



Gender Bias in Psychoanalysis – An Alternative Thinking

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Abstract

Under the risk of being surpassed by newer methods or being accused of using unsubstantiated techniques, it seems urgent to rethink some psychoanalytic central concepts that have not aged well. Considering that, this paper – part of a larger theoretical investigation on psychoanalysis conception of femininity – will try to offer another perspective to explain female sexuality in its own terms. This shift is helpful not only to understand women's sexuality, but it also opens a path to the comprehension of diverse sexualities that aren't part of the usual standard psychoanalysis works with. So, to rethink femininity in metapsychological terms we went back to the psychoanalytical myth of origins suggested by the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi to understand if there were misconceptions – conscious or unconsciously made - that led to the narrowing in psychoanalysis ability to describe sexualities that are not heterosexual and masculine. To demonstrate that we departed from some clinical material to discuss the revealing concepts Ferenczi left us, the context in which they were developed and how they can be alternatives to some rigid phallogocentric interpretations historically transmitted inside psychoanalysis. These considerations help us understand contemporary conflicts that emerge from the clash of a patriarchal society, based on consumerism and technological development that begins to face its limits. The intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts of a given time tend to take on cultural dimensions and express them in singular ways.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Femininity; Metapsychology; Amphimixis; Simultaneity

Introduction

Although psychoanalysis has been in the bullseye of feminist criticism almost from its start, today it is known that the field contributed in a significant manner to the feminist movements; by offering a psychological theory which explains human functioning in what it has of most irrational and unpredictable, psychoanalysis becomes an interesting - but not obvious - allied to political theorists and philosophers who try to understand how the social order is established and how the power circulates within/between

individuals of a given society.

We could say the central drawback of psychoanalytic theory to contemporary thinkers from these other areas is its highly contaminated metapsychology that gives little space for thinking diversity - either in relation to gender, social class, or race – without pathologizing it. By assuming the heterosexual white European man as the prototype for humanity, psychoanalytic theory tends to exclude minorities and reproduce oppression discourses; what limits its utility in theory-making of other fields that try to understand

human relations in an ever-changing globalized world from a postmodern stance.

This makes us think if psychoanalysis became a dated theory, even though psychoanalytic practice is still seen as a legitimate form of psychotherapy all over the globe - at least until now. But could theory and practice be so easily split? Wouldn't the treatment also carry marks of this male-centered perspective? And if so, shouldn't psychoanalysts bother to reframe the theoretical background in which their practice is based? Under the risk of being surpassed by newer methods or being accused of using unsubstantiated techniques, it seems urgent to rethink some psychoanalytic central concepts that have not aged well.

One of these is well represented by the Freudian idea of a penis envy, allegedly present in every woman due to her biological anatomy and that dictates her psychosexual development, usually towards the acquisition of a passive attitude in relation to men and contempt for their own sex. And that's their "best chance", the other options would be determined by penis envy fixation, in which they could manifest "manly interests" of an intellectual nature, homosexuality, and probably frigidity, caused by the non-transferring of the libido from the clitoris to the vagina.

Besides the prominent misogyny present in this conception, the centrality of the penis - the phallic organ - in classic psychoanalytic theory, leads to the complete obliteration of the vagina and the consideration of the clitoris as an inferior erotogenic organ. Although these ideas have been in dispute since as early as the 1920's, Freud didn't change his mind on this respect, and on his last article on the subject [1], he reaffirms this notion of women being castrated by nature.

Considering that, this paper-part of a larger theoretical investigation on psychoanalysis conception of femininity - will try to offer another perspective to explain female sexuality in its own terms. For that, the first thing to be done would be to recognize the importance of the vagina in a girl's psychosexual development: the cathexis it dictates, the fantasies it evokes and the anxiety it brings up. This shift is helpful not only to understand women's sexuality, but it also opens a path to the comprehension of diverse sexualities that aren't part of the usual standard psychoanalysis works with.

