

## Dr. Freud's Making Elisabeth Abnormal

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**Abstract:** This essay is a critique and rewrite of Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) classic theory of psychoanalysis and his psychotherapist methodology. In his prominent theory that emphasizes the causal relationships between repression (psychological) and neurosis (physical), Freud claims that one's somatic symptoms are deeply associated with psychological repression of immoral thoughts, which is caused by ego's *defence* mechanism that consists of high standard of ethical sense and morality. However, by reconstructing the story of Elisabeth Von R in Freud's case study of hysteria (1906), I argue that one can simply suppress his/her idea instead of repressing it in unconsciousness and does not necessarily develop neurosis even if the idea is considered socially unacceptable. In so doing, I aim to provide a critical perspective to Freud's explanation on abnormality and suggest reconsidering some of the fundamental problems in the practice of psychotherapy and the condition of inherent social and physical power inequalities between patients and psychotherapists. In demonstrating this, I also incorporate Michel Foucault's (1975 [1978]) critical discussion on how authoritative power agencies (including professionals and specialists) arbitrarily define people as normal or abnormal in a society and make them a target of discipline. For more effective and engaging discussion, I take a dialogue format between Elisabeth (as appeared in Freud's study) and her friend Anna, a fictive character who will raise her critical voice about the process, implications, and problems of Freud's psychoanalysis.

### Dr. Freud's Making Elisabeth Abnormal

This is a story of my friend Elisabeth, who has gone through psychotherapy with the famous psycho-analyst Dr. Sigmund Freud. Being a friend of hers since we were six years old, I was interested in Dr. Freud's treatment for Elisabeth. When I initially heard from Elisabeth that she was under the psycho-analytical treatment, I did not know anything about Dr. Freud's treatment but wondered why she decided to go to psycho-therapy for the pains in her legs instead of going to physical therapy. Elisabeth said that many people told her Dr. Freud's treatment is special because he analyzes psychological causes of physical pains. I think Elisabeth was curious about Dr. Freud's therapy and

suspected her pains might also have some other hidden and psychological causes. However, as her treatment proceeded, I realized that Dr. Freud analyzes all human beings as having a *defence* mechanism that causes repression of certain ideas, sexual or erotic desires. As a result of repression into unconsciousness, physical illness (symptoms) arises. But in the beginning of the treatment, neither Elisabeth nor I ever imagined that is what psycho-therapy is supposed to be about.

One evening during the treatment, Elisabeth came to see me with a bit pale face. I could recognize she was very tired.

I (Anna, myself): How is your treatment going with Dr. Freud?

E (Elisabeth): It has been okay. But he said something different today. He said that there is a "connection" between the events that happened before my illness and the actual somatic symptom. My pains are both simultaneous and symbolical connected to some kind of repressed idea. In my case, the pains were already present a long time ago and recurred. And he said, the pains represent my history of frustrated love. I can't walk well just as I can't move forward with my love for someone (symbolization). This connection "must have been caused and determined by that set of experiences."<sup>1</sup> So, the pain in my legs is not physical but hysterical.

I: Really? I think I have never heard of such symbolization that a person's mental distress can be converted into somatic symptoms and physical pains. Then, what did he say about the exact basis of the connection in your case?

E: He said I have had socially forbidden romantic desire. It was my strong affection for my brother-in-law Josef that really caused the symptoms in my legs. In fact, I was surprised to hear about the connection between Elisabeth's romantic history and her pains. But most of all, I could not believe that Dr. Freud discovered her feeling of love for Josef. So I asked Elisabeth:

I: How come he found out about the story of Josef and you?

E: Because I told him.

I was even shocked that she actually revealed her secret feelings to Dr. Freud.

I: Why did you tell him about your feeling for Josef? He does not even know you well, and you didn't have to.

E: [sigh] I felt like I have to. I had strong pressure to confess something, anything, whatever I experienced these days. I felt forced to reveal whatever

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<sup>1</sup> Breuer and Freud, p. 138.

comes up to my mind in order to escape his power. But quite strangely, Dr. Freud then seemed to get so interested in my story.

I: Why did you feel such pressure? He is just your doctor who would help you get cured.

E: Because he kept pressing my forehead with his hand. I was quite embarrassed and compelled to say anything.

