

[Student's Name]

[German Course]

[Instructor]

[Date]

The (Mis)interpretation of Freud

Today, Sigmund Freud continues to be one of the most widely-recognized names in psychological realms. Whether reading a book on psychology or taking a course in the field, Freud's ideas regarding child development, sexuality, and consciousness are almost always mentioned. Despite this widespread recognition, however, Freud is not always perceived in a positive light. There have been attacks on Freud's character, with some people describing him as a "ruthlessly ambitious man, a brutally insensitive and unscrupulous clinician, quite unrepentant about those of his terrible diagnostic blunders of which he was aware, and a supreme manipulator of friends and colleagues in the endless quest for self-promotion" (Tallis 670). Not only has Freud himself come under fire for supposedly being perverted and desperate for glory, but many of his theories have also since been discredited. Some critics have gone so far as to say that Freud is a "cargo cult scientist" and that he "emerges as a quack" (669). His theories are now generally seen as wholly unsupported by science, and rightfully so.

Science is defined here as "knowledge about or study of the natural world based on facts learned through experiments and observation" ("Science"). More narrowly, this definition often implies the use of scientific methodology in order to study or accumulate knowledge. This rigorous methodology stresses objectivity, reliability, and empirical evidence with the goal of replicating phenomena and generating new knowledge, often in order to explain causality of events (Frey 1). With this framework in mind, it's not hard to see why Freud is sometimes

considered unscientific. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his methods are questionable at best. Presumably, he simply wrote down dreams as he remembered them, and this served as his data, but because dreams are not physical, observable phenomena and are also easily forgotten, there's reason to believe that his data are inaccurate. Furthermore, his data come in the form of his own dreams, as well as from a handful of people he knew, such as his children and patients, which makes for an extremely small sample size and a non-representative and subjective one at that. Freud did not control for the biases inherent in his sample size and data collection method. Instead, he writes that “with different people and in different contexts the identical dream-content might well conceal a quite different meaning,” showing that his method of interpreting dreams does not always yield replicable results (Freud 83). Most importantly, Freud's main argument – that every dream is a wish-fulfillment – is not falsifiable, which is one criterion needed for something to be considered a scientific fact, according to philosophers like Karl Popper. Adolf Grünbaum points out that the way Freud tries to support his argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams* displays a certain circularity, whereby his theory created facts that fit his theory, with the result that Freud's theory is impossible to falsify (Tallis 669). For example, when faced with the counterargument that not all consciously-remembered or “manifest” dream-content, such as anxiety dreams, are about fulfilling wishes, Freud counters that these dreams are distorted and censored so as to not immediately appear as a wish-fulfillment. In the unconscious or “latent” dream-content, the dream is still a wish-fulfillment, but this dream becomes distorted because “an aversion exists towards the subject of the dream or towards the wish derived from it” and because the person wishes to repress the latent dream (Freud 124). This means that if a dream appears to be a wish-fulfillment, it is a wish-fulfillment, and if it does not, then it is still a

wish-fulfillment, just disguised. There is therefore no way that a dream cannot be a wish-fulfillment.

One glaring flaw with this argument is that it can be used to support any thesis about dreams. If someone were, for example, to assert that all dreams are about *not* fulfilling wishes, he could argue his thesis the same way that Freud argued that all dreams *are* wish-fulfillments. If the manifest content of a dream is about *not* fulfilling wishes, then the thesis is obviously supported, and if the manifest content *is* about fulfilling wishes, then this is because the remembered dream was distorted – through some vague mechanism – and the latent dream content is actually still about not fulfilling wishes. This argument holds no ground to a modern audience because it's not falsifiable and can be used for any number of claims, and a reader cannot expect to find Freud's argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams* convincing when there is so much bias and subjectivity in his methods. By today's standards, this book simply cannot be considered scientific.

Because Freud's work does not demonstrate the scientific rigor that we've come to expect today, people are quick to criticize and discredit his work. The harshest critics believe Freud used his "mastery over the rhetoric of science to sustain his scientific fairy tale" because he was desperate for fame (Tallis 670). However, this seems like an unlikely motive, given that Freud, as a neurologist, probably knew about the scientific method and how to employ it if he had wanted to. A more plausible explanation for why Freud seems unscientific is because there has been a great misunderstanding: critics and the general public have been led to believe that all of Freud's works were intended to be interpreted scientifically when some actually belonged in the humanities.

Knowledge can be broadly categorized into two domains: the sciences, the methodology of which was described before, and the humanities, in which *The Interpretation of Dreams* and some of Freud's other works arguably belong. While the goal of the sciences is to generate factual and reliable information using empirical and objective methodology, the goal of humanities is to generate meaning and wisdom using interpretative methodology (Frey 3). Interpretative methodologies are idiographic in nature, meaning that they seek to understand their objects of study "not as instances of universal laws but as singular events" (Bettelheim 41). They often make use of text analysis, reflective thinking, or the acknowledgment of audience in order to render something meaningful for others (Frey 3). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud does just that: he writes down his dreams, does a line-by-line analysis of his written dreams, and engages in self-reflective thinking in order to understand where the dream content came from and what the meaning behind the dream may reveal about his unconscious desires. He does not need a large sample size to validate his argument because, unlike scientific methodologies, interpretative methodologies do not require verification through replication by experiment. Freud also does not have to be completely objective in his methods because in the humanities, the search for meaning is a process that is different for everyone, and there is no universal truth. Interpreting dreams requires the use of the history of an individual in order to understand what the consequences of this history is, which is why Freud writes a preamble before all the dreams he analyzes. Since every individual has different experiences, the meanings of dreams are always going to be different for different people, and this is perfectly fine in the realm of the humanities. Freud's use of an interpretative method places him more in the humanities than the sciences, but critics' failure to realize this may explain why Freud has been largely discredited.

