What's the point of neuropsychoanalysis?

Franck Ramus

Summary
Neuropsychoanalysis is a new school of thought attempting to bridge neuroscience and psychoanalysis. Yet few neuroscientists and psychiatrists would have heard of it if it had not recently received public support from notable neuroscientists. The present paper discusses whether such support is warranted.

Declaration of interest
None.
constitutes the core of psychology and psychiatry and leads both theoretical thinking and clinical practice. In France, for example, psychoanalytically trained child psychiatrists reject international classifications of mental disorders in favour of their own idiosyncratic ones, delay the diagnosis of autism or substitute it with psychoanalytic diagnoses such as ‘infantile psychosis’, delay or prevent any form of educational intervention; practice instead analytical forms of psychotherapy whose efficacy is not supported by any empirical evidence (including highly questionable ones such as packing15); put the blame on parents for the neurodevelopmental disorders of their children; and play even a filmmaker who dares to expose their ideas about autism16 in a context of increasing challenges to their authority, French psychoanalysts relish any overt sign of interest for psychoanalysis from a world-renowned neuroscientist. Such declarations are then instrumentalised in the hope of delaying any evolution of French psychiatry and psychology for a few more years, forming new obstacles on the path to evidence-based psychiatry. Patients pay dearly for that.

I have no doubt that the respected neuroscientists mentioned above condemned all these abuses and showed indefectible commitment to evidence-based psychology and psychiatry. But they should think twice before making any statement that may be interpreted as a rehabilitation of psychoanalysis (unless they have stunning new data to reveal, of course). They should be aware of all the consequences of upholding the popularity of psychoanalysis. They should be aware that they will be unwittingly enrolled in the support of discredited diagnostic and therapeutic practices, at the expense of patients, albeit in distant places.

If psychoanalysis is to be rehabilitated, this will have to be on the basis of its own merits. It is not enough for empirical research to tackle the influence of early life experiences, the neural correlates of unconscious processing, or the decoding of dream content using neuroimaging, to support psychoanalysis as such, even if Freud happened to use the same words. What is needed is to show that (1) certain central psychoanalytical concepts (such as the Oedipus complex) can now be sufficiently precisely defined to make clear, testable predictions, that some of these predictions are indeed correct, and that they are not better explained by other, simpler theories; or that (2) psychoanalytical theories of the causes of certain mental disorders are correct and more accurate predictions than alternative theories; or perhaps that (3) psychoanalytical therapies have proven some efficacy for certain disorders, for reasons specific to psychoanalytical concepts. But none of the authors cited here has provided any hint that this is the case. Merely finding inspiration in Freud’s writings and making vague analogies between psychoanalytical concepts and neuroscientific findings will not do.

Franck Ramus, PhD, Laboratoire de Sciences Cognitives et Psycholinguistiques, École Normale Supérieure, EHESS, CNRS, Paris, France. Email: franck.ramus@ens.fr
First received 8 Feb 2013, final revision 17 May 2013, accepted 5 Jun 2013

References
7 Kandel E. The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present. Random House, 2012.