

The Psychoanalytic Concept of Feminine Passivity: A Comparative Study of Psychoanalytic and Feminist Views

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THE AIM of this paper is to examine the psychoanalytic concept of feminine passivity as described by Freud and to review challenges of this concept by feminists and other psychoanalysts. The concept of feminine passivity is, as will be demonstrated later in this paper, dependent upon two other psychoanalytic concepts related to women: (1) penis envy and (2) that the clitoris is an inadequate and immature sexual organ. All three of these concepts are seriously questioned by feminists and some psychoanalytic writers. The criticisms raised by feminist writers have created within the women's movement, and even among some mental health workers, the feeling that psychiatric treatment of women is dangerous and repressive rather than helpful and liberating.^{1,2} The criticisms raised make it clear that a new look must be taken if we are to more accurately understand the psychology of women.

FREUDIAN VIEW OF FEMININE PASSIVITY

Freud's 1933 lecture entitled "Femininity" begins, "When you say masculine, you usually mean 'active,' and when you say feminine, you usually mean 'passive.'"³ In support of these assertions, Freud gives examples of a biologic nature, such as the passivity of the ovum and the activity of the sperm, and the male's seizing hold of and actively penetrating the female who is passively receptive in the sexual act. He adds, "Even in the sphere of human sexual life, you soon see how inadequate it is to make masculine behavior coincide with activity and feminine with passivity. The further you go from the narrow sexual sphere, the more obvious will the 'error of superimposition' become."³ Two examples of this error are given by the activity of the mother towards her child and the large amount of passive adaptability necessary in men. It is because of this merging of active and passive traits in the psychology of each human being that Freud warns against equating these terms with masculine and feminine. Yet, he then concludes, but rather hesitantly, "It is perhaps the case that in a woman, on the basis of her share in the sexual function, a preference for passive behavior and passive

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aims is carried over into her life to a greater or lesser extent, in proportion to the limits within which her sexual life thus serves as a model."³ The additional factor of social customs seems to puzzle Freud; he feels that part of woman's passive stance and the suppression of her aggressiveness is forced upon her by the culture. He thus acknowledges this factor of the cultural influence on women, but explains that his main interest is in the intrapsychic factors. Therefore, his description of the development of passivity in the female child is in intrapsychic and not cultural terms.

One of his main aims in formulating this theory of feminine passivity was to attempt to explain the phenomenon of the little girl turning her libido away from her mother to her father during the Oedipal period. In developing this theory, Freud found causes in penis envy and the inadequacy of the clitoris:

The little girl, prior to her discovery that she has no penis, has lived in a masculine way, has been able to get pleasure by the excitation of her clitoris and has brought this activity into relation with her sexual wishes directed towards her mother, which are often active ones; now, owing to the influence of her penis-envy, she loses her enjoyment in her phallic sexuality. Her self-love is mortified by the comparison with the boy's far superior equipment, and in consequence she renounces her masturbatory satisfaction from her clitoris, repudiates her love for her mother, and at the same time not infrequently represses a good part of her sexual trends in general. Along with the abandonment of clitoral masturbation, a certain amount of activity is renounced. Passivity now has the upper hand, and the girl's turning to her father is accomplished principally with the help of passive instinctual impulses.³

Freud seems to be saying that it is mainly through the girl's disappointment with her clitoris in comparison to the penis and through the consequent partial repression of her sexual impulses that she becomes passive and is thereby propelled toward her father and away from her mother.

In the same year Freud wrote these ideas (1933), Jeanne Lample-DeGroot put forth her theory of feminine passivity. She agrees with Freud that the girl, upon entering the Oedipal period, must inhibit some of her active libidinal impulses in order to change her love object from her mother to her father and that the inhibition is a result of feeling that the clitoris is inferior to the penis.

