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## **‘Freud you’re hysterical!’ Connecting the female and the mother into psychoanalysis**

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This paper critically analyses how Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of the male and female oedipal complexes and their consequences, the castration complex and penis envy, relate to women’s psychological development through a feminist perspective. This will importantly connect the female voice into a male-centred discipline. Looking at feminist reaction to Freud’s theories and their subsequent modifications challenge Freud’s ‘anatomy is destiny’ theory and encapsulate the importance of social and relational factors in psychological development. Looking forward, feminists call for a more androgynous society to help reject oppression, while still celebrating differences in our gendered societies.

### **Introduction**

Psychoanalysis is a psychotherapeutic discipline that believes adult unconscious behaviours and thoughts relate to childhood psychological development. The founding father of psychoanalysis, Dr. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) looked at relationships the child had with their parents and constructed theoretical foundations into how the child/parent triad dictates and influences adulthood.

The aim of this paper is to critically analyse how these theories relate to women’s psychological development through a feminist perspective. This is important as it will convey the female voice into a discipline that has previously been known for its male-centred views on psychological development. In doing so, gaps such as relational and societal factors that connect the female and the

mother into this therapy will be revealed. Moreover, looking at feminist reaction and their adaptations to Freud’s theories bring the female into psychoanalysis and creates inclusion, progression and a shift within the field of psychoanalysis. ‘Once patriarchal and phallogocentric, it now becomes almost entirely mother-centred’ (Sayers 1991, p.3). This is a preferable stance as it challenges the hierarchy of society. This perspective looks at interpersonal factors and mother-love identification rather than Freud’s seduction theory.

To begin, one must look to Freud himself and his writings to gain an insight into how women were perceived within psychoanalysis. Imperative in the discussion is his hypothesis that ‘anatomy is destiny’. This meant that gendered personality is determined by the biological presence or absence of a penis. Through this biological standpoint the pivotal theories on the male<sup>1</sup> and female<sup>2</sup> Oedipus complexes must be investigated in gendered terms. These describe how the platonic love of the child for the parent of the opposite sex becomes sexual. The period before this, the pre-Oedipal stage will also be examined. Using Freud’s case studies, in particular the ‘Dora’ case<sup>3</sup> (1905) and feminist reaction, it considers the gendered debate of the consequences of these processes, namely his constructs of penis envy and castration complex from a female viewpoint. Through the feminist debate, modifications which reconnect the female and the mother into psychoanalysis will be uncovered.

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<sup>1</sup> Developed its name from the play Oedipus Rex, written by Sophocles in Ancient Greece. See <http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/oedipus001.html>

<sup>2</sup> Also called ‘The Electra complex’ by Carl Jung (1875-1961)

<sup>3</sup> Dora, real name Ida Bauer (1882–1945) was misdiagnosed with hysteria and jealousy, rather than anger at her father’s affair and his male friend’s sexual advances.

## Freud's Viewpoint of the Female

Psychoanalysis has been noted for its misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes. Its founder, Dr. Sigmund Freud was heavily influenced by the 'Victorian' culture at the time which encouraged women to be passive and dependant. They were not to fall into the trap of what Friedan (1974) called 'The Feminine Mystique', which was the struggle women had in retaining their identity whilst being good wives and mothers.

Chodorow highlights Freud's opinion of women as;

*"[...] women have less sense of justice than men, are overwhelmed by jealousy and shame, are vain, are unable to submit to life's requirements, and have made no contribution to civilisation"* (Chodorow 1978, p.143).

Pervin (1989, p.165) observes that Freud perceives the traits of vanity, sensitivity, submissiveness and dependence on others as distinctly rooted in the feminine. He also uses difference to highlight superiority and inferiority rather than just difference. What is obvious upon analysing Freud's work is the language he uses to show his views. He believes that the woman *is* inferior not that she *thinks* she is.

