The genius of Sabina Spielrein

John Launer

For many years, I have helped to run an annual training day on management for young psychiatrists and psychologists who are about to become consultants. We usually spend most of the day doing an exercise where they turn themselves into the managing boards of two imaginary mental health institutions and compete for business. Over the years we have had fun inventing the names and characteristics of these two institutions. There were a few years when I called one of them ‘the Spielrein Institute’. I chose the name as a joke—at least, I thought it was a joke at the time. I took it from a real historical figure called Sabina Spielrein. Like many people, all I knew about her was that she was a patient of Carl Jung and had then become his mistress. I knew Sigmund Freud was somehow connected with her.

The respect of Freud was anticipated much of the biological and psychological research of our own era.

The next plank of her proposition, in summary, is that we are all torn as human beings between the will to procreation and the drive towards self-preservation and procreation is supported by advances in evolutionary psychological understanding, including selfish gene theory and how genes contribute to ageing and death. Her idea that males and females are in continual competition to impose their genetic inheritance on each other, is consistent with emerging discoveries in the molecular biology of conception and pregnancy. This includes the field of epigenetics, where we now understand how genes from the mother and father are modified to compete with each other within the embryo, placenta, and even the baby. Her realisation that these genetic tensions are played out in our mental lives has been vindicated by a huge range of research into the ways the sexes and generations relate to each other. And finally, her proposal that such thinking should underlie psychological treatment is a central tenet of the emerging schools of thought known as evolutionary psychiatry and psychotherapy. In some ways, she was offering a synthesis of these ideas that goes beyond anything else that has yet been written.

Spielrein’s argument was completely rejected—indeed mocked—by those who heard it at the time. It then disappeared into oblivion. Remarkably, that is where it remained. I have yet to come across any assessment of her ideas that does them full justice. Although it is nowadays common for people writing about Sabina Spielrein to say she was underestimated as a thinker, this is always in the context of showing how Freud, Jung and others borrowed and adapted some of her ideas. No-one, so far as I am aware, has ever re-examined her theory through the eyes of modern evolutionary biology, realised how prescient she was, or challenged the way her theory has been marginalised in the history of psychology. Personally I hope to redress this, and am now completing a book about her ideas.

UNRECOGNISED GENIUS

Fortunately I am not the only person now taking an interest in Sabina Spielrein. This
On reflection

month, the director David Cronenberg is releasing a movie about her, with the title ‘A dangerous method’.15 Cronenberg is best known for his horror and science fiction movies, which have earned him nicknames like the Baron of Blood and the King of Venerable Horror. This movie, however, appears to be in a more measured genre. The script has been adapted from a play by Christopher Hampton, which in turn drew on her biography by John Kerr. The heroine in the movie is played by Keira Knightley, who has been tipped for an Oscar nomination for her performance.

Like nearly every account of Sabina Spielrein, the movie will dwell mainly on her notorious triangular relationship with Jung and Freud. To judge by the trailer, and comments from previews in Venice and Toronto, it is a thoughtful and accurate account of what happened between the three protagonists, although Cronenberg has taken some poetic licence in the sex scenes. For example, it shows Jung beating Spielrein at her request ‘sex against survival’. It would be wonderful, and well deserved, if the same date 100 years later marked the turning point in our understanding and assessment of Sabina Spielrein. Perhaps one day there really will be a Spielrein Institute in honour of a woman who I believe was an unrecognised genius.

Competing interests John Launer is preparing a book on Sabina Spielrein for publication.

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REFERENCES

Correction

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