The severe narcissistic insults which the little girl feels because of her genital inferiority, and the coincidental appearance of resentment toward her mother, who is made responsible for this inferiority, are the cause of the girl's surrender of active love and acceptance of the passive role. She must permit herself to be loved in order to augment her injured self-love. She gradually begins to turn her passively directed love wishes from her mother to her father. This complete change of object is accomplished with the aid of increased enmity toward the mother; hatred and rage complete the process of turning away from the first love object.⁴

Lample-DeGroot explains that these passive libidinal strivings must be accompanied by some active libidinal strivings. She gives some examples of both active and passive object-directed strivings. With purely feminine or passive love, the woman is not able to love but lets herself be loved. In this situation, without what she calls masculine or active object love, caring for children is burdensome for the woman. In the normal woman, active libidinal strivings have their outlet in being the active mother. The other extreme, says Lample-DeGroot, is the woman who is very maternal and so devoted to her children that she has a poor relationship with her husband and a poor sexual adjustment.

In 1944, Helene Deutsch elaborated on Freud's idea of feminine passivity in her book entitled *The Psychology of Women*. While she takes several of his points to task, she begins as Freud did with the belief that the passive role of women is very clear in the sexual act. She says, "The masculine organ is made for active penetration, the feminine for passive reception."⁵ She wonders to what extent this biologic situation expresses itself in the total psychologic picture of the feminine personality.

Deutsch differs from Freud in that she delineates the areas of feminine activity and not just the areas of passivity. She feels that many active tendencies can and should accompany this passivity.⁶ She emphasizes that while the active and aggressive forces of the girl are subjected to inhibition, the inhibition is only partial and many active forces are preserved as positive ingredients of feminine mental life.⁵ It is only when the woman's activity comes into conflict with the passivity that the woman is abnormally active or has what she calls a masculinity complex. Deutsch sees the woman's normal activity evolving out of her urge to master reality, her identification with the active mother, and her participation in active games. She feels the girl's normal activity should also come from her identification with her father, but in such a way that the fact that she is not a man does not give her any inferiority feelings. However, this identification with the father, which occurs especially in puberty as a part of normal development, can lead to the masculinity complex in which the woman uses activity as a mechanism of defense against the fear of passivity and of the reproductive functions.⁴

Deutsch attempts to clarify another point, as well as this one, about normal activity in women. She explains that passivity does not mean apathy or lack of sexual energy, but that energy is manifesting itself in the passivity. This statement seems to obscure an already confusing area; however, it may convey Deutsch's dissatisfaction with so much emphasis on feminine passivity. Freud's choice of the word *passive* is distressing because it does indeed mean a lack of energy or will, while the word *active* has a more positive meaning of having energy and liveliness.⁷

Deutsch's aim in developing the concept of feminine passivity seems to be identical to Freud's—that is, to explain what aids the girl in turning her libido from her mother to her father during the Oedipal period. She differs from Freud in explaining the means by which the girl accomplishes her passive stance. Instead of seeing penis envy as the central reason for the change, Deutsch stresses the little girl's lack of an adequate outlet for her active-aggressive instincts during the clitoral or phallic phase. Because of this inadequacy of the clitoris to gratify the active and aggressive instinctual impulses, those impulses which need an active organ are consequently given up. If the girl then follows a line of normal feminine development, the inhibited activity undergoes a turn toward passivity, and the active clitoris is eventually replaced by the passive-receptive vagina at the time of sexual intercourse. The girl is thus left for a period of time, Deutsch feels, without a functioning sexual organ, and it is by this explanation primarily, and only secondarily the presence of penis envy, that Deutsch understands the girl's forfeiting her active sexual impulses and turning toward a passive stance.

FEMINIST VIEWS OF FEMININE PASSIVITY

Several recent feminist authors have included in their writings a section on Freud's theories on women. Among the feminist writers reviewed in this paper, there is agreement that Freud's works on the psychology of women have served to compound the social suppression of women in our culture rather than alleviate it. This feeling that women have been suppressed and misunderstood by Freud, and thereby psychoanalysis in general, seems to be gaining widespread acceptance in the women's liberation movement. Freud appears to be the main target for the feminist criticism, more recent psychoanalytic theorists being generally ignored.

