in some cases, even barbaric care.

Treatments included alternating hot and cold baths, lengthy periods of drug induced sleep, and in some cases, brain surgery that resulted in death.

It was in the midst of this, in 1886, Dr. Sigmund Freud began treating patients with a simple, but radical approach. He listened. [2:23]

HAROLD P. BLUM, Executive Director, Sigmund Freud Archives:
Physicians of that day prescribed, but they didn't listen. They were the authorities. The patient was expected to, in effect, obey and listen to the doctor.

Listening to a patient's life history was an entirely new development.

NARRATOR:

Freud's goal was to get his patients to talk as much as possible about anything and everything. In Freud's office, no subject was taboo.

But rather than interview them face to face, he had his patients lie on a couch turned away from him, so that they would be more comfortable revealing their deepest thoughts.

If his methods seemed peculiar, the theories behind them were even more outlandish.

Sigmund Freud developed a revolutionary new way of thinking of the human mind. He introduced the idea of the unconscious.

Freud believed that the unconscious is a place where we bury conflicts such as painful memories, or unacceptable thoughts that we do not want to deal with. And this can make conscious life more difficult.

JAMES MAAS, Professor of Psychology, Cornell University:

He said the unconscious is the real us. Buried down like the bottom of an iceberg. All we see is the tip of the iceberg above the surface of the ocean. That's the present day us. But what really makes us is the downstairs, the subconscious. We are driven by sexual desires, for example, that lay dormant, but are trying to somehow affect our behavior.

NARRATOR:

Freud was convinced that if his patients could bring their repressed thoughts to the surface through conversation, they would have to confront them. This alone could diminish their anxieties, and eventually relieve them of their symptoms.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL, Author, *Anna Freud: A Biography*

This central Freudian notion of the unconscious mind is the one that everyone has to deal with, whether they accept it or reject it. They cannot ignore it.

There aren't that many ideas within the history of ideas that have that kind of a galvanizing power.

NARRATOR:

At first, the mainstream medical community met Freud with scorn and derision. They labeled him a radical and revolutionary, a description that suited him even as a child.

Sigmund Freud grew up in a poor Jewish neighborhood in Vienna. [04:57] As a boy, Sigmund was a brilliant, ambitious, and opinionated student.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[via actor's voice] At school, I was always the bold oppositionist, always on hand when an extreme had to be defended.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

One could say that, in a certain sense, as we look at Freud's accomplishments, that he was already at a very young age, in a class by himself.

NARRATOR:

At 17, Freud graduated high school and entered the University of Vienna to study medicine.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

Medicine was a good way for a young Jewish boy who was very bright to, to make – to make a career for himself. But Freud also, clearly had a great deal of scientific curiosity.

He always had, from his youth, this kind of questing. He would put himself a problem and then just go after it, until he solved it.

NARRATOR:

In 1882, Freud began an internship at the general hospital in Vienna. And in the next three years, he experimented with a number of different specialties, including neurology.

Freud was consumed by his research. But the 26-year-old was also in love. It was during his internship that Freud met Martha Bernays. A lively, intelligent woman, Martha came from a good Austrian family.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEL:

This was his great love, and he struggled to win her, and to get together enough money to be able to marry her. And it's over several years, that, that this unfolds.

NARRATOR:

Only one thing stood in their life. Sigmund Freud was unknown. He would have to make a name for himself first.

Freud redoubled his efforts at the hospital. He dreamt of making a discovery that would make him famous, wealthy, and benefit mankind. He soon pinned his hopes for fame and fortune on a little-known drug, which seemed to hold great promise as an anesthetic and as a treatment for exhaustion and depression.

It was cocaine.

Freud believed in cocaine so much that he began using the drug himself, and even sent some to Martha. [07:10] Freud said cocaine helped him relax in social situations and made him feel more like a man.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[via actor's voice] You perceive an increase in self-control, more vitality and more capacity for work. This result is ensured without any (inaudible)... unpleasant aftermaths, which accompany exhilaration from alcoholic means.

NARRATOR:

Anxious to capitalize on his discovery, Freud published a paper extolling the drug's virtues. But Freud deeply regretted his haste, after the drug's addictive properties became known. It was a huge blow for Freud, professionally.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

It was a source of great disappointment for Freud because he had hoped to be the discoverer of local anesthesia, cocaine being first used effectively as a local anesthetic. It's possible that Freud even thought it had certain aphrodisiac qualities.