*"Freud was only sometimes describing how women develop in a patriarchal society. At other times, he was simply making unsupported assertions which should be taken as no more than that or as statements about how women (and men) should be."* (Chodorow 1978, p.142)

De Beauvoir (1949, p.70) states that Freud simply modified his theory of male psychological development to include women. A view supported by Firestone (1979, p.56) who suggests that Freud analyses the female only as 'negative male'. His books on *A case of hysteria, three essays on sexuality and other works* (1905); *Two case histories 'Little Hans' and the 'rat man'* (1909); *An infantile neurosis and other works* (1919), culminating in his seminal work on women, *Female Sexuality* (1931b) highlight the disconnection and disinterest

between psychoanalysis and the female. The basis for this was in the biological theory that *‘anatomy is destiny’* which opened up the gendered debate on biology vs cultural/social theories.

### **Anatomy is Destiny**

Freud’s (1925, p. 246) *‘anatomy is destiny’* belief was that gender differences, masculinity and femininity, were the product of biological sexual maturation and not of social construction, where social environment teaches children to exhibit gendered attributes. If boys and girls go through their ‘gender specific’ sexual development normally they will display the allotted masculine or feminine traits. The child must go through and resolve their specific oedipal complexes; boys facing the castration complex and girls overcoming their own version of the castration complex, penis envy. This theory has been critiqued as being too rigid. Chodorow (1978) rightly argued against this biological explanation. She maintained that genitalia alone do not teach children about their gender differences. Relational and societal factors must also be accounted for. This was supported by Horney (Pervin 1989, p.150) whose views also had a social, interpersonal emphasis. She also rejected Freud’s biological standpoint believing that his statements concerning women did not take into account their cultural differences. Pervin (1989, p.150) concurred, noting that most of Freud’s direct analytic observations were limited to upper and middle class patients. Freud’s class blindness is apparent in Brody’s (1970) investigation into his case studies, noting that all of Freud’s cases were from upper and middle class. Moreover he explains that the cost of therapy would have been a factor in Freud’s lack of dealing with lower class patients (1970, p.11). While this goes against Freud’s belief that his biological theories on development were supposedly class inclusive, irregardless of class they began with the pre-Oedipal stage.

## The Pre-Oedipal Stage

The pre-Oedipal stage, usually from the ages of 0 – 3 years is what Freud believed to be the period of platonic love between the child and their parents. The child's libido<sup>4</sup>, their psychic energy and driving force for all behaviour, focused on themselves<sup>5</sup> with the oral stage, through feeding; and the anal stage, through the retaining and expelling of faeces. His belief that both male and female children journey through the pre-oedipal stage in the same masculine manner, describing them as '*Polymorphously perverse*'<sup>6</sup> changed to assume that the girl's pre-oedipal attachment to mother was of a longer duration and developed at a later age to boys. The girl's pre-oedipal relationship with her mother would determine her oedipal attachment to her father and to men in the future. Chodorow (1978, p.77) gives this period a more relational perspective. She reveals that the child's relation to its mother within this time is vital in building its sense of self, its later object-relationships and its feelings about mother and about women in general. She disagreed with Freud's claim that both sexes have only one gender, the phallus, noted in the phallic stage<sup>7</sup>, the stage after the oral and anal stages; but are on polar opposites; either possessing a phallus or are castrated. She rejected his view that both sexes go through this period in the same psychological manner, highlighting how he neglected the gendered differences of pre-oedipal attachment. Her revelation that the mother treats each sex as different is important. Mother-daughter pre-oedipal is one of identification, individuation and dependence. The narcissistically defined self says "I am you and you are me" (Chodorow 1978, p.100). Primary

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<sup>4</sup> Over time this term has become more sexualised and intimates at a sexual energy rather than a more inclusive psychic one

<sup>5</sup> The child is libidinally narcissistic, concentrating its entire libido on itself.

