Viennese Culture and its Psychological Complexities

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Vienna is well-known as the home of the famous Sigmund Freud the founder of psychoanalytic theory. He developed the therapeutic techniques that are still implemented in therapy today, such as the use of free association and transference. He was also very interested in how sexuality affects one’s mind in particular how the sex drive can affect the death drive. He developed the theory of the unconscious and divides the mind into three psychic structures known today as the id, ego, and super ego. Freud was born in Austria on May 4th, 1856 and studied in the University of Vienna. Today he is one of the most mentioned names in the field of psychology. Psychoanalysis was thus born in Vienna due to his work in the field of mental illness. However the city of Vienna had long been affected by an interest in mental illness prior to Freud’s time. This paper will focus on how the introspection tendencies were characteristic of Viennese culture during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will also explore why introspection tendencies were characteristic of Viennese culture. Vienna has been interested in mental illness and problems of sexuality long before Freud. In fact Freud is not the only contributor to this field, there were many who before before him. According to Bettleheim (1990) Vienna had many other contributors to the field of mental illness prior to Freud. For instance Baron Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a professor at the University of Vienna who first gave name to paranoia, and explored the many forms of sexual drive in his “Psychopathia Sexualis” published in 1886 which revolutionaries the way the world viewed sexual perversions. This is turn led to the decriminalization of sexual perversions in Austria and thus led to an era of changed attitudes regarding sexuality in Vienna. Vienna also had other contributors to the field of mental illness such as Wagner von Jouregg, the head of the psychiatry department at the University of Vienna who won a Noble prize in medicine in 1927 for his work was the begging of chemical treatment for mental illness. Another physician, Manfred Sakel also from Vienna, discovered the insulin-shock treatment for schizophrenia in 1933.

To better understand Vienna’s interest in mental illness one needs to understand its history as well. Bettleheim (1990) states that Vienna was once called “die alte kaiserstadt” which meant “the old imperial city”. Vienna was once the capital of the Hapshurg Empire, who at one point in time was far greater than even the famous Roman Empire. This Empire started to decline in power in the 16th century when its emperor Charles V couldn’t make claim. There was a revolution in 1848 that lead to the forced resignation of Prince Metternich (Austria’s chancellor) this lead to the beginning of the reign of Franz Joseph an emperor who’s history is stained by mental illness and tragedy that would not only affect Vienna but the entire world as well. During this time of history Vienna became very multicultural after the Napoleonic wars, it was once the seat of the empire where most of the important cultural institutions where in its influence. Vienna was also the second largest city in Europe, after Paris.

Its history was particularly affected in 1866 when Prussia became the dominant power. After the war with Prussia, Austria was no longer the dominant power over the other German states. In 1870 after Prussia defeated France, Berlin would replace Vienna as the center of the Garman-speaking world. Bettleheim (1990) states that due to this Vienna would turn to denial as a kind of defense, and would begin focusing more on mental illness then the world itself: “External Reality is discounted and all mental energy is turned inward” only the inner life of the individual is allowed to matter” (Bettleheim, 1990, p.7). While German was focusing on building its empire, Vienna’s cultural elites would focus on discovering and conquering the inner world of man. Conquering mental illness was part of this new focus. Vienna was both an old imperial capital and a center for modern culture.

Emperor Franz Joseph began Vienna’s preoccupation with mental illness the moment he marries Elizabeth, a young and beautiful Bavarian princess. She was once considered the most beautiful women in Europe however history would describe her as hysterical, narcissistic and anorexic. She was known to starve herself, drinking nothing but six glasses of milk per day. Part of her neurosis involved her endlessly and aimlessly traveling all over Europe. When the emperor asked her what she wanted for her name day she replied “what I would really like best would be a completely equipped insane asylum” (Bettleheim, 1990, p. 9). In fact madness was very common in her family so she frequently visited institutions deigned for the insane. She was then assassinated by an anarchist in 1898 when traveling on one of her lavish trips to Geneva. Considering Vienna’s history it was clear that an interest in insanity and the devastating impact of neurosis and hysteria was found in the imperial court which dominated Vienna long before Freud’s time. Another example regarding this is Rudolf, the son of Emperor Franz Joseph and Elisabeth. He lead a very lonely lifestyle, became very depressed and seeking comfort in many the affairs he had with women. He was not very close to his father and his mother never showed him much attention. Due to his distant and unavailable mother he developed an oedipal complex, with his sex drive eventually leading to murder and suicide when he would eventually kill himself and his lover in a suicide pact. This shows a possible connection in the relationship between sex drive and the death drive which would later be explored by Freud. After his son’s death the Emperor had difficulty coping and developed work neurosis. Rudolf’s deaths lead Elisabeth to obsess about maintaining her beauty and youth, she would withdraw from court life and travel endlessly. After this tragic story in the imperial court the Emperor having lsot his only son and heir names Archduke Francis Ferdinand as the next ruler. He was eventually assassinated in 1914 and thus beginning the events leading to the First World War.

Since these events that marked history, Vienna’s culture have a strong interconnection between sex and death, which would form a major topic for most of its art forms such as its art and literature. For instance Bettleheim (1990) describes an incident when in 1881 Vienna’s Ring Theater burnt down resulting in great loss of life. The emperor decreed that this tragic site become a new residential building called “house of atonement” which would charge high rents to help support the orphaned children of this tragedy. At least people were reluctant to live there because of the death that occurred on the site. Freud however, once he married decided to move in that location. He even received a letter from the emperor himself to congratulate him on his first child being the first to be born in that building. Freud believed that the strongest inner powers were the thanatos, eros, death and sex. His alter ego was the well-known Viennese literary figure Arthur Schinizler, who also studied the man’s psyche. He wrote two plays titled “A little Love Affair” and “Enormous Country”. Both plays address the topic of sexual affairs that eventually results to death either by dual or suicide. His novel “Miss Else” also addresses this theme of sexual involvement leading to destruction.

One decade after Elizabeth’s death, Vienna built an institution to house the insane. Its architect was Otto Wagner and it was the Church of St. Leopold at Steinhof. A place devoted to serving people suffering from mental illness. It was a true work of art. “During the last years of the disintegration of the great Hapsburg Empire, it’s capital paid tribute to the importance of madness with a beautiful and impressive monument” (Bettleheim, 1990, p.16). Hence to understand Vienna’s interest in introspection in the ninetieth and twentieth century one needs to understand it’s history and how it was stained by tragedy related to mental illnesses and the psyche forces that drive it.

Question:

When considering people who are dealing with various types of traumas, in what ways could an art therapist better detect the various defense mechanism that the patient is using for coping with their trauma. Also what specific art therapy approaches would one use to help a victim of trauma explore their trauma in a way that would allow the patient to best communicate that trauma to the therapist yet minimalize reliving the pain of the trauma to the patient?

Reference

Bettleheim, B. (1990). Freud’s Vienna. *Freud’s Vienna and other essays* (pp. 1-23). New York, NY: Knopft.