Fortunately for us, some great authors have already pointed out this importance. Karen Horney [2,3] was one of the first analysts to start considering the psychic implications of recognizing the vagina and more contemporary analysts, like Luce Irigaray (1986) tried to describe some specific erotisms of a woman's body using this organ as reference.

What these authors show us is that female sexuality, represented by (but not restricted to) the female genitalia - which is internal and external, serves pleasure as much as reproduction and is non-detachable from the rest of the body -, instead of the active-passive, self-other opposition, seems to better explain the phenomena we see nowadays in the clinic and in society which refers to the forms emotional suffering acquires in cultures with more fluid gender identities and types of bonds.

Before we continue, it is important to recognize the baggage of the terms we chose to use in this essay, since "femininity", "feminine sexuality" and "female" are words that were historically tied with signifiers as "fragile", "passive" and so on, usually in a context of depreciation of women and their attributes or as a form of essential aspect. Although a lot has changed in the last 20 years, we believe that still exists a part of human experience that can be termed as feminine and that is not restricted to female-born individuals, but assembles characteristics that emerge out of specific inter and intrapsychic experiences in a particular sociocultural context [4].

As Harris puts it: Words and signs, no matter how subtle the theorizing that deploys them, also carry the primary process glue and sediment or junk (pick your term) that has accrued to these terms from their inception. It is not actually possible to simply by fiat take a term and sever it from its history or its material conditions. This is surely one of the points about free association. Words like "phallus," "vagina," "empty vagina," "masculine," and "feminine" come with particular and elaborate baggage. Power and powerlessness, shame and excitement, adhere to these terms inevitably and both predictably and unpredictably. How then to theorize change? New terms? New strategies of appropriation? Many of these moves are interesting and useful. None seem quite adequate [4].

Thus, we will consider "feminine sexuality" one amongst other aspects of sexuality, historically and relationally constituted, which can be translated by feelings of being penetrated and the anxiety and pleasure they evoke as well as the type of bond they dictate.

Feminine Sexuality: A New Beginning

The history of psychoanalysis teaches us that recognizing the female sexuality and its specificities was a hard task that few were up to. Nowadays, fortunately, the phallocentricity of the field was already pointed out by a number of authors, not only psychoanalysts (Irigaray, Butler, Horney etc.). But although it is already common ground that Freudians weren't able to grasp femininity, it seems to still be a challenge for

psychoanalysts to think about it on metapsychological terms. We can say that this difficulty is, largely, due to the centrality given to the male sexual organ and sexuality in the structuring of both male and female psychics. According to Freud's developmental theory, individualization is a difficult process that demands a series of conditions to be achieved and, even so, is still prone to be abandoned every time some unexpected event requires a shift in the libido. At first, the author did not elaborate a theory that considered gender differences an impact on the individual's development, but advances in psychoanalysis led him to discuss the matter Appignanesi & Forrester, 2010.

This becomes very clear with the analysis of texts in which he openly and mainly discusses the theme [5-8]. Since he departs from the Oedipus and the castration complex to explain a number of phenomena observed especially in the practice with children – love and hate for the parental figures, fear of losing and guilt for desiring, envy and gratitude, etc. it seems that many times this metaphor caused deviations in psychoanalytic theorizing, particularly in gender matters [9].

So, to rethink femininity in metapsychological terms we can go back to the psychoanalytical myth of its origins and try to understand if there were misconceptions – conscious or unconsciously made – that led to the narrowing in psychoanalysis ability to describe sexualities that are not heterosexual and masculine.

Ferenczi, in his polemic book (1923), which he wrote while working with traumatized soldiers, tries to uncover the meaning of the genital organization of the libido by means of clinical observations and theoretical work, using analogies from the natural sciences to do so. More precisely, Haeckel's law – which assumes ontogenesis, the development of the individual, reproduces phylogenesis, the development of the species. The author inaugurates a myth of the origins to psychoanalysis, by which he captures the mix of regression and aggression, the amphimixis of layered embodied excitements, experienced in forms that have emerged both developmentally and intergenerationally. At the end of Thalassa, he considers the way his model speaks to gender differences. In, this essay, we will consider that his model is useful precisely to theorize the increasingly complex models of sexuality and desire that are now the topic of psychoanalytic work on cis, queer, gender non-binary and gay forms of sexual life.

