



FREUD'S COGNITIVE STYLE: IT'S A SURPRISE

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Abstract: Fifty years ago Robert Holt (1965) argued that knowledge about Freud's cognitive style would help us better understand his thoughts. He further hoped that his essay would attract additional attention to this problem: How did Freud process information? How did Freud make his discoveries? What enabled the obvious and abundant creativity? We've taken Holt's challenge, focusing on one hitherto unexplored aspect of Freud's cognitive style, brought to our attention in a puzzling comment by Martin Bergmann (2011a: 247): 'We never find Freud saying "This surprised me very much"'. Therefore, we will focus on one facet of Freud's cognitive style, specifically, the experience of surprise in the context of discovery. We first approach the question narratively, as did Holt, and, with the help of PEPWEB (for the first time we believe), in a cull of the *Standard Edition* (*surprise, surprises, surprised, surprising, surprisingly*). Eager to answer Holt's call for the study of Freud's cognitive style, we conclude that Freud was open to surprise in the context of discovery.

'It is unclear why those of us who love psychoanalysis, warts and all, should trouble ourselves with the matter of publically sanctioned evidence.' (O'Carroll 2001: 65).

Introduction

Fifty years ago Robert Holt (1965: 162; cf, Holt, 1973) addressed 'Freud's Cognitive Style', arguing persuasively: 'If we can clearly apprehend the *ways* Freud thought, we may be able to gain a better understanding of *what* he has to teach us'.¹ Borrowing the term, "cognitive style," from the work of George Klein and colleagues (Gardner, Holzman, Klein, Linton & Spence 1959), Holt went on to describe the ways in which Freud took in and processed information, noting: obsessive-compulsive personality traits, a gift for passive, free-floating attention, an oscillation between doubt and certainty, a tendency to think in binary concepts, an

unusual tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity and inconsistency, a tendency to amend rather than revise, a willingness to generalize “sweepingly”, a temporary eschewal of secondary process thinking, a nimble use of all the tools of rhetoric, and an intolerance of meaninglessness.

After helping us begin to get into Freud’s head, Holt expressed the hope that his essay would attract ‘attention to the problem of Freud’s cognitive style’ and ‘open up some ways of approaching it’ (Holt 1965: 178). We take up the gauntlet, focusing on one aspect of Freud’s cognitive style, his *openness to surprise in the context of discovery*. We will approach the issue, first, narratively, as did Holt, but then use PEPWEB (we believe for the first time in a psychoanalytic paper) to explore a text (-ual) analysis of this facet of Freud’s cognitive style,

We were nudged in this particular direction by a recent, puzzling statement, made by Martin Bergmann (2011: 247), to whom most analysts have listened whenever he has spoken. We were quite flummoxed when he said, ‘We never find Freud saying “This surprised me very much”’, a point left tantalizingly unexplored in the remainder of the article. We wondered, could this really be the case? Was this a casual comment, whatever, analytically, that might be, or something pointed to re-focus our attention to the problem of *how* Freud thinks, thereby, per Holt, deepening our understanding of *what* he thinks. After that comment, Bergmann planted the flag, claiming the territory in the name of Theodor Reik, who, as we know, made much of “surprise,” breaking ground with ‘New Ways in Psycho-Analytic Technique’ (1933), further mining the vein in the book length *Surprise and the Psycho-Analyst* (1935), hammering the point home in the best-selling *Listening with the Third Ear* (1949).

Granting the Reikian emphasis on surprise, we were curious about Bergman’s all too-brief comment on Freud. We find it hard to believe that Bergmann would believe that Freud undervalued the experience of “surprise” in the context of discovery. He couldn’t have been suggesting that Freud was not “open” enough to experience, and re-experience surprise in his daily, that is, hourly work. More likely, it was a matter of emphasis. Earlier, Bergmann in *The Evolution of Psychoanalytic Technique*, had remarked: ‘what Freud said *en passant*, became to Reik the cornerstone to a whole structure’ (Bergmann and Hartman 1975: 370). Bergmann’s provocation was seized as an opportunity to further explore Freud’s cognitive style, specifically his use of surprise in discovery and validation.

In response, we will, perhaps preaching to the analytic choir, show that Freud, too, made much of surprise, enriching our understanding of one facet of Freud’s cognitive style. We will

document, chronologically, narratively, Freud's initial attraction to, formative intellectual exposure to, personal enjoyment of, technical comfort with, and persistent curiosity about surprise. A somewhat more microscopic textual examination of his thinking (in the *Standard Edition*), employing the PEPWEB, will follow. If Freud was cognitively open to surprise, we believe we should value surprise, too, and so we close our comments with a well-earned focus on surprise in the psychoanalytic situation.