I: Pressed your forehead? Why? Didn't it hurt?

E: Maybe he did not intentionally try to hurt me, but it was painful. When he first tried to hypnotize me, it failed. He seemed irritated with the fact that I was not easily hypnotized, so then he approached me, put his right hand on my forehead, and then pressed. At first time, it did not work either. But as he was repeatedly doing it, I felt strong power pressing on my forehead and intimidating me. I had to stop him asking me further questions because I was afraid he wanted to know too much about my feeling for Josef. [Sigh] I wanted to avoid further investigation and needed to escape his coercive power. So I just said "I have nothing special to tell you about any 'real' story. I don't remember..."<sup>2</sup> But he never trusted me and forced me to say something. Do you know what he said about my behavior? He said "that's typical reaction, Elisabeth. I know you still have something to tell me. Don't apply any criticism to your idea or don't hesitate to produce it because-you [she] found it too disagreeable." Oh...I got nervous. He kept telling me that I was still resisting and that prevents him from helping me to tell him the truth. I almost vomited because of his pressure and tension.

I: That sounds terrible, Elisabeth. I can't believe him doing that kind of thing on you. If a man pressed his hand on my forehead like you said I would certainly feel scared and nervous.

Although I did not outwardly criticize Dr. Freud's behavior in front of Elisabeth, I thought he should not have tried to approach Elisabeth closely or press her forehead. I sometimes do not understand our how society allows a man of good standing to use his power as a process of treatment. For me, it is a male power that constrains women, who have lower social and gender status than a well-respected man like Freud.

I: Elisabeth, I am not sure if you really wanted to tell him about the confidential story that we used to share with each other. Do you feel better after telling him the story anyway?

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<sup>2</sup> Breuer and Freud, p. 153.

E: [Frowning] Actually, no. I am not sure whether it was a good thing to tell him about my feeling for Josef. I still feel uncomfortable telling my secret to a man of learning and experience, but who is also a stranger to me. Can I really trust him that he will not spread gossip to many other people?

I: You're right. It is unfortunate that he does not believe that you really had nothing to confess but still considers your reaction as resistance. I am not sure why he did not just accept what you said as it is. Did he suggest anything to you about what to do with your resistance?

E: He said he is concerned about my resistance because he cannot get into deeper inside my mind. To cure me, he needs to diagnose the exact origin of the symptom. But "the construction of symptoms is a substitute for something else that did not happen,"<sup>3</sup> which is forgotten in my unconsciousness. He also told me that I should learn a certain level of ease to "free myself [themselves] from my [their] intentional thinking and to adopt an attitude of completely objective observation towards the psychical process taking place in me [them]."<sup>4</sup>

I suspected Dr. Freud might have been unhappy with Elisabeth's "resistance" until he was finally able to force Elisabeth to confess the secret. But I felt his treatment was very inappropriate and coercive for Elisabeth who is just his patient and not an enemy. I got worried if Elisabeth took everything Dr. Freud said as a fact and got confused. We used to talk about her affection secretly and I found it rather precious to keep it confidential only between us. But now I only see Elisabeth is getting more anxious and nervous.

Elisabeth looked very tired and we decided to stop talking. It might be good that Dr. Freud explained to Elisabeth about his analysis of the causes of her leg symptoms, but it seems that he was taking her story much more seriously than what it is. He seemed to be convinced by his analysis after he learned that Elisabeth once had secret and serious affection to her brother-in-law. I suddenly wondered whether Dr. Freud is taking on an identity of a police officer or investigator, not a doctor, trying to force a confession out of the patient under threat of punishment. It just reminds me of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* which I have recently read. What is the difference between his treatment and the pre-modern power that creates a false confession by oppressing people and torturing them using the micro-physics of power? It must be an intimidating experience for Elisabeth to feel the power and pressure on her forehead, especially when she was left alone with Dr. Freud in his sterile

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<sup>3</sup> Freud, p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Breuer and Freud, p. 271.

and closed therapy room. That must have made the usually cheerful Elisabeth feel small in his dominant presence.

A few days later, Elisabeth visited me again and we continued to talk about her treatment.

I: I am concerned about you, Elisabeth, that you might start thinking there is something wrong in your own feelings. Take it easy. It was just a talk between you and me, nothing more than that. You used to share your emotion about Josef with me and always said you feel fine after talking to me.