These considerations help us understand contemporary conflicts that emerge from the clash of a patriarchal society, based on consumerism and technological development that begins to face its limits. The intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts of a given time tend to take on cultural dimensions and express them in singular ways. But how far anatomy/

biology can take us in an understanding of the psychic differences between the sexes?

Carlo Bonomi [10] considers that “Sándor Ferenczi was not only Freud's closest followers but also the only one who totally embraced the views of the master, plunged himself in his phallogocentric system, and further developed it” (p. 203). As we can see, the insistence, from both Freud and Ferenczi, on the anatomical difference as the major determinant for the way psyches develop can easily fall into the establishment of a hierarchy of that difference. Being psychoanalysis a “male science”, as Karen Horney would say 1991, 1926, it is not difficult to know which is the sex on the top of this hierarchy and which is at the bottom. Saying we are not assuming that anatomy and physiology should be disregarded as important elements in the human subjectivity. But we are pointing out a great risk we can incur while using it to describe some complex phenomena that are multi-determined.

Thalassa's [11] last chapter is dedicated to the explanation of the sex differences and its meaning in the process of genitality. Until now, Ferenczi has taken us a long way from the very beginning of human existence, both individually and species wise. But in this chapter, we will see the author coming closer to the Freudian explanations of the development of psychic differences determined by the genitals and drawing away from his own new discoveries on human sexual behavior.

As we said, when failing in recognizing the vagina as being known and also being the source of other types of erotisms simultaneously, Ferenczi missed the opportunity of applying his recent theory of amphimixis to the comprehension of female sexuality. The author, then, will insist on the shift in the woman main zone of excitation to the vagina and the abandonment of the clitoris as an inadequate pleasure zone. By supposing that the girls feel in disadvantage, Ferenczi makes a phallogocentric turn and starts considering that what is primary in humanity is the male organ and, since females would have lost the “sex struggle”, they didn't continue to develop it, but had to gain “its compensation in understanding how to fashion out of suffering and affliction the happiness of womanhood and motherhood” 1923, pp: 103.

This narrative of the sex struggle makes us ask ourselves: is he still talking about the same species and its course of evolution? If so, why part pleasure and pain attributing each one to a different class of individuals – pleasure/male and pain/female? The idea of a physical and psychological adaptation of women to men is not only sexist, but it also reveals some theoretical imprecisions from an evolutionist perspective. Besides the condescending tone the author assumes towards the female individuals, we would like to punctuate a logical problem in following the Darwinian

premises on this reasoning that led him to the tautology that he feared.

For when he describes the struggle between the sexes for deciding which would carry the embryo, how could the male's brutality be the cause and the consequence of this striving? How would aggressiveness help men to overmaster women when it was the consequence of the more "active" role men have during coitus, when sexes were already parted? Another thing to be noted in Ferenczi's thinking is strive to the thalassical return only makes sense in this logic through a male's point of view. It is still the phallic logic, phallogocentrism, operating.

But it is also worth noticing that both, Freud and Ferenczi, in different moments of their theorization, have realized this multi-determination. The critique that Freud makes on the already mentioned "'Civilized' sexual morality and modern nervous illness" [12] to the "double sexual moral" society imposes to men and women is far ahead of his time and has the merit of recognizing the oppression of female sexuality in the culture. Ferenczi [13] on his essay "The Effect on Women of Premature Ejaculation in Men", also asserts that "We have formed a feminine ideal, which we have allowed women themselves to accept, according to which they cannot admit or manifest sexual desire" (p. 291). Bonomi [10] adds that, actually, Ferenczi's scientific fairy tale [Thalassa] was in fact the starting point of a progressive deconstruction from within of the pillar of the Freudian system, the Phallus. Suffice to say that Ferenczi [8] replaced castration with a metapsychology of the fragmentation of mental life, thus formulating a new language to explain the effects of trauma on the human psyche [10].