In pitting Reik v. Freud, perhaps Bergmann is re-animating an old war, with Freud as proxy.² Perhaps analysis, in the present, like the military, often finds itself re-fighting an older conflict; after all, why should analysts be free of repetition? On the other hand, this may be a war that never ends, or even be winnable. We have seen that psychoanalysis once wanted to be objective, rational, medical (even surgical), scientific, but has found itself awash in subjectivity, and often quite proud of it (Israel 2013; Summers 2013; but cf. Eagle 2003, for a contrasting viewpoint). However, before trying to explore the question of Freud's openness to surprise in the context of discovery, we reprise the yester-years of this issue.

Freud and surprise

Hypnosis had been tried, vivisectioning the unwilling patient who would not give voice to what had happened. Freud learned that by-passing the resistance – instead of analyzing the resistance – was a mistake, the defensiveness pointing the way to the objections to sex and aggression. How and why the patient resisted was as important as what was resisted. Instead of extracting secrets and lighting the fires of abreaction, Freud recast the analytic space. Suggestion and exhortation vanished, and were removed from the quiver. The patient was now encouraged to speak freely, as best one could. No longer the puppet of the hypnotic ring-master, the patient lead the way, associations providing the trail to find the way home. The analyst now listened with evenly-hovering or free-floating attention, without memory or desire.

At a time when the apples had begun to roll from the tree, selections (e.g., “the Committee”), defections (e.g., Rank and Ferenczi), ejections (e.g., Stekel) and rejections (e.g., Jung) served to differentiate and articulate a growing body of psychoanalytic theory and technique. The earliest surveys of technique found tremendous variation in practice (Glover 1928/1955). Somewhat later, in a survey of ‘mature psycho-analysts who have been more or less

sobered and subdued by countless experiences with the struggles and dilemmas peculiar to psycho-analytic treatment,' Oberndorf (1943: 113) concluded: 'the extraordinary degree of individualism of analysts in procedure and results may exceed previous supposition'.

One of the more famous debates over technique occurred between Reik (1933) and Fenichel (1935/1941), Reik arguing on behalf of surprise, Fenichel outlining a more systematic technique. Working from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we define "surprise" as the experience of astonishment at the unexpected, of startling discovery, of being seized, taken unawares, of wondering about the images and emotions accompanying imminent discovery. In part enabled by surprise, often accompanied by a shift in figure and ground, creativity is about openness, loosening of repression, free play, and shelter from the prevailing intellectual winds (Schachtel 1959, 1971). Finally, we would suggest that the experience of surprise is not uniform within or between persons, varying in amount of affect involved (from mild spark to something incendiary), with a degree of cognitive disjunction (from creative synthesis to major shift in figure and ground), and a clear temporal course (from slow preconscious incubation to sudden awareness).

Sounding very much like the first intersubjectivist (Israel 2013; although, some would argue that Ferenczi came first; cf. Arons and Harris 2010), Reik argues that 'the basis of analysis is the establishment of an understanding between the unconscious of one person and that of another' (Reik 1933: 232). Herold (1939: 220) prefers the term "illumination" to "surprise", but we counter that not every eruption of unconscious content will be illuminating; some will be downright unfamiliar and unsettling (Freud 1919). Surprise and illumination reverberate, co-mingle. For Reik, discoveries come with surprise (born in subjectivity), not in the systematic analysis of defences. The 'only fit governing principle for our technique is to allow ourselves to be surprised' (Reik 1933: 330). The analytic situation becomes an 'atmosphere of expectant adventure' (Sherman, 1959: 46). Free-floating attention and counter-transference reverie became hosts to bubbling surprise and sudden astonishment, such that the pair become essential for meaningful exploration and eventual corroboration. The surprise is not limited to the analyst, and often leads, contagiously, to 'reciprocal illumination in the patient' (Frenkel 1953: 275). Reik, anticipating Kohut (1959), makes it clear that the analyst's unconscious empathic connection is built on unrelenting introspection. Listening to the self, it is possible to understand the other. Accordingly, many of Reik's works seem confessional in nature.