Part Two

NARRATOR:

In 1885, Freud's career took a momentous turn for the better. That year, his research in neurology led him to Paris to study the problem of hysteria, with Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot.

Hysteria had been a catch-all diagnosis for patients who exhibited an array of physical symptoms like spastic ticks and speech impairments with no known medical cause.

Hysteria was widely believed to be incurable. But Charcot disagreed.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

Charcot felt that hysteria was not necessarily degenerative, that it was possible to think in terms of cure. And that it was a condition of psychological origin. And this is the beginning for Freud.

Freud's year with Charcot was really a turning point for him.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

The experience with Charcot was really significant for the impression it made on Freud. People under hypnosis could become aware of thoughts, feelings, fantasies, issues that they were not consciously aware of.

So it gave Freud a beginning feeling for the unconscious mind.

NARRATOR:

Determined to explore this further, Freud went to work with Josef Breuer, a prominent Viennese physiologist, who was also researching hysteria. [1:22]

Breuer had been treating a patient named Anna O. with a revolutionary new therapy, the talking treatment.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

Breuer learned that bringing Anna O. back to earlier experiences, which were disturbing to her, and having her relive them and talk about them, talk them out, she symptomatically made extraordinary improvements in her condition. And it was Anna O. herself, the patient, who coined the term "the talking treatment."

NARRATOR:

The work of Charcot and Breuer intrigued Freud. In 1886, he opened his own practice dedicated to treating hysteria and other nervous diseases. However, Freud's practice wasn't an immediate success. He experimented with a variety of techniques, including electrotherapy and hypnosis. But his results were disappointing.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

He discovered by putting a person under a hypnotic spell, that you can get them to remember things that they have forgotten, to make associations between memories that had not been clear to them. And you can produce a temporary alleviation of symptoms. But it didn't last.

It had the further difficulty that, that it was difficult to make a determination between a person's memory and something that might be suggested by the hypnosis. And Freud became very cautious about suggestibility.

NARRATOR:

Determined to avoid suggestion, ultimately Freud abandoned hypnotism, and he developed a new technique, based on Josef Breuer's talking treatment, called free association.

For Freud, free association meant encouraging his patients to speak freely, with as little censorship or guidance as possible.

This process not only seemed to make Freud's patients feel better. But more importantly, over time, his patients' ramblings revealed to Freud their underlying conflicts.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

If patients like Anna O. were allowed and encouraged to speak freely, inevitably, the disturbing experiences that they brought up, connected with their symptoms, began to go back to adolescence and childhood.

NARRATOR:

One such case was known as the "burnt pudding" case. [03:47] It involved a woman who, as a child, had been abused by her father. Coincidentally, there was a smell of burnt pudding coming from the kitchen at the time.

SCOTT BARON, Psychotherapist:

Years later, she was a nanny working for a family, and the father was, again, an abusive man. One day during one of these abusive episodes, not directed her, the cook was burning the pudding. And the combination of the intense emotional experience, triggered by the recurrence of the smell, brought on a hysterical symptom.

NARRATOR:

As more and more of Freud's patients began recalling incidences of abuse from their childhood, Freud arrived at a bold conclusion that he would later come to regret: all hysteria was caused by sexual abuse during childhood. And Freud even went further, theorizing that unconscious sexual urges begin in infancy and drive much of human behavior. None of this sat well in Victorian Vienna.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

The time, certainly, did not favor any unedited, unexpurgated discussion of sex. That much we can say automatically.

And certainly the public in Vienna, back in that time, didn't want to deal with issues of sexual molestation any more than they really wanted to acknowledge all kinds of other problems inside and outside of homes.

Despite his unconventional theories, Freud's own home life was traditional. Having married the love of his life, Martha Bernays, the Freuds had six children during their first nine years of marriage.

They settled into a typical domestic arrangement. While Martha managed the family, Sigmund Freud was consumed by his work.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

Freud not only saw patients five and six days a week, but he – some of the patients went with him on his vacations and continued their analytic work there.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[via actor's voice] I cannot imagine life without work as really comfortable. I find amusement in nothing else.

NARRATOR:

Freud's analytic work didn't stop with his patients.

When his father died in 1896, Freud's grief moved him to begin a process of self-analysis. In effect, Dr. Sigmund Freud became his own patient. [06:18].

SCOTT BARON:

He was his own best subject. He realized the benefit of releasing some of these subconscious issues of his own, and felt that it was important for each individual psychologist to have worked these issues through on their own, to be able to better treat the patient.