One of the first of the recent feminist writers, Simone de Beauvoir, understands Freud to say that women are passive biologically and therefore psychologically.⁸ She rejects this explanation completely and points to society as the major imposer of passivity on women. She believes Freud is applying the term passive not only to the girl's psychosexual development, but to her motor-muscular and intellectual development as well. She disagrees with Freud and stresses the importance of allowing girls to climb trees, fight with companions, compete with peers, participate in a variety of adventuresome games, be curious, and take initiative in order to gain a sense of mastery of the environment. If the culture forces girls to miss out on these activities, then they will become passive and dependent.

In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote that, in regard to women, Freud betrayed his goal of freeing energies by equating passive with feminine and active with masculine.⁹ Friedan felt that both Freud and Deutsch were applying the term feminine passivity to spheres of life beyond the sexual one. Her conclusion from their writings was that in order to achieve normal femininity, the woman had to renounce all active goals of her own, all of her own originality, and identify and fulfill herself through the activities and goals of her husband. However, as mentioned earlier, Deutsch had clarified this point about normal activity by saying that women should be active in many areas and that even though the psychoanalytic nomenclature would call this activity "masculine," it would in fact be normal for women.

Kate Millett¹⁰ and Shulamith Firestone¹¹ applaud Freud's goal to cure frigidity in women, but they feel that instead of his theories liberating women, they helped to produce the conservative trends in America between 1930 and 1960 which resulted in a deterioration in the economic and educational status of women. In regard to Freud's concept of feminine passivity, Millett questions Freud's use of the now inaccurate biological assumption that the ovum is passive and the sperm is active. In regard to Freud's idea that the woman is passive in the sexual act, Millett says, "The notion that the female's role in coitus is passive and therefore masochistic, its only delight in enduring pain, while a very revealing projection of masculine attitude toward the female situation in intercourse, is unlikely to be the source of further wisdom."¹⁰ Besides viewing Freud's biologic assumptions as invalid and unconvincing, Millett also feels Freud failed to "separate two radically different phenomena, female biology and feminine status. By inferring the latter is as much, or nearly as much, the product of nature as the former, and somehow inevitable, rather than the product of a social situation, he seems eager to con-

vince us that what a man's world has made of woman is only what nature had made of her first."¹⁰

Germaine Greer feels that the cultural pressures on a woman and not normal development produce a passive and ineffectual woman, unable to live and work with her strengths.¹² These cultural pressures make the girl accept such social concepts of femininity as cleanliness, neatness, conformity, inactivity, quietness, goodness, and mental apathy, when really the girl would like to be active, athletic, vigorous, a tomboy, and a thinker. The psychoanalytic concept of feminine passivity, Greer feels, is simply supporting a cultural view which keeps women oppressed and inactive. Greer interprets Deutsch's definition of feminine passivity to mean that a normal woman should be absolutely dependent on a man through whom her total significance is realized. (Actually, the example Greer uses from Deutsch to reach this conclusion is not Deutsch's description of a normal woman but of one who needs to overestimate the man and one who is in danger of masochistic subjection and of the loss of her own personality.) Greer also feels that Freud's understanding of feminine passivity is derived from an invalid view of a woman as a castrated man, a being feeling deprived and inadequate from the start, who attempts to compensate for her inadequate feelings by having a child.

Several valid points are raised by these feminist writers. First is the idea that passivity in women has more extensive cultural derivatives than Freud acknowledged and that the cultural pressures on girls do push them towards a passive stance in many areas. The second point is that Freud's view of girls as imperfect boys left an impression of the girl as inadequate, defective, and of less value than the boy. Freud, Lample-DeGroot, and Deutsch did not evolve theories describing the forces which aid the girl in developing feelings of adequacy, value, and uniqueness about her female sexuality and her femininity. The third point is that female sexual impulses should not be seen as passive in terms of either their reproductive or their pleasurable functions.

OTHER PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEWS ON FEMININE PASSIVITY

The psychoanalytic theorists considered in this section bring Freud to task on three issues. First, a woman's lack of self-esteem or her sense of inferiority may be due in large part to a culture in which men are more valued than women. Second, Freud's theory of the girl's clitoris as inadequate and immature may be invalid as suggested by recent research on female sexuality. Third, Freud's view of the girl's development of heterosexual feelings, and her wish to have a baby as secondary to a sense of being anatomically defective, is brought into question.