Fenichel (1941: 13; emphasis added), bemoaning the “irrationality” of said technique, countered: that ‘the subject matter, *not the method*, of psychoanalysis is irrational’. Fenichel (pp. 5-6) went on to criticize those analysts:

that misuse the idea of the analyst’s unconscious as the instrument of perception, so that they hardly do any work at all in analysis but ‘float in it,’ sit and merely ‘experience’ things in such a way as to understand fragments of the unconscious processes of the patient and unselectively communicate them to [the patient]”...without “a reasoning power that keeps ulterior aims in view.

No matter the tribal hostility (cf, Frosch 1991) behind Fenichel’s remarks and our uncertain interpretation of Bergmann’s remarks, Reik did nothing of the kind; he insisted that ‘conscious knowledge and reason should not have the first, but the last, word in the process of analytic discovery’ (Reik 1948: 391-392). Building on Freud’s notion of “evenly hovering attention,” Reik took us deeper, challenging us to be open to surprise, which, as Reik spun it, became something of a religious experience: it was experienced passively; it was a noetic moment; sadly, it was transient, and often ineffable (James, 1906).

To begin the exploration of this facet of Freud’s cognitive style, we succinctly, and chronologically, trace the red-thread of surprise along the following trajectory: In the beginning, there was Goethe! In his ‘Autobiography’, Freud tells us that he decided to go to medical school after hearing Goethe’s ‘Fragment on Nature’. This passionate paean contains the lines: “Nature ... *without being asked and without warning*, it draws us into the *vortex* of its dance and *sweeps us away*” (Freud 1925: 7, emphasis added). Freud allowed himself to be carried away by the experience of this encounter with Goethe’s work, evoking sensations of suddenness, surrender, infusion, emotional contagion, surprise.

A second piece of evidence may be unearthed in his encomium/obituary to Charcot, with whom he studied from 13 October 1885 to February 28, 1886. Early in his intellectual development, Freud (1893) described, and endorsed, Charcot’s way of working with the living mysteries, the diagnostic dilemmas that filled the halls of the Salpêtrière. Charcot would:

look again and again at the things he did not understand, to *deepen* his impression of them day by day, till *suddenly* an understanding of them *dawned* on him...He might be heard to say that the greatest satisfaction a man could have was *to see something new*, that is, *to recognize it as new*. [Charcot] would say that it was wonderful how one was *suddenly able to see new things*. (Freud, 1893: 12; emphasis added).

Prolonged observation. Interaction. Immersion. Listening. Stasis. Surprise. Understanding. This seems rather reminiscent of the work of the analyst: hour after hour of listening; observation, necessary interaction; attachment and separation; reflection; effortful empathy; patient exploration; more listening, till something registers in the Third Ear, and the analyst considers advancing a conjecture built in the surprise of empathic (initially) unconscious comprehension.

Writing many years later, in his autobiography, Freud fondly looked back and recalled that Charcot's methods and demonstration provoked 'a *sense of astonishment* and an *inclination to skepticism*' (1925: 12; emphasis added). This phrase nicely models openness to surprise followed by a critical assessment of the experience, i.e., discovery followed by validation.

Next, we insist that another of Freud's works, a somewhat neglected piece (Quinodoz 2004, p. 51), *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* (Freud 1905) also demonstrates Freud's interest in and enjoyment of surprise. Freud nimbly demonstrates how many jokes depend upon surprise, the simple delight in the clever evasion of the censor, allowing libidinal and aggressive material to surface and be safely expressed. Displacement, condensation, reversal, symbology, representability, secondary revision, all contribute to surprise and enjoyment.

Freud's first general paper on technique, 'Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-analysis', first defined the analytic-frame, -attitude and -process. Prominent in the guidelines, we find Freud (1912: 113; emphasis added) saying:

the most successful cases are those in which one proceeds, as it were, without *any purpose in view*, *allows oneself to be taken by surprise* by any new turn in them, and always meets them with an *open mind, free from any presuppositions*.³

We observe the same openness when Freud (1919) subsequently described – and wondered about – occult anxieties, startling and unfamiliar feelings, and eerie surprise in unfamiliar and unexpected moments. Freud lists some of the things that may contribute to such feelings: uncertainty, ambiguity, restlessness, unfamiliarity, insecurity, repetition, darkness, the strange brew of monotony-boredom and novelty, all of which suffuse the analytic situation.