However, I sensed psycho-therapy was actually causing much distress for Elisabeth after she confessed her story to Dr. Freud. Elisabeth complained of her stress after she heard something new from Dr. Freud that she had never imagined before.

I: What is that?

E: He told me that my feeling for love of my life has been deeply repressed into my unconsciousness and forgotten for a long time.

I: Elisabeth, I never felt that you repressed that thought in your mind. You can't repress anything when you are clearly aware that we were sharing your idea and feeling of love. Personally, I think there is no reason for you to repress your affection for Josef because your feeling was never traumatic or harmful to anybody. You were aware of that, too. We decided not to tell any other people about your feeling for Josef because we clearly knew that it is simply not socially acceptable, I mean, to love a sister's husband. That is why we decided to keep it secret.

E: I know. But as Dr. Freud revealed, I just realized my affection toward Josef was indeed very presumptuous and a bad thing, which I have completely forgotten.

I: But don't you think everyone has that kind of feeling? You told me that you like Josef not because you were afraid that your feelings were immoral. You were aware that your feeling was never obscene or disgusting even if once you had sexual desire for him in your mind. As I kept saying, it was just a confidential talk between us.

E: No, Anna. I think Dr. Freud was right. I just realized that I did a terrible thing to my sister. Think about it, if I love my sister's husband what does it really mean? It is the idea that I can do anything to achieve my love even killing my sister or wishing that she were dead! I can't stand myself being so selfish and evil-hearted! I completely forgot I was denying that I have done such a horrible thing to my sister. I was not even aware that my memories were repressed for a long time, and now they are just uncovered during my recent treatment.

I: [Sigh] Well...you can't blame yourself simply because you had strong desire and serious affection for your sister's husband.

E: Would I be forgiven?

I: By whom? Please, don't accuse yourself or feel guilty. Dr. Freud had no idea about your affection for Josef until you told him under his hand-pressure. Remember Elisabeth, it was just a secret about feeling of love between you and me. We even once fantasized that you and Josef finally dated like a couple in romance! The most important thing is to remember that we just dreamed about it knowing that it will never actually happen.

I was trying my best to remind her of the first time we shared her secret feeling about her brother-in-law. I suddenly felt sympathy for Elisabeth. After consulting with Dr. Freud she seems to believe that she is guilty simply because she had such affection for her sister's husband. I came to wonder why Dr. Freud claims Elisabeth had repressed her feelings into deep unconsciousness because she could not stand the fact that she had an affection for her brother-in-law. It seemed to me that Dr. Freud is making Elisabeth feel guilty.

A few days later, we had a tea time and chatted. But Elisabeth did not mention about her treatment. She only made it brief, "I do not go to see Dr. Freud anymore. He said I am done and cured, and things are moving forward." But I could not still understand what exactly Dr. Freud did for "curing" Elisabeth. Perhaps...is it "confession," which he named it "abreaction"?

One Sunday morning, on my way to the market, I realized many whispers passed between people around me. They were talking about a newspaper article that appeared in today's issue. I grabbed one of the copies at the newsagent. When I started reading it, I could not believe my eyes! Under the title of "December 17, Case 5. Fräulein Elisabeth Von R," the story of Elisabeth was in the newspaper. Dr. Freud was writing to *The Vienna Times* about his case study on hysteria neurosis. In revealing Elisabeth's given name to the public, Dr. Freud might have not fully considered the privacy of his patient since 'Elisabeth' is a common name to be recognized, just as mine, 'Anna.' But as a matter of fact, that was not true in this small town when he gives much detail information about the patient's family members and relationship, personality, and age, almost everything. In the newspaper, Dr. Freud analyzes:

But it [repression] is the only *precondition* for the construction of symptoms. Symptoms, as we know, are a substitute for something that is held back by repression. (...) In investigating resistance we have learnt that it emanates from forces of the ego,

from unknown and latent character traits (Freud, p. 369). I recognized a universal characteristic of such ideas: (...) they were all of a kind that one would prefer not to have experienced, that one would rather forget. From all this there arose (...) the thought of *defence* (Breuer and Freud, p. 268). The thesis that symptoms disappear when we have made their unconsciousness predeterminants conscious has been confirmed by all subsequent research, (...) our therapy works by transforming what is unconscious into what is conscious.<sup>5</sup>