It is worth wondering how such an influential writer could have been interpreted wrongly by so many people. Bruno Bettelheim, author of *Freud and Man's Soul*, argues that a flawed translation of Freud's works may have something to do with it. Freud was born in Austria, and many of his works, including *The Interpretation of Dreams*, were originally written in German, which means that many people's understanding of Freud is dependent on the English translations of his works. If the translators misinterpreted Freud and translated his works based on this incorrect interpretation, this could lead to a misinterpretation of Freud on a large scale.

Bettelheim argues that this is exactly the case. Having read Freud's works in both English and German, Bettelheim observed that there was a tendency for translators to omit Freud's musings on the soul in favor of more concrete words, with the result that many people are unaware that Freud's motives for writing some of his books may have been more humanistic than scientific. After reading the original German, Bettelheim maintains that the reason Freud worked so hard to uncover the unconscious was to "give us some degree of rational control over it, so that when acting in line with its pressures was not appropriate, the releasing of these pressures could be postponed or neutralized, or... be redirected... to serve higher and better purposes" (17). Freud's ultimate goal for everyone was to "know thyself" because only by understanding one's unconscious can one save oneself from the destructive consequences of acting without knowing (Bettelheim 23-25). Freud himself says in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* that psychoanalysis should be important to others "not as therapy but rather because of what it reveals to us about what concerns man most closely: his own essence" (32). Psychoanalysis is not a cure for anything, but rather, a way to better understand oneself.

Many American audiences, however, may have trouble realizing this because the English translations strips Freud of his humanistic sentiments and replaces them with medical and

scientific jargon. For example, simple concepts such as “das Es” und “das Ich” were unnecessarily translated into the foreign Latin terms “id” and “ego” respectively, despite the fact that “es” und “ich” simply mean “it” and “I” (Bettelheim 53). Freud, as a master of rhetoric and prose, chose his words carefully, using simple, common words with emotional associations in order to make readers understand that psychoanalysis was a personal process, not a form of therapy to be carried out by an objective practitioner. The translation, however, removes much of the impact of Freud’s word choice by replacing personal, everyday terms with cold, meaningless, technical terms. The same effect occurs when “Mutterleib” (womb) is translated to “uterus,” “Schaulust” (lust or sexual pleasure) is translated to “scopophilia,” and “Fehlleistung” (faulty achievement) is translated to “parapraxis” (Bettelheim 52, 87, 91). Because of the technical nature of these invented terms, readers are likely to think that Freud is introducing new and foreign concepts when he is actually describing phenomena that most people have probably already observed. These terms create distance between the reader and the concepts because they are not common words and they elicit no previous associations. Bettelheim believes that English translators had an American audience in mind when translating, so they made a conscious decision to translate Freud more scientifically because of a “deliberate wish to perceive Freud strictly within the framework of medicine” (33). However, it’s also possible that, because Freud was a physician and wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* using headers and sections, which are characteristics of scientific prose, the translators themselves were unaware that Freud did not mean for his book to be used as a medical reference guide. Whatever the reason, Freud’s works, through shifts in meaning of key words, have been translated in a way that unfortunately makes Freud’s humanistic motives unknown to a large portion of his readership.

Claims that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience may have some grounding when considering that psychoanalysis, by being subjective and not replicable, does not abide by current American standards of what science is. That, however, does not mean that Freud's works are meaningless and should be ignored. The modern definition of science tends to be strict and limiting, excluding any findings that are not scientifically tested using rigorous scientific methods. There is a tendency to think the current definition of science is the best and that being objective and demonstrating reproducibility is the most trusted way to find the truth because the results are consistent and tested. However, in actuality, there are often multiple truths, and the truth is never so simple. Truth can be subjective, with each person carrying around their own versions of the truth, and these truths are equally as valid and useful as the truths supported by rigorous science because they impact our individual behavior and daily lives. Freud, through psychoanalysis, attempted to help people find the truth about themselves in a systematic manner so that knowledge of these truths could be used to help people become better people. As someone in the humanities, he wanted people to generate meaning in their lives through personal introspection and reflective thinking about the unconscious. Unfortunately, because of a series of misinformed translations and a tendency to want to box people into either the humanities or the sciences, this idea was lost, and Freud's name has now become a source of ridicule and scorn instead of receiving the legacy it deserves.

Works Cited

Bettelheim, Bruno. *Freud and Man's Soul*. London: Hogarth Press, 1983. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. Joyce Crick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

Frey, Rodney. "The Humanities and the Social Sciences: Contrasting Approaches." University of Idaho, 7 Sept. 2013. Web. 22 Apr. 2014.

"Science." Def. 1. *Merriam-Webster*. Encyclopedia Britannica Company, n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.

Tallis, RC. "Burying Freud." *The Lancet* 347.9002 (1996): 669-71. *ScienceDirect*. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.