As he neared the end of his life, in his last technical paper, Freud (1937: 259) discussed ‘constructions’, or conjectures about the holes in the patient’s anamnesis. He wished for much: ‘What we are in search of is a picture of the patient's forgotten years that shall be alike trustworthy and in all essential respects complete’. Both the analyst and the archeologist ‘have an undisputed right to reconstruct by means of supplementing and combining the surviving remains.’ Both of them, moreover, are ‘subject to many of the same difficulties and sources of error’. Willing to live with this uncertainty, Freud (1937: 258) insisted that this is ‘the task’ of the analyst. No doubt many of the analyst’s conjectures begin as unconscious surprise and preconscious conjecture, before secondary process gives form to the experience so that it might be delivered – in useful form – to the patient who may or may not provide some confirmation of the hunch.

Thus far we have traced Freud’s early intellectual exposure to surprise, beginning with Goethe, then Charcot, his finding surprise in joke, to an early technical paper advocating surprise, in the experience of the uncanny, to his last technical paper, where he wonders how to generate and validate surprise. We conclude: Intellectually, personally, clinically, and technically, Freud was ready to be surprised. After all, this is the mind that gave voice to infantile sexuality, dared reminding us we were born between fæces and urine, courageously exposed religion as a repetition of infantile dependency, calmly understood us as beasts with consciousness, and helped us see how night rules the day.

We may now turn to a further, more microscopic, examination of the question: did Freud use the experience of surprise in the context of discovery, or not? Before we turn to PEPWEB, a final clarification of terms is in order. We follow the philosopher Reichenbach (1938), who differentiated the *context of discovery* (how one comes to think of something) and the *context of validation* (how one rationally supports what was discovered), which Meehl (1954: 66) says, must be ‘kept distinct’ from one another. The former is the ‘province of psychology’, the latter ‘the province of epistemology’ (Wiggins 1973: 147). This is similar to Rapaport’s (1951: 720)

distinction between “inventive” and “elaborative” phases in the development of ideas. One can see that both goals are expressed in Freud’s wish for something “complete” and “trustworthy”!

Method

Freud’s cognitive style will be further explored when we turn to PEPWEB (version 14). The *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* will be sifted for the following words: *surprise, surprises, surprised, surprising, surprisingly*. Each “hit” will be examined to determine if “surprise” was used in the context of discovery, validation, or for personal or rhetorical purpose. For clarity, examples of each include: Discovery (something is discovered): ‘We were very surprised to find that the symptom...’; Validation (what tests or supports what was discovered): ‘My earliest hunch was surprisingly confirmed, sequentially, in the associations that followed’; Rhetorical (persuasion): ‘It will be no surprise to the reader...’; Personal (private life): ‘Tante Minna surprised us with a visit. To make some rough, ordinal comparison of frequency, the *Standard Edition* will be sifted for the following “control” words: *unconscious, libido, and repression*.

Results

Ratings: after discussion of the nomological net surrounding “surprise”, followed by practice ratings and discussion to consensus, the two authors produced consensus ratings of all “hits” on “surprise” and its variants (451 ratings). Reminder: a “hit” will be defined as the search word used one or more times per citation (e.g., could be the relatively lengthy *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* or the fairly brief ‘Constructions in Analysis’). Each instance will be rated, resulting in a number larger than the number of citations.

Hits: “Surprise” was used 122 times in 62 citations, 72 in the context of discovery, 9 for validation, 37 for rhetoric and 4 for personal. “Surprised” was used 163 times in 55 citations, 45 in the context of discovery, 4 for validation, 82 for rhetoric and 32 for personal. “Surprises” was used 14 times in 11 citations, 10 in the context of discovery, 0 for validation, 3 for rhetoric and 1 for personal. “Surprising” was used 138 times in 61 citations, 100 in the context of discovery, 4 for validation, 33 for rhetoric and 1 for personal. “Surprisingly” was used 14 times in 10

citations, 5 in the context of discovery, 0 for validation, 9 for rhetoric and 0 for personal. Thus, surprise and its variants was used 249 times, over half the time (55.2%), in the context of discovery or for validation (see Table 1 below).

	DISCOVERY	VALIDATION	RHETORICAL	PERSONAL
SURPRISE (122)	72	9	37	4
SURPRISED (163)	45	4	82	32
SURPRISES (14)	10	0	3	1
SURPRISING (138)	100	4	33	1
SURPRISINGLY (14)	5	0	9	0
TOTALS (451)	232	17	164	38