While agreeing to his point that we all have unconscious areas in our minds that can be linked to consciousness, I read it again and again in hopes that I can figure out his analysis on the “real” connection between Elisabeth’s somatic symptom and repression. According to Dr. Freud, repression of thoughts is caused by a *defence* mechanism that ultimately leads to physical pains. Then, it becomes clear to me that there is no evidence of hysteria for Elisabeth. How can Elisabeth repress her idea through her *defence* mechanism when there was nothing to repress? When she does not need to repress her thoughts, how can the *defence* mechanism ever control her ideas and cause her symptoms? I could not find understandable reason why Elisabeth has to be put into an ‘abnormal neurotic’ category instead of being a ‘normal’ person. Can Freud judge a person between abnormality and normal because he is a specialist and professional psychotherapist?<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth and I always believed that feelings of love should be treasured regardless of its subject. The feeling itself cannot be immoral or blamed, thus her *defence* of ego could not have been activated by her own feeling of love. In fact, Dr. Freud was not clear about the difference of *defence* mechanism between the neurotics and normal people. It was not explained how come Elisabeth has much higher level of *defence* mechanism than anyone else has, especially because he cannot explain why only Elisabeth developed such an excessive standard of morality while we both shared the feeling for secret love and dreamed of unrealistic romance.

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<sup>5</sup> Freud, p. 347.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault (1995 [1978]) similarly and critically argues that authoritative power agencies in a society including professionals and specialists (like psychologists) arbitrarily define and classify people as normal or abnormal in order to discipline them based on the social norm.

Nonetheless, Elisabeth was reborn into a neurotic in a day, which in other words an abnormal lady! Is she really abnormal while what she is doing makes complete sense to me? I believe Elisabeth could have been psychologically stable if she was able to continue to keep her affection confidential instead of experiencing Dr. Freud's implicit criticism implied that her thought is too pathogenic like a social evil to be accepted in this society. I suddenly remembered once Elisabeth mentioned about "overcoming resistances." I paused to think further about the relationship between resistance and "*defence*" of ego. Now I can see that Dr. Freud was fighting against his patient in order to overcome the patient's *defence* mechanism by accusing it as "resistance." But for me, resistance by ego's self *defence* can just be an ordinary sense of morality and a kind of self-censor system that belongs to everyone who negotiates their fantasy with social norms in daily life. In most cases, the kind of *defence* mechanism may force us not to reveal things that we feel are socially inappropriate, but it cannot always result in the repression of our thoughts.

Now everyone started guessing that the lady in the newspaper is my friend Elisabeth and criticizing her "inappropriateness" of affection toward her brother-in-law. They only blamed her but did not consider the processes of how Dr. Freud made her abnormal, whether they were appropriate and justified. Elisabeth became a target of criticism as an obscene lady who does not know how to control her feelings of love and who possibly transfers sexual desire and affection onto anybody even her sister's husband. At that moment, I received a phone call from Elisabeth's mother and heard that Elisabeth's symptom appeared again and her pains in both legs got more severe. The most difficult thing for me is to see her old self wounded, which used to be careful and cheerful as well as intellectually developed. Now I no longer see the old Elisabeth who used to take a secret as a romantic fantasy. She hardly comes out of her room and falls into deep depression and frustration. I feel impotent that I cannot be of any help for her to overcome the situation and change her mind positively. The only thing I can suggest for her is to leave home for a while and travel around in order to ignore hasty criticisms from other people for the time being.

Poor Elisabeth, if she had a single chance to talk with her brother-in-law instead of going to psycho-therapy with Dr. Freud, if Josef was an ordinary man who cares about human emotion of life and love, she would not have to suffer from the idea that her original feeling was pathogenic and socially incompatible. I can say I once dreamed about falling in love with a married man who is too charming to resist. I am sure most people also have similar feelings;

some kind of affection that they want to keep in themselves not to be uncovered. It is not because the idea is immoral (who can blame it as immoral?) but rather because it is just a secret in one's mind. I am sure even Dr. Freud has such feelings, too. I put on a coat and muffler to leave home. He cannot produce any more "abnormal" people in this society. I am going to go to meet Dr. Freud now.

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