COMMENT

Serendipity in Freud’s Career: Before Paris

Cora L. Díaz de Chumaceiro

Caracas, Venezuela

Freud’s life and work continue to be a focus of inquiry for many. In Creativity Research Journal, Gardner and Nemirovsky (1991) presented a thought-provoking examination of Freud’s creative process. Their starting point was Freud’s clarification of his vocational interest during his visit to Charcot’s clinic in Paris in 1885, reinforced by a later visit to Nancy in 1889. The objective of this comment is to highlight Freud’s acknowledgment of serendipitous events, often overlooked, that apparently influenced his emotional state and creative process before his trip to Paris. The data are drawn from his works and letters as well as from biographers’ oeuvres.

In An Autobiographical Study, Freud (1925/1959) recounted that he had worked in Ernst Brücke’s (1819–1892) physiological laboratory from 1876 to 1882. It was assumed that he would continue working at this Institute and eventually take a post as assistant when a vacancy opened. Apart from psychiatry, the different branches of medicine had failed to attract Freud’s interest to the extent that he only belatedly decided (in 1881) to obtain his doctorate in medicine. Freud (1925/1959) wrote:

The turning point came in 1882, when my teacher, for whom I felt the highest possible esteem, corrected my father’s generous improvidence by strongly advising me, in view of my bad financial position, to abandon my theoretical career. I followed his advice, left the physiological laboratory and entered the General Hospital as Aspirant [clinical assistant]. I was soon afterwards promoted to being a Sekundararzt [junior or house physician], and worked in various departments of the hospital, among others for more than six months under [Professor of Psychiatry Theodore] Meynert [1833–1892], by whose work and personality I had been greatly struck while I was still a student. (p. 10, italics added)

Freud began his study of nervous diseases, planned to become a university lecturer (Dozent), and hoped to further his studies with Professor of Neuropathology Jean Martin Charcot (1825–1893) in Paris. With Brücke’s support, Freud was granted a “traveling bursary” and, in autumn 1885, went to Paris.

According to Jones (1953), it is impossible to tell from reading the Autobiography, if Brücke had gone out on a limb “to offer his weighty advice” (p. 61), if Freud had asked for his opinion, or why they talked at that time. Jones did not see Brücke’s possible contribution to the facts of which Freud had to have been aware—a very uncertain future and a precarious financial basis. Freud was hardly blind to his real-life situation, and thus the decision to change his professional path was not an unexpected one. On the contrary, the fact is that, on obtaining his MD degree, Freud had considered “with an increasingly heavy heart” (unpublished letter to Martha Bernays, August 5, 1882; Jones, 1953, p. 61), the unavoidable decision to leave his laboratory work behind and to instead practice medicine. “But what brought the matter to a head at a particular moment was something new in his life. He had fallen head over ears in love!” (p. 61).

Now, although Freud never mentioned this motive in forming his resolution, it was evidently the decisive one. It was like him to suppress it. Bernfeld [1951, p. 208] remarks, in calling attention to it, that in the self-confessions scattered throughout his writings Freud figures at times as a villain, a parricide, ambitious, petty, revengeful, but never as a lover (save for a very few superficial allusions to his wife). (Jones, 1953, pp. 61–62)

Gay (1988) confirmed this story. In the summer of 1882, Freud followed Brücke’s advice to leave. Poverty was the official reason for the change. “That was part of the story, but only part,” Gay wrote (p. 37). As never before, Freud’s poverty bothered him intensely. He had unexpectedly met Bernays at his home when she was
Comment

visiting one of his sisters in April 1882, “Freud fell in love quickly. ... She was worth working for, worth waiting for” (p. 37). Two months later, they were engaged.

Although when the Freud and Bernays families met is unclear, evidently they considered each other friends. Falling in love has an impact on the lives of men and women for better or for worse. In this case, the surfacing of love and the urge to marry triggered a change in the initial path of Freud’s career: The need for financial improvement then became a primary target. Can this event be classified as serendipity? By definition, serendipity is the unexpected finding of valuable things—extendable to valuable persons who positively influence one’s career. On hearing the greatly anticipated news of being granted the travel stipend, Freud, on June 20, 1885, wrote to Martha who was living in Wandsbek:

Oh, how wonderful it will be! I am coming with money and staying for a long time and bringing you something beautiful for you and then go on to Paris and become a great scholar and then come back to Vienna with a huge, enormous halo, and then we will soon get married, and I will cure all the incurable nervous cases and through you I shall be healthy and I will go on kissing you till you are strong and gay and happy. (E. Freud, 1960, p. 154, italics added)

Undoubtedly, the visit with Charcot marked a turning point in Freud’s career (Strachey, 1956/1966). In hindsight, though, the timing of Freud’s falling in love with Martha can also be viewed as serendipitous for his career. Had he instead gone to Paris in a depressed state, the results of his trip might have been very different. The Paris experience reinforced and consolidated the dream for his life while in the heightened state of being in love.