This oscillation on these great authors positions shows us how this subject is not only complex, but also filled with ambivalence. To give up the centrality of penis is not something that psychoanalysis could easily do. As Freud [14] said in "Medusa's Head", the representation of the female genitalia as a terrifying vision could only be created in a misogynist culture; and psychoanalysis is part of this culture although it also criticizes it.

But the clinic and the culture demand us to question this centrality. So, we propose a theoretical shift on the approach to the woman's body presented in Thalassa, trying to consider it on its own terms, but suspending some premises that we consider too jeopardized by phallogocentrism.

According to Luce Irigaray, woman's autoeroticism is very different from men. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language ... And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for

woman, she touches herself in and of her without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two but not divisible into one(s) - that caress each other [15].

By conceiving a woman's autoeroticism as not needing mediation, the author moves away from the old dichotomy activity-passivity and claims another type of register for the female sexuality. This register, or style, differently from the male one - which she affirms, privileges sight -, would be tactile and non-constituting a unity. Instead, she says, "simultaneity is its "proper" aspect - a property that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other" [15].

We believe that the notion of simultaneity is a key concept for understanding female sexuality. This notion allows us to give a better explanation for what happens when the little girl discovers her own body and its differences regarding a boy's body. Differently from what Freud believed, if we accept the fact that the girl, from a very early age, knows she owns a vagina, and "with the infallible accuracy of the unconscious" Horney, 1991,1926, pp. 62 invests on it by means of masturbation or erotic fantasies, including the ones of rape and being damaged inside, even the whole development out of the Oedipus complex becomes more plausible to her.

The conception that the girl doesn't have to 'choose' between different types of pleasure seems more sensible in psychoanalytic terms, especially if we consider that no source of pleasure is easily given up and that the idea of being forever castrated is also one that doesn't suit the unconscious very well. Horney [16] called upon the Freudian pleasure principle to argue against these conceptions. And the "horror" that the female genitals would provoke, Rank [17] associated it with the remembrance of the initial trauma of being born, which also seems more reasonable than the Freudian explanation of it being the mark of castration. These examples show us that conceiving a woman's body through a male perspective reduces our ability to see her as a subject driven by unconscious sexual desires that seek, first and above all, pleasure and that can only be dissuaded of deadly gratifications by indirect means. There is no need to make her fit into "either...or" logics.

And that is sexuality in its most de-centrating state and where Ferenczi was leading us before this phallic deviation. The Ferenczian concept of amphimixis, as well as the idea of simultaneity, seems abler to grasp the stages of infantile sexuality in females and its manifestations in adulthood.

It seems to us that this notion is extremely valuable if we don't want to continue considering women, LGBTQ communities or non-European people subject hood as exceptions to all these psychoanalytic rules. In fact, Ferenczi's developments on the origins of sexuality in the individual are very similar to some recent ideas that consider the erogenous body a more valuable instrument – both clinically and theoretically – to think about otherness and diversity without linking these to the anatomical difference and ideas of male and female Birman 1999, Sodr  & Ar n [9].

Clinical Examples

Some ideas presented in Thalassa can lead us toward a renewed metapsychology that is useful and more modern, both politically and clinically. To demonstrate that we shall depart from some clinical material to discuss the revealing concepts Ferenczi left us, focusing on the amphimixis of pain and pleasure in feminine sexualities.

These dimensions can be seen working together in Vanessa's case; a young woman who comes to the analyst's office following her mother's request, since their fights have worsened as the daughter was finishing college. The initial disbelief in therapy was surpassed when Vanessa started addressing her allergy problems that have accompanied her throughout her life and that after several failed attempts of treatment, she had come to the conclusion had psychological reasons.

She was her parents' first child and they divorced when she was 4. She was raised mainly by her father until the age of 12, because her mother couldn't afford bringing her up. Vanessa thought her parents to be rather conservative and harsh, what she thought were due to their Chinese ascendancy. She claimed her father was very violent when punishing her – until that day. She also attributed her parents' divorce to such violent behavior, saying that more than once she had seen her father hitting her mother. Her grievance, however, was more towards to her mother's demands of perfection – as a student, daughter and especially towards her appearance.

