

A PLEA FOR RECONSIDERATION OF PENIS ENVY: SIGMUND FREUD A FEMINIST IN HIS TIME

Dare I offer this recommendation at the time of the Me Too Movement in our history? It has been over a century since Freud posited the notion of penis envy. Many female psychoanalysts rose in reaction, responding to his ideas as misogynistic. However, some addressed its value in trying to understand how the male gender, and member, is accorded a position of status and power.

Over the last few years, scores of women have reported long standing sexual abuse by men in powerful positions. Sexual manipulation and abuse of women is not new. But this loud outcry, and implication for many of these predators, is. Why were these women complicit and silent for years and, some, for decades? The victims have talked about status, position and power saying they were coerced and overpowered and warned they would be humiliated, suffer and

not succeed, unless they complied and remained silent.

My hypothesis is those fears defensively overlay much deeper fears of rejection and abandonment related to their own idiosyncratic, and conflicted attachment to, and separation from, mother. The unconscious conflicts in the infant mother dyad, embedded in the vulnerable female's character through complex gender identification, leave her highly susceptible at puberty when there is pressing demand for sexual maturation, attachment, dependency and guidance toward independence.

I'd like to revisit Freud's notion of penis envy in relation to this phenomena and more deeply explore how he felt women were without something vital. Freud's ideas of, "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" and "anatomy is destiny", invite us to begin there and to employ all we know about how our hearts and minds fantastically and imaginatively symbolize meaning.

My hypothesis is that females are weakened in a crucial way, albeit unconsciously, particularly during the transforming phase of pubertal sexual development. How disruptive, and abrupt, the separation from the maternal object, is, during this time, as they choose a new male love object. At the same time, the male child though, too, experiencing a necessary distancing and separation from mother, remains deeply connected to the mother figure through choosing a female object for himself. Also, the female is expected to choose a new, additional site, of sexual pleasure, the vaginal orifice.

My hypothesis, of course, does not exclude how young females are primed to be looked at, admired and prized, for their sensual, and eventually, their sexual appeal. That coupled with being trained to please, and to serve and accommodate, is culturally the external pressure contributing to this inherent internal unconscious vulnerability.

One of the most compelling, and complex, arguments concerning Freud's notion of penis envy has been that of Clara Thompson. (Thompson C. 1943 Journal of Psychiatry V 6 Issue 2 pp 123-125) Rather than focusing on the literal penis/ vagina anatomical difference, she was the one who formulated that what women really envy is male status and power. Strangely, her view was not seen as valid as other's views. It is certainly conceivable that her view was rejected by the male led, and dominated, psychoanalytic profession who, more rigid than Freud, were taking Freud's ideas and transforming them into literal bedrock because of their own cultural narcissism. Also, females did not want to contemplate the idea that they were weaker than men. This became a cultural and societal response and, consequently, the complexity of male power over female impotence has not been fully understood.

I don't think that Freud intended the concept of penis envy to be understood as literal and concrete. This limited idea is not in keeping with Freud's creative and expansive mind. One of the problems, I see, is that the negative reaction to the idea of a woman envying a man's penis, an organ she didn't and could not have, was so extreme, intense and seemingly irrefutable that many alternate views were silenced. The more in-depth conversation stopped. I experience this reaction, even now, as I discuss these ideas with colleagues. We, as psychoanalysts, must attempt to fully understand the unconscious elements of a woman's response to male status and power. A response that has restricted women's development.

In this highly significant era of female development and equality psychoanalysts could be responsible for making both psychological and cultural sense of men's societal domination of women using the complexity of unconscious

variables that Freud was attempting to address. Lately, the focus has been on these bad men rather than the larger concern of how this has been allowed to happen for so long.

In 1933, Freud wrote, “If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as *idée fixe*, I am of course defenseless”. Freud’s response, I think, invites other’s ideas rather than being a defensive one and presents a challenge to discuss and attempt to understand the complexity of this issue.

Can women rid themselves of their defensive response if we have wombs and breasts and you don’t? This concrete, and child-like, reaction only leaves them attached to an archaic, and misunderstood, awareness of a recognized cultural institution of female domination by men. And, I think, stuck in an inevitable, unending and conflicted attachment to Freud, and all men, in a battle for power and equality.

Clara Thompson was an expansive thinker. She was a teacher, a clinician and an organizational leader. She was not, in a pretentious way, attached to her ideas. She saw them not as “fixed” theories but as ideas to contribute to the ongoing discussion. She objected to any reactionary, and limited, responses to Freud’s idea.

An initial retaliatory response came from another female psychoanalyst, Karen Horney. She was a leading voice saying men had womb and breast envy. However, a close reading of the progression of Horney’s work suggests she was attempting to deepen the conversation by understanding more about why women were really overvaluing men.