NARRATOR:

In his efforts to better access his unconscious mind, Freud discovered a whole new road to the unconscious: the dream.

Over time, he theorized that dreams were a place where the mind runs uncensored, playing out thoughts and memories we dare not discuss in the waking world.

Freud believed that dreams could provide him with remarkable access to the repressed thoughts in his own mind, as well as his patients'.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

Dreams were viewed two different ways before Freud. They were of fantastic importance, prophecies about the future. They were almost divine messages. They were also considered to be nonsense, just waste products of the sleeping mind.

Now what Freud did was to elevate dreams into the realm of scientific observation and discovery. He showed that dreams had a meaning.

Part Three

NARRATOR:

Freud presented his ideas on dreams to the world in 1899, in one of his most controversial books. He called it, simply, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BREUHL:

When Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it sold less than 100 copies initially. I mean, it was a book that had, initially, no resound in the world.

NARRATOR:

Reviews of *The Interpretation of Dreams* were few and unflattering. And Freud's theories were condemned as repugnant.

NEWSPAPER REVIEWS:

[via actor's voice] Freudianism is digging down into the sewage of our moods and appetites, dreams, and passions.

Dr. Freud lives in the fairyland of dreams among the ogres of perverted sex.

His theories lend themselves with terrible ease to the uses of ignorance and quackery.
[0:49]

SCOTT BARON:

These theories were frightening to a great many people. They certainly challenged the establishment.

I think it would be an exaggeration to say that people thought he was insane. Although I'm sure there were some who did.

NARRATOR:

Dogged by resistance to change, Freud faced an uphill battle.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[via actor's voice] There followed a period of absolute helplessness. At that time, I would gladly have dropped the whole thing. Perhaps I persevered only because I had no longer any choice of beginning something else.

NARRATOR:

But Freud had confidence in his work, and he remained committed to his theories. In the early 1900s, a small number of likeminded men became interested in Freud's new science, psychoanalysis.

At first, the group met in Freud's apartment to hear him lecture and discuss his theories. As Freud's reputation grew, so did his circle of supporters. And in time, psychoanalytic societies sprang up in Vienna, Zurich, and New York.

Over the next 20 years, Freud published more than a dozen books and wrote volumes of letters, papers, and articles. Though he did revise his theory that all hysteria was caused by sexual abuse, Freud continued to provoke the mainstream.

Her developed new theories on everything from the components of the mind to childhood sexuality.

Soon, terms like ego, superego, the id, and the Freudian slip all became household words.

But just as Freud's ideas began to take hold, Freud became ill. In 1923, as a result of a lifelong addiction to cigars, Freud was diagnosed with mouth cancer.

He battled the disease for the next 16 years, and endured dozens of painful operations in the process.

Over time, both his speech and hearing became permanently affected.

ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL:

He had a whole side of his face, his jaw, replaced with a prosthesis, painful to wear, painful to take out, painful to put back in, just a... a horrible illness. [03:04]

NARRATOR:

In the midst of Freud's battle with cancer, an even greater battle was spreading throughout Europe. In the 1930s, the Nazis began their rise to power. And in 1938, Sigmund Freud looked on with horror as the Germans occupied Austria.

The Nazis condemned Freud's psychoanalytic theories as Jewish pornography, and they burned his books.

SIGMUND FREUD:

[via actor's voice] What progress are we making? In the Middle Ages, they would have burnt me. Nowadays, they are content with burning my books.

NARRATOR:

Fearing for his safety, Freud's friends and supporters, both in the United States and England, began urging him to flee Vienna. But Freud was reluctant to leave.

HAROLD P. BLUM:

This is where he had grown up. This is where he had his education. This is where he had so many attachments. It was really a part of his identity and part of his life.

NARRATOR:

It wasn't until the Gestapo arrested his daughter, Anna, for questioning, that Freud realized that he and his family could no longer safely remain in Austria. And in June of 1938, Freud left Vienna for London.

Freud spent the last year of his life very ill, but surrounded by friends, family, and supporters. He died in exile in 1939.

More than 60 years after his death, the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud is being carried on by thousands of psychoanalysts around the world. And what began as an effort to treat the mentally ill is today helping people from all walks of life.

SCOTT BARON:

There's openness in society today that can be traced directly back to some of Freudian thought and theory and how things have shifted. We are a society that talks very freely about our inner feelings, about our conflicts, about sex, sexuality. This is all part of the Freudian revolution.

[Credits]