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What Freud got right

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Abstract (Abstract): Beyond the basic animal instincts to seek food and avoid pain, [SIGMUND FREUD] identified two sources of psychic energy, which he called "drives": aggression and libido (the latter encompasses sexuality but also had a more expansive meaning, involving the desire for stimulation and achievement). The key to his theory is that these were unconscious drives, shaping our behavior without the mediation of our waking minds; they surface, heavily disguised, only in our dreams.

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Psychology

Headnote

His theories, long discredited, are finding support from neurologists using modern brain imaging. SIGMUND FREUD HAS BEEN out of the scientific mainstream for so long, it's easy to forget that in the early-20th century he was regarded as a towering man of science—not, as he is remembered today, as the founder of the marginalized form of therapy known as psychoanalysis. At the start of his career, he wanted to invent a "science of the mind," but the Victorian tools he had were too blunt for the task. So he dropped the "science" part and had his patients lie on a couch, free-associating about childhood, dreams and fantasies. This technique yielded the revolutionary notion that the human mind was a soap opera of concealed lust and aggression, of dark motives, self-deception and dreams rife with hidden meaning. The problem was, Freud had lots of anecdotes but almost no empirical data. With the invention of tools like the PET scan that can map the neurological activity inside a living brain, scientists discounted the windy speculations of psychoanalysis and dismissed Freud himself as the first mediasavvy self-help guru.

But a funny thing happened to Freud on the way to becoming a trivia question: as researchers looked deeper into the physical structure of the brain, they began to find support for some of his theories. Now a small but influential group of researchers are using his insights as a guide to future research; they even have a journal, *Neuropsychoanalysis*, founded three years ago. "Freud's insights on the nature of consciousness are consonant with the most advanced contemporary neuroscience views" wrote Antonio Damasio, head of neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine. Note that Damasio did not refer to psychoanalysis or the Oedipus complex. Instead the work is going on at the fundamental level where emotions are born and primitive passions lurk in the shadows of dreams.

Beyond the basic animal instincts to seek food and avoid pain, Freud identified two sources of psychic energy, which he called "drives": aggression and libido (the latter encompasses sexuality but also had a more expansive meaning, involving the desire for stimulation and achievement). The key to his theory is that these were unconscious drives, shaping our behavior without the mediation of our waking minds; they surface, heavily disguised, only in our dreams. The work of the past half-century in psychology and neuroscience has been to downplay the role of unconscious universal drives, focusing instead on rational processes in conscious life. Meanwhile, dreams were downgraded to a kind of mental static, random scraps of memory flickering through the sleeping brain. But researchers have found evidence that Freud's drives really do exist, and they have their roots in the limbic system, a primitive part of the brain that operates mostly below the horizon of consciousness. Now more commonly referred to as emotions, the modern suite of drives comprises five: rage, panic, separation distress, lust and a variation on libido sometimes called seeking. Freud presaged this finding in 1915, when he

wrote that drives originate "from within the organism" in response to demands placed on the mind" in consequence of its connection with the body." Drives, in other words, are primitive brain circuits that control how we respond to our environment—foraging when we're hungry, running when we're scared and lusting for a mate. The seeking drive is proving a particularly fruitful subject for researchers. Although like the others it originates in the limbic system, it also involves parts of the forebrain, the seat of higher mental functions. In the 1980s, Jaak Panksepp, a neurobiologist at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, became interested in a place near the cortex known as the ventral tegmental area, which in humans lies just above the hairline. When Panksepp stimulated the corresponding region in a mouse, the animal would sniff the air and walk around, as though it were looking for something. Was it hunger? No. The mouse would walk right by a plate of food, or for that matter any other object Panksepp could think of. This brain tissue seemed to cause a general desire for something new. "What I was seeing," he says, "was the urge to do stuff" Panksepp called this seeking. To neuropsychologist Mark Solms of University College in London, that sounds very much like libido. "Freud needed some sort of general, appetitive desire to seek pleasure in the world of objects," says Solms. "Panksepp discovered as a neuroscientist what Freud discovered psychologically." Solms studied the same region of the brain for his work on dreams. Since the 1970s, neurologists have known that dreaming takes place during a particular form of sleep known as REM—rapid eye movement—which is associated with a primitive part of the brain known as the pons. Accordingly, they regarded dreaming as a low-level phenomenon of no great psychological interest. When Solms looked into it, though, it turned out that the key structure involved in dreaming was actually the ventral tegmental, the same structure that Panksepp had identified as the seat of the "seeking" emotion. Dreams, it seemed, originate with the libido—which is just what Freud had believed. Freud's psychological map may have been flawed in many ways, but it also happens to be the most coherent and, from the standpoint of individual experience, meaningful theory of the mind there is. "Freud should be placed in the same category as Darwin, who lived before the discovery of genes" says Panksepp. "Freud gave us a vision of a mental apparatus. We need to talk about it, develop it, test it" Perhaps it's not a matter of proving Freud wrong or right, but of finishing the job.

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