<sup>6</sup> The child has no cultural inhibitions that prevent their sexual drive from using any number of objects as a source of pleasure, without shame, guilt or disgust.

<sup>7</sup> The phallic stage is the stage of development where the libido focuses on the genital area.

identification<sup>8</sup> and symbiosis here tends to be stronger while for boys it is of *differentiation* and masculine oppositeness, ‘as a definite other’ (Chodorow 1978, p. 105). This relational aspect stood in contrast to Freud’s biological perspective. To understand what this perspective was for girls, one must compare it to the theory for boys.

### **The Male Oedipus Complex**

To Freud, the boy’s pre-oedipal love for his mother<sup>9</sup> becomes sexual around the age of three to six. He now sees his father as an aggressive rival for his mother’s affections and wishes to replace and murder him. This sexual attraction to mother alters only when he realises anatomical differences in males and females by witnessing the differences from mother and sisters and comparing to that of himself and father. Rather than seeing these differences as biological changes, he hypothesises that *all* girls, mother included, have been castrated, and he fears that father will castrate *him* because of the rivalry for mother’s love. This castration anxiety causes a conflict within the boy between his self-love; his narcissistic interest in his penis, and his love for his mother. The choice between penis and mother almost always sides with the penis, leading him to deny and repress his sexual love for mother with these feelings re-attached to another woman in adulthood, thereby ending the Oedipus complex. The reward for giving up mother and avoiding penis castration is identification with father. The boy goes from fearing him to wanting to become him, mimicking his actions and behaviour, as well as identifying with his masculine superiority and his gender roles regarding females<sup>10</sup>. This was criticised by Mitchell (1974, p.54)

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<sup>8</sup> A sense of ‘one-ness’

<sup>9</sup> This could also be care-giver or nanny.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent example of the Oedipal complex is ‘The analysis of a five-year old boy’ Freud, S. (1909) *Two case histories: ‘Little Hans’ and the ‘rat man’*. Vol. X. Vintage. London, UK.

who proposed that Freud only looked at Oedipality through the lens of the active little boy who believes the world to be male, and castrated or not. This is apparent in his case studies of 'Little Hans', 'The Rat Man' (1909) and 'The Wolf man' (1919), neglecting to think that the girl must believe the world to be female. This was especially obvious in the 'Dora' case (1905).

### **The Dora Case**

One of Freud's most important papers dealing with female psychological development, The 'Dora' Case, emphasises his complete lack of understanding the female sex. The case showed a fine example of the female Oedipus complex observed from a male perspective and marred by Freud's diagnosis of hysteria and his subsequent interpretation of her bisexuality and her inability to be aroused by an older man's advances. It depicts a deplorable picture of a young woman not being listened to and being pigeon-holed into the 'vain, dependent' picture of women which Freud has portrayed. It is easy to agree with Millet's (Putnam Tong 1998, p.137) more realistic diagnosis of Dora's 'hysteria' in that she was justifiably angered by both her father's adultery and Herr K's sexual harassment.

### **Female Oedipus Complex**

de Groot (2000, p.63) remarked that the female Oedipal stage explains the distinctions between the psychological mind-frames of both women and men. The distinctive difference for females going through the Oedipus Complex is that the child's love object must change gender to father. Freud's view that all women are inherently bisexual as their first love-object is mother was questioned by Chodorow (1978, p.95) who hypothesised that all children are matrisexual. This was supported by Dorothy Dinnerstein (1987, p.28) who proposed that for girls and boys, a woman is the first human centre of bodily

comfort, pleasure, and of social intercourse. For Freud, it was ‘Penis Envy’ that led the girl to hate her mother and turn to her father:

*“It was a surprise to learn from analyses that girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being thus at a disadvantage.”* (Freud 1936, p.124)