Then Freud developed a positive, idealizing transference to Charcot. As a memento of this experience, Freud acquired an engraving of André Brouillet’s painting, La Leçon Clinique du Dr. Charcot, that shows Charcot demonstrating a female hysterical to a rapt audience in the Salpêtrière; later, after moving to Berggasse 19, Freud proudly hung the painting up in his consulting room. Finally, in 1889, Freud named his first son, Jean Martin, known as Martin, after Charcot—a tribute to the master that was acknowledged with a brief, courteous reply and his congratulations (Jones, 1953).

It is well known that, as a serendipitous result of being part of Brücke’s circle, Freud had previously met Joseph Breuer (1842–1925), “a friend whose share in the making of psychoanalysis was to be decisive” (Gay, 1988, p. 32). In 1883, Freud wrote to Martha about the case of her friend Bertha Pappenheim, which Breuer had revealed to him recently.

When Breuer died on June 10, 1925, Freud (1925/1961) revealed in Breuer’s obituary:

It was in 1880 that chance brought into his hands an unusual patient; a girl of more than ordinary intelligence who had fallen ill of severe hysteria while she was nursing her sick father. It was only some 14 years later, in our joint publication, Studies on Hysteria (1895)—and even then unluckily only in a much abbreviated form, censored, too, from considerations of medical discretion—that the world learnt the nature of his treatment of this celebrated “first case.” (p. 279, italics added)

Breuer treated Bertha Pappenheim (Fräulein Anna O.) for 1¾ years before mentioning the case to Freud in mid-November 1882. That this case left its mark in Freud’s mind is evident from the fact that he mentioned it to Charcot, who, nevertheless, did not seem interested in “the discovery” (Jones, 1953, p. 226).

Later, in their opening statement in Preliminary Communication, Breuer and Freud (1893/1955a) presented the result of their lucky opportunity to treat this patient:

A chance observation has led us, over a number of years, to investigate a great variety of different forms and symptoms of hysteria, with a view of discovering their precipitating cause—the event which provoked the first occurrence, often many years earlier, of the phenomenon in question. (p. 3, italics added)

Furthermore, in the same work, they added:

The first case of this kind that came under observation dates back to the year 1881, that is to say, to the "pre-suggestion" era. ... This observation was made possible by spontaneous auto-hypnotes on the part of the patient, and came as a great surprise to the observer (p. 7, italics added).

Anna O named her procedure the "talking cure," or humorously, "chimney-sweeping" (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1955b, p. 30).

In An Autobiographical Study, Freud (1925/1959), again referring to the case of Anna O, stressed:

A chance observation showed her physician that she could be relieved of these clouded states of consciousness if she was induced to express in words the affected phantasy by which she was at the moment dominated. From this discovery,
Breuer arrived at a new method of treatment. (p. 20, italics added)

Essentially, Anna O had entered herself or was put into a deep hypnotic trance and was then induced to tell Breuer what was bothering her. After overcoming, in this manner, attacks that characterize "depressive confusion," the same procedure was used for the removal of inhibitions and disorders of a physical nature. While awake, the patient was unable to describe the origins of her symptoms, or to discover any connections with her life experiences. By contrast, when hypnotized, the missing links were immediately found. Summarizing his contribution, Breuer wrote:

The essential merits of my achievement are that I recognized what an unusually instructive and scientifically important case chance had assigned to me, and I persevered with attentive and faithful observation, declining to ruin the simple interpretation of these important facts by preconceived opinions. (as cited in Ackerknecht, 1957, p. 170; Hirschmüller, 1978/1989, p. 131)

Both Freud and Breuer, then, assigned to chance (serendipity) the opportunity of having this patient, which led to observing and subsequently writing about the use of catharsis by talking. Clearly, this creative intuition emerged and was articulated privately between them for a long time before Freud could convince Breuer to publish the findings—more than a decade later. As Freud (1901/1960) later stated: "I believe in external (real) chance, it is true, but not in internal (psychical) accidental events" (p. 257).

Paraphrasing Pasteur, as I recently emphasized (Díaz de Chumaceiro, 1996, 1997a, 1997b), a broad range of chance events often has a role in the preparatory stage (Wallas, 1926) of the creative process of individuals with prepared minds. These incidents, too often overlooked when addressing the creative process, merit being known and discussed more frequently, particularly if the authors themselves have underscored the role of chance events in the creation and development of their work.

References