Simone de Beauvoir objected to Freud’s formulation but was more forward thinking, saying, “Even if the girl does not envy the penis, she sees that it gains something for the boy. Women

raised and educated exactly like men would work under the same conditions and for the same salaries". (de-Beauvoir S. 1949 *The Second Sex*). Unfortunately, she wrote about women transcending this one down position rather than joining the deeper conversation specifically addressing the unconscious aspects of women accepting their demeaned position. An entire movement adopted these reactions debunking anything valuable in Freud's ideas about the female/child/adult feeling envy for the male/child/adult's phallus and all its complex unconscious vicissitudes and meanings.

It became me, against you, disallowing any beneficial discussion. It is a perfect example of the baby being thrown out with the bathwater. Thus, we have victims who've been silenced, in the face of abuse, by their own unresolved unconscious conflicts.

"Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" Freud (1905) is

one of Freud's most controversial cases and became a lightning rod for Freud's critics. A further look into Dora's case is enlightening in understanding female development. Freud diagnosed Dora with Hysteria. Her most important manifest symptom was Aphonia, the loss of her voice. Freud was accused of using her to support his dream theory as other important adults in her life, had, for sexual gratification. Freud treated her mainly through the analysis of two dreams. What is not discussed is his attempt to help this young woman, overwhelmed by adult's sexual advances and her own blossoming sexuality, recognize and experience her own sexual responses and reactions rather than repressing them and becoming symptomatic. Her disgust was a "reversal of affect" of pleasure joined by a "displacement" of sensations from her genitals up to her throat. Her defense against the pleasurable feeling of a man's erect penis against her body resulted in hysterical symptoms. Freud was not insinuating that Dora

should yield to Herr K but that their encounter should generate some measure of sexual arousal and that her defensive response was a symptom of her hysteria.

Dora's case, in the minds of critics, was blatant in its descriptions of sexual response. What followed, and was more explicit, was his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. In this groundbreaking paper, Freud explored the female's challenges in sexual development, further. "When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice, it implies that she has adopted a new leading zone for the purpose of her later sexual activity. A man, on the other hand, retains his leading zone unchanged from childhood. The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone, in this way, together with the wave of repression at puberty, which, as it were, puts aside their childish masculinity, are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially to

hysteria. These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity". (Freud S. 1905 SE Vol VII p 123)

A female's gender development is linked with the closeness to, and identification with, her mother. The male child is valued, more, as an object and becomes a source of his mother's own Oedipal gratification. Consequently, he has a greater ability to separate as he carries with him the sense of a valued and loved object. "The female solves her conundrum by translating her envy of the male privilege into heterosexual desire. A girl's desire for men can be said to result from her stronger desire for her mother". (Chodorow N. 1978 The Reproduction of Mothering). I see this stronger desire as a result of having to give up the mother, prematurely, leading to unconscious difficulties with separation, independence and attachment.

How do we understand the male object's conundrum? How do we make sense of his participation in this complexity of

domination and power over women? He comes by it rightly. Unlike the female, the pubescent boy retains his leading erotogenic zone and when he is with a female object, whom he unconsciously identifies as his original maternal object, he never fully loses his mother. His penis maintains a so-called “bridge”, into the maternal object, along with his gratification of suckling at the maternal breast. On the one hand, this gives the male great strength and power and ensures, unconsciously, that he is the oedipal victor over his father and preferred, as a male child, by mother. On the other hand, it is anxiety provoking, shaming, humiliating and terrifying as he fears castration from the paternal object and internalizes intense rage and tremendous fear of loss. The frequent looking for an unambivalent female object, often resulting in the pursuit of women, younger than he, can be a result. Also, the phenomena of some men having great difficulty feeling sexually attracted to the women with whom

they are in love or loving the women to whom they are sexually attracted. These unconscious conflicts can lead to chronic dissatisfaction in their romantic relationships and deeply unresolved attachment difficulties.

This paper asks us to reconsider Freud's concept of penis envy and address both feminine and masculine development in a less defensive way. Rather than women borrowing male confidence, in leaning on men, they have an opportunity to rediscover confidence in themselves. The Me Too movement, rather than simply getting rid of sexual predators and deviants, must consider why women remained silent for decades and centuries. Freud was not intending to be literal and concrete in his investigations. He was positing that the pubertal transformation, and separation from the maternal object, may ultimately leave a woman at a disadvantage. Her having to extend her affection, now, to a different love object

and give up her original object choice, may weaken her and leave her vulnerable to trying to borrow male confidence rather than finding it within herself. Freud's idea about the difference in how men and women love is apt in this context. He posited that a man's love for a woman is pure whereas a woman falls in love with a man's love for her. This results in women being seduced by their need for admiration despite the pain of abuse.

There is no scientific evidence that a woman wants a penis.

There is demonstrable evidence, and it is scientifically viable, that women envy male power and dominance.

Sigmund Freud was a scientist, an anthropologist and a psychoanalyst. Unfortunately, his zealous male followers became more doctrinaire than he.

Clara Thompson's ideas were more dissonant and objectionable than Freud's were. Her ideas related to an entire

cultural and social world being challenged.

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