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# Charles Brenner, Psychoanalyst, Dies at 94

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

Dr. Charles Brenner, who reigned for nearly a half-century as the dean of American psychoanalysis, working to clarify, refine and fiercely defend its core principles, died Monday in Manhattan. He was 94.

His death followed an emergency medical procedure at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell hospital to relieve internal bleeding, said his niece Mary Brown.

A neurologist by training, Dr. Brenner applied to psychoanalysis a ruthless scientific intellect that helped clarify Freud's canon for working therapists and students and eventually led him to formulate a theory of motivation that has had a profound effect on analytic treatment.

His 1955 book, "An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis," became a standard reference in training programs and sold more than a million copies, becoming the best-selling text on psychoanalysis by someone other than its inventor.

His landmark 1964 text, with Dr. Jacob A. Arlow, "Psychoanalytic Concepts and Structural Theory," extended Freudian thinking to argue that patients should understand not only the mental barriers underlying their distress, but also exactly which thoughts were being blocked — say, a self-sabotaging guilt about success or an urge to be punished for feeling pleasure.

In a break from strict orthodoxy, Dr. Brenner argued that Freud's concepts of the ego, the id, and the superego were just that, concepts, and that the engine of human motivation was more like a psychological calculator, continuously computing ratios of pleasure versus pain: the gratification that would come from a love affair, for instance, versus the risk of discovery and abiding ache of guilt.

In analytic therapy, patients could reach a compromise between incompatible wishes that resolved some of the distress and was useful, Dr. Brenner argued.

"He was a creative, elegant thinker who was very much in the Freudian tradition but never entirely a company man," said Dr. George J. Makari, a psychiatrist at Columbia University and author of the book "Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis." Even late in life, Dr. Makari added, "he was still proposing some radical reforms."

Through it all, Dr. Brenner, revered in some quarters as almost a surrogate for Freud, defended Freud's legacy against skeptics and other reformers with withering certainty. He became, in the words of the writer [Janet Malcolm](#), "the intransigent purist of American psychoanalysis."

Dr. Owen Renik, an analyst in private practice in San Francisco, called Dr. Brenner “an unusually clear thinker who simply had no use for empty theorizing.”

. “Unfortunately, dialectical interchange was not Charlie’s forte; he tended to be dismissive of points of view different from his own,” Dr. Renik continued. “As a result, there was a limit to the extent to which his thinking evolved. Nonetheless, much of it has enduring value.”

And so it was, scholars say, with psychoanalysis itself, which for years refused to adapt to an onslaught of findings from cognitive psychology, pharmacology and neuroscience — and which, despite enduring insights into human behavior, has lost much of its authority in psychiatry and with the public.

Charles Brenner was born in Boston on Nov. 18, 1913, one of two sons of Sam Brenner, an immigrant from Ukraine who became a lawyer, and his wife, Ann, a schoolteacher. The boy was not a late bloomer: he graduated from Boston Latin School at 14, and from Harvard at 18, cum laude in chemistry.

After earning a medical degree, also at Harvard, and doing his residency and internship in Boston, Dr. Brenner turned his attention to the still-emerging field of psychiatry, which in the United States was dominated by European émigrés and smitten by the ideas of Freud.

Dr. Brenner trained at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute and held neurology appointments at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia. He also served, from 1944 to 1950, as an associate attending psychiatrist at Montefiore Medical Center.

He quickly became a fixture in New York psychoanalytic circles, taking sides in just about every major debate in the field and positions at the New York Psychoanalytic Society, the American Psychoanalytic Association and the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, where he was an instructor and supervising analyst for much of his career.

He looked the part of the establishment analyst: an austere presence, meticulous in speech and dress, he fully embodied a formal Yankee prototype the way an immigrant’s son can. But behind the formality was a warmth and loyalty he extended to all who responded to his teaching and ideas.

“He was a wonderful and generous teacher who trained many analysts and was always available,” said Dr. Arnold Rothstein, a psychoanalyst in New York.

Dr. Brenner’s wife of 66 years, Erma, who worked with children, died in 2001. His daughter, Elsa Brenner Cohen, died in 2005.

He is survived by another daughter, Lucy Biven of Leicester, England; a son-in-law, Roger Cohen of Milwaukee; three grandchildren, Laura Biven of Washington; Peter Biven of London; and Robert Cohen of San Carlos, Calif.; a nephew, Charles Brenner of Oakland, Calif.; and two nieces, Ms. Brown of New York, and Elizabeth Brenner of Redwood City, Calif.

In an interview late in his career, Dr. Brenner was asked about the future of psychoanalysis, and he answered that it would always hold promise for those interested in the mind.

“It worked for me, you know,” he said. “So I think it can work for other people, too. But I may be all wrong, you never know. But that has been my experience in science in general.”