### **Penis Envy**

Freud theorised that at the age of three her discovery that she does not have a penis leads the child to automatically think that she has been castrated<sup>11</sup> and her clitoris is inferior to the boy’s superior model (Horney 1939, p.102). While the sight of sex differences gives boys the *fear* of castration, for girls, this fear has become true and they feel ill-treated. They develop disdain for mother who is penis-less and blame her for their own apparent lack of appendage. Freud believed that the female child’s discovery that she is castrated is a pivotal point in her growth which can lead to three possible developmental lines; that she represses her sexual drives, becoming sexually inhibited, or develops neuroses; that she embraces the ‘masculinity complex’ (Freud 1931b, p.4) fantasising that she is a man with a penis<sup>12</sup>; or to a normal femininity, in which she takes her father as object choice and thus arrives at the Oedipus Complex.

Hence the child turns to the father, with the wish for the penis being transposed into a wish for a baby fulfilling the aim of the most feminine wish<sup>13</sup>, and to have father’s baby, especially if the baby is a boy who brings the ‘longed for penis’ with him. This hypothesis is rejected by Chodorow (Putnam Tong 1998,

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<sup>11</sup> This lack of penis is seen as a wound to their self-esteem, ‘a narcissistic wound’. Chodorow, N. (1978) p. 94

<sup>12</sup> This may manifest in a homosexual object-choice.

<sup>13</sup> As thought by Freud

p.14) who believed that penis envy grew out of Freud's own blindness, disrespect for women and misogynistic attitude.

While Freud believed the attachment to mother ends in hate, leading girls to change love-object to father, Deutsch thought that penis envy was *secondary* to bitterness against the mother. She believed feminine passivity stems not from penis envy but from her lack of an organ which can fulfil her active and aggressive sexual needs (Sayers 1991, p.64). The supposed patriarchal infallibility of the penis envy theory, that it is absolute and non negotiable, meant that feminists found it difficult to debate the penis envy theory. Torok (2000, p.80) correctly highlighted that women's attempts to relinquish penis envy are doomed to an impasse. To argue penis envy is to feed into the perspective. All options are covered. Either woman is envious, sexually inhibited, neurotic or in denial. Firestone's (1979, p.48) accurate admission that; 'Freudianism is so charged, so impossible to repudiate because Freud grasped the crucial problem of modern life: sexuality', gives us a much better idea of how to view penis envy as a metaphor for the envy of male privilege and power. She notes (1979, p. 51) that the Oedipus stage must be understood in *terms of power*. Fiskin (2010) believed this to mean that power here is a social relation and not a trait of the individual psyche which thus weakened the biological inflexibility of Freud's theory.

Horney (Sayers 1991, p. 94) felt penis envy was a consequence of a male bias in psychoanalysis, or 'masculine narcissism'. She noted that *all* problems within male-female relationships could be explained through penis envy and highlighted the omission of the neurotic man (Horney 1939, p.106). Women's feelings of inferiority began, not in their realisation of their castration and disappointed identification with their father, but in their awareness of their social subordination and innate identification with their mother. Kate Millet

(Putnam Tong 1998, p.136) believed it to be ‘a transparent instance of male egocentrism’ and that it turned the beauty of child-birth into ‘nothing more than a hunt for a male organ’. Rather than envy, Torok (2000, p.83) believes it is an *idealisation* of the penis.

For boys, the castration complex ends his Oedipus complex; for girls penis envy begins her Oedipus stage. She uses this phase as a place of refuge away from mother and the lack of penis and remains here for some time as the fear of castration is not there to motivate her from leaving it. This in turn means the super-ego – part of Freud’s model of the psyche which holds one’s conscience and guilt suffers. Klein (Likierman 2001, p.68) disputed this theory, noting that the Oedipus complex does not suddenly appear at an advanced stage of development but instead, it develops gradually from an earlier pre-genital<sup>14</sup> phase of development.