As early as 1926, seven years before Freud's lecture on "Femininity" was written, Karen Horney¹³ was challenging not the validity of, but the emphasis which Freud placed on the concept of penis envy in the girl's development and his neglect of how the girl's positive feelings about her part in reproduction develop. Horney felt that Freud was groping for an answer to the puzzle of why the girl turns her love from the homosexual to the heterosexual object and that he had inappropriately used his well-documented theory of penis envy as a major explanation for this puzzle. Horney is amazed at Freud's ignorance of the girl's positive identification with her mother's reproductive activities and remarks that

“the present analytical picture of feminine development differs in no case by a hair’s breadth from the typical idea that the boy has of the girl.”¹³

Two decades later, Horney received some support from Clara Thompson. Thompson makes the additional point that the culture denies that the sexual life of the woman is as important or as urgent as the sexual life of the man. The perception of passivity and inferiority as basic characteristics of a woman’s sexual drive is invalid and, instead, these characteristics are forced upon her by a culture in which her sexual drive is inhibited.¹⁴

Jumping about three decades ahead to 1973, Mary Jane Sherfey¹⁵ is questioning the theory of normal inhibition or passivity of the woman’s sexual drive. She refers to Masters and Johnson’s findings of the female’s multiple orgasmic potential and her great intensity and duration of sexual excitement. This suggests little of a passive or inhibited nature in the female’s sexual response. In addition, this finding makes the girl’s development of heterosexual libidinal strivings difficult to attribute to her disappointment with her clitoris since Masters and Johnson’s studies suggest that at least for the adult woman the clitoris is not disappointing. In addition, Sherfey questions Freud’s idea of the clitoris as the immature sexual organ and the vagina as the mature sexual organ. She quotes Masters and Johnson’s very important finding that the female sexual orgasm is physiologically the same whether it results from masturbation or intercourse. It seems, therefore, that it is *not* the case that the vagina replaces the clitoris during female maturation, but that the vagina, with the onset of intercourse, acts in unison with the clitoris to produce the identical orgasm.

Marjorie Barnett gives some additional information on the girl’s orgasmic potential.¹⁶ She finds that orgasms occur very early in the female child, earlier, in fact, than they do in the male child. This finding makes doubtful Deutsch’s idea that the girl is disappointed with her clitoris for its inability to be an adequate outlet for sexual tensions. Taking this into account then, it is difficult to conclude that the girl becomes passive due to disappointment with her clitoris. The girl’s frustration with her sexual equipment may instead occur in consequence of the realization that she cannot satisfy her mother sexually, and thus she must turn to her father with her sexual strivings.

Robert Stoller¹⁷ writes that penis envy and the inadequacy of the clitoris are two concepts which have been overemphasized in explaining how the girl develops a feminine identification and how she makes the transition from homosexual to heterosexual objects. He feels that the girl develops her femininity not so much through the wish to replace the missing penis by having a baby, as through the pre-Oedipal period of relatively conflict-free identification with the mother and by way of the approval and pleasure of both her mother and her father that she is a girl and not a boy. While penis envy may then facilitate the girl’s turning to her father during the Oedipal period, of even greater significance is her feeling of being accepted and valued by her father because she is a girl.

It is clear that Freud’s contribution to the psychology of women has concentrated predominantly on the Oedipal phase of the girl’s development with a neglect of the events prior to this phase which bear on the development of a female and feminine identity. The feminist authors are saying that the girl is not a defective boy. She has a biologic and psychologic uniqueness. It is the absence of

a theory on what in a girl's development makes her feel that being a girl is positive and unique which disturbs the feminists. The girl's development needs to be explained not on a deficiency model nor on the inversion of male psychology but on what is intrinsically unique in the female. Perhaps this theory will be developed more fully if a closer look is taken at the girl's identification with her feminine mother and at her father's and mother's attitudes towards her as a female child.

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