TABLE 1

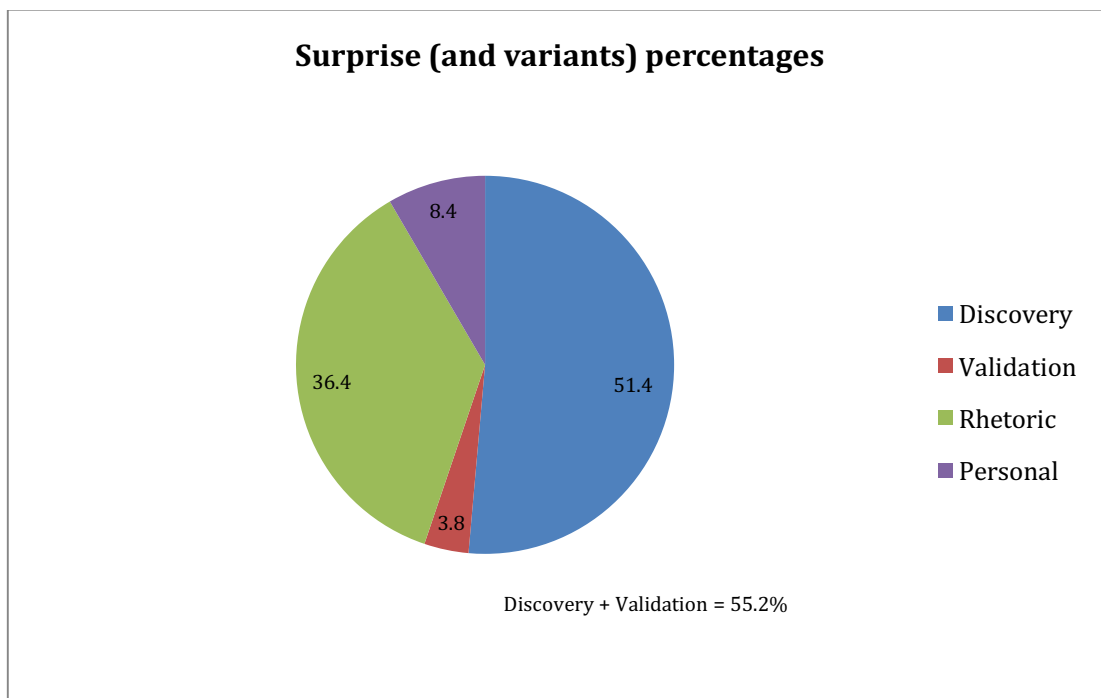


TABLE 2

Comparison Searches: The above hits were compared with the hits on three words of common analytic parlance. “Unconscious: was used 744 times in 143 citations. “Libido” was used 456 times in 110 citations. “Repression” was used 605 times in 113 citations. Now might be the time to insist that “surprise” should be included in every psychoanalytic dictionary, currently a glaring omission: as a PEPWEB search reveals!

Discussion

We are grateful for the opportunity to explore one facet of Freud’s cognitive style, openness to surprise. The above table and chart, in harmony with this article’s earlier narrative conclusion, makes it clear that Freud did value the experience of surprise in the context of discovery. Necessarily, “hunches” must be “abundant” in the larval phase of a science (Rapaport 1951: 79n). Like other great scientists, Freud had ‘immense patience in observation and great boldness in framing hypotheses’ (Russell 1945: 528). It is possible that a separate cull for synonyms (e.g., astonish, astonishes, astonished, astonishing, astonishingly) would further demonstrate Freud’s comfort with surprise in the context of discovery. Further, since we know that Freud discussed formative theory and technique with colleagues (correspondence with Fliess is the outstanding example, according to Masson (1985)), a further cull of his letters might add additional impact to our broadside.

Comments on surprise in the analytic situation

The experience of surprise is central to the psychoanalytic process, the green upon which we tilt. Indeed, Alter (1996: 625) suggests that ‘the response to novelty is an intrinsic feature of the psychoanalytic situation’. Although speaking of the emergence of Egyptian Monotheism, something new, Freud’s words are perfect here: ‘Every novelty *must* have its preliminaries and its preconditions’ (1939: 21; emphasis added). We suggest that the average-expectable-analytic-setting furnishes the perfect ‘preliminaries and preconditions’ for novelty, for surprise. After all: ‘certain conditions facilitate surprise’ (Faimberg & Corel 1990: 415; cf. Bindra 1959). The physical setting, ideational free-play, recumbent position, pseudo-sleep, discouragement of small-talk, structure, motoric inhibition, quiet, paced silence, and regularity, all are conducive to

surprise (Fenichel 1934; Greenson 1953; Lewin 1955; Macalpine 1950). After all, Freud (1900: 102) likened the process of free association to the state of the mind that precedes sleep, when we are regularly surprised by “involuntary ideas” in a parade of hypnogogic psychedelia (Silberer 1910/1950).