*“What we need to understand is why a girl, but not a boy, seems to be looking for an excuse to ‘drop’ her mother. We also have to understand why the discovery that she does not have a penis is such a trauma to a girl in the first place”.*  
(Chodorow 1978, p. 120)

### **Reconnecting the Female and the Mother**

Chodorow highlights that while the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship does turn the child towards her father, she does not, as Freud suggests, abandon mother completely. The child’s intense, ambivalent relationship with her omnipotent mother turns her to see her father as a symbol of freedom that can help her to create space between herself and mother. The rejection of her mother is a defence against primary identification, to put boundaries in place between herself and mother by projecting what is bad in their relationship onto mother and retaining the good bits for herself. This goes against Freud’s view that

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<sup>14</sup> The oral and anal phases of development.

daughter's 'turn' because of mother's lack of penis and of penis envy which Chodorow defines as;

*"A girl wants it for the powers which it symbolises and the freedom it promises from her previous sense of dependence and not because it is inherently and obviously better to be masculine. Penis envy is the symbolic expression of another desire. Women do not wish to become men, but want to detach themselves from the mother and become completer, autonomous women."* (Chodorow 1978, p.123).

She analyses that Freud sees the 'turn' rooted in hatred for the mother and not in love. The girl notices that mother prefers to be in the company of penises so therefore wants a penis to win her love. The hostility of the turn is an attack and an expression of love for her. Chodorow suggests that turning to the father is not detrimental to the relationship with the mother and that both relationships grow. The girl develops her bond with her father alongside the relationship to her mother. 'A girl never gives up her mother as an internal or external love object, even if she does become heterosexual' (Chodorow 1978, p.127). Father does not have enough of a role to break the maternal attachment, showing that the 'turn' is not unconditional and the child moves from attachment to one parent to another and back again. This shows the difference in the resolution between the sexes in the Oedipus complex. In boys, Freud believed that their resolution was definite, that the castration complex obliterates the sexual love for the mother as the oedipal love for mother threatens the boy's ego and masculinity. As the girl is already 'castrated' this fear does not end her sexual fantasy of being with father and highlights the difference in how each gender resolves this stage. For girls, it is resolved over a longer period of time in adolescence when they seek out their individuation and their independence, though still continuing their identification attachments. They continue to experience the previous merging with mother, a theory supported by Deutsch (Sayers 1991, p. 62).

Chodorow (1978, p.120) questions why, if as Freud suggests, the Oedipus complex is so similar to both genders, the boy does not give up women as his love objects as well, once he discovers his mother’s lack of penis?

## **Conclusion**

Putnam Tong (1998, p.131) notes that ‘Psychoanalytic feminists recommend that we work toward a more androgynous society in which the full human person is a blend of positive feminine and positive masculine traits’ and that gender feminists agree that women should retain their femininity and men should renounce the more extreme forms of masculinity. This is supported by Dinnerstein (1987, p. 11) who uses the term ‘liberty’ to reject what is oppressive and maiming in our male-female arrangements and to restructure them again.

This paper has allowed this author to investigate how relational and societal factors enhance the biological theory of gender difference. It has provided the opportunity to consider how Freud’s theories were perceived by women and feminists through the pre-Oedipal, male and female Oedipal complexes, showing how they have been perceived, altered and accepted. While there is a plethora of criticism in how he viewed women and their psychological development, his accomplishments in the field of psychoanalysis, over one hundred years ago, must be noted. If we are able to look at Freud’s theories as foundations on which we can evaluate and develop into a more inclusive and developmental hypothesis then we are able to accept both its limitations and its potential. From once looking at the world through male eyes, we are now able to connect the female and the mother into a discipline which is now more inclusive and open. Looking at psychoanalysis through a feminist lens allows us to permeate the gaps. From investigating his case studies and his treatment of women we can learn from his mistakes and move forward. We can follow in the

steps of Horney, Deutsch and Chodorow modifying and enhancing how psychoanalysis can explain and improve women's psychological development. With this we can celebrate the differences that gender plays in psychodynamic theory.

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