Tentatively, we sketch the presence of surprise in the analytic process. Surprise is omnipresent. First, the naïve patient will be surprised by the strange rules in the analytic situation (Peterson 2014). Misery and the positive transference provide, initially, the wind that fills the analytic sails, pushing the treatment in surprising directions. The inner world is recreated within the analytic situation, again and again, repetition often preceding or substituting for recall; the patient will be surprised to discover their issues again in play, this time with the analyst. In other words, the patient will be surprised to discover their relational past in the relational present. We recall Freud (1912b) saying no one is actually destroyed in effigy. Here, transference may be considered as an attempt to recreate the familiar, thereby reducing the anxious surprise about the identity of the stranger/analyst. Old faces surprisingly re-appear. Much later on, analyst and patient will be pleasantly surprised when the repetition stops. At the same time, a patient who has relationship expectations within the transference – ‘men are hurtful’ – may be surprised when the analyst does not behave as expected or coerced. Throughout, analyst and patient may be surprised from “within,” bubbling unconscious comprehension, or from “without,” something created and discovered between them in the analytic process.

Surprise pervades the middle phase of therapy; recall Freud (1913: 123) saying that ‘the infinite variety of moves which develop after the opening moves defy any such description’ Therefore everything in the middle of the treatment is unpredictable, unplanned, surprising. Bohm (1992: 625) argues that “turning points” (‘momentary sudden change in quality, depth or direction’) in the treatment are invariably filled with surprise. In fact, the analyst is ‘a surprise-er’ who ‘must try surprising “the contrary-angles” of what is being discussed’ (Bohm 1992: 680). Good interpretations and necessary confrontations gently surprise the patient. No doubt the patient will be surprised when asked to take moral responsibility for the content of his dreams (Freud, 1925). Imagine the patient’s further surprise upon discovering their own “paradoxical” efforts to defeat the forward process (Menninger 1958). With the establishment of the transference, thematic sameness in the working through allows for discovery and surprise. Insight becomes the startling signal to a background of noise.

Fenichel (1941) best described the process of working through: when tracing a conflict, analyst or patient must say 'there too, there again, here again'. However "it" was discovered that working through is also a surprising "rediscovery". A patient will, for a time, be surprised to see their issue surface in every corner of intra-psychic and interpersonal life, in and out of the analytic situation (Blum 1994). As a matter of evidence, as a massing of interpretive force, working through becomes conviction incarnate. Working through makes surprising discovery increasingly trustworthy.

Conclusion

We hope to contribute to an understanding of how Freud thinks (note present tense; his thought is alive!), by exploring one aspect of his cognitive style. We hope to have documented another facet of his thinking (one that is quite commensurate with Holt's bountiful conclusions, as discussed above). Our findings factually remind the rest of the world – especially his detractors – that Freud was quite open to surprise in the context of discovery. He was able to allow 'Pegasus to take wing' (Holt 1965: 176), and be open to discovery. No matter whether regarded as a biologist (Sulloway 1979) or as a hermeneuticist (Ricoeur 1970), Freud's cognitive style is blessed with an openness to surprise. It is no surprise, then, that a recent article by Holt (2015) refuted charges that Freud might have had an authoritarian personality. No matter that *his* psychology became *our* psychology: 'the roots of invention will ... always be autistic' (Rapaport 1951: 439n).

So often research confirms what wise elders already knew. Freud was a spelunker, boldly exploring a freshly discovered underground grotto: curious, cautious, open, with a beam of light hungrily searching the depths, ready to be surprised. Cumulatively, our findings may be considered a partial answer to Roy Schafer's (1968: 3) observation that Freud, although 'always concerned with data-gathering', was 'equally concerned with the overriding question: "How to think?"'. How do we know what we know? With openness to surprise, of course!

Notes

1. The continued assault on the Strachey translation could be regarded as another attempt to get closer to what Freud thought.

2. Elsewhere, Bergmann (2011b: 669) states: "My experience as a teacher of the history of psychoanalysis has convinced me that familiarity with the old controversies and why they emerged contributes significantly to the maturity of the student of psychoanalysis"
3. We encourage our readers to use PEPWEB to explore any number of issues and we encourage PEPWEB to expand their search functions. Imagine being able to explore one journal's use of citations from other journals; how ideologically narrow/broad are the citations? How often does the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* cite articles from the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*? Which journal is most catholic in its citations of other journals? Which journal is the most egocentric/incestuous in citing articles from its own pages?

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