During the treatment, Vanessa associated her allergic rashes to this kind of demand, as if they were avoiding her of becoming what her mother expected, in an interesting example of transgenerational transmission affecting the body functioning. Later, she would expand this association, saying her allergies happened whenever she was "donating too much of herself", trying to please others. Bodily experiences were very often associated with anxiety and fear of merging into others, which were enacted in the sessions. She had fantasies about her mother trying to make an abortion during her pregnancy. In a recurrent dream, she would also see

herself trapped inside a small bottle, trying to find her way out, without success; she thought it to be the representation of her feeling of being condemned to be at people's service.

At the same time, Vanessa enjoyed the mesmerizing effect she had over people and saying 'no' to them seemed always too far from her reach. She ended up repeating her mother's submission through her aloofness and feeling angry at herself and others when things didn't turn out the way she wanted. It was important during the analytic process to allow and even invite regression to occur. Many rashes and laughter and unpunished 'misbehavior' were needed for her to recognize the effects this posture had on her life, including her allergies, and to try to build other types of relation that didn't feel as invasive and damaging as her parents'.

This mixture between pain and pleasure is also revealed in a bigger scale in Jay's life. She is an analytic patient, coming into treatment at a moment of crisis in her marriage when she found herself pregnant in a failing relationship and with a first child, just less than 12 months. Alarmingly, Jay could already see a repetition. She was about to lose everything, she imagined. Marriage and family were at risk. We were able to see quickly what was being repeated there. At the age of 6, she had been taken from her family by police and after an oddly remembered/misremembered interview with lawyers and state officials and put into foster care. All she could recall was that the interview made her feel it was she that was wrong and bad, she who destroyed her family.

In this repetition in adulthood, as a new parent, she could only imagine everything falling again into chaos and uncertainty. We were able to work and stabilize matters and Jay was able to establish a life as a single parent. A woman of great beauty, once a model, she could often begin romantic situations in a state of empowerment but inevitably choosing manipulative and dominating men would retreat to states of fear and vulnerability. She could certainly parent well and effectively, but in her romantic/sexual life, there was domination in multiple forms, physical and psychological. In one long relationship, Jay was induced by her partner into different formation, multiple partners, experiences that she tolerated but felt intimidated to enter.

Finding more strength to claim independence was hard work in the treatment and even when liberated from one sadomasochistic scene, another would arise in its place. Finally, after a period of working on alcohol and drug use, Jay took better management of her romantic and sexual life. However, what came with more awareness was memory. Sexual experiences triggered fears of abuse and danger to her children. Enactments, imagined initially as sexual play produced terrible flashbacks and paranoia. Jay felt at the mercy of partners, whether casual or long term. She was

aware of agreeing to or even instituting games of submission, which inevitably turned into experiences of danger either to her or to her children.

Jay's sexual life was an acute mix of danger and imagined power that inevitably crashed. Her beauty and the excitement she could generate in others inevitably led to psychic danger. Her younger child, born into the scene of breakdown and danger, carried Jay's capacity for enactment and manic excitements and repeating scenes of emotional danger. Repetitions were subject to analytic work but often came in unexpected situations for which Jay always seemed unprepared. I think in this treatment, we have seen the endless echoing experience of sexuality and breakdown, a confusion of tongues, an admixture of excitement and danger, always arriving unexpectedly.

Another patient, Shane, learned of very tumultuous conditions of her early life, only in late middle age. The tumult involved breakdown in her parents' marriage and separation during her mother's pregnancy. In a curious and emotionally costly developmental, while other family members knew of this turmoil, Shane was never told. It has been the task of her analysis to reconstruct the costs and impact of the prenatal life. I often think of Ferenczi's use of the 'regressive thalassal trend', a term he uses to describe the complexity of prenatal experience as it carries and participates in sexual experience. Shane can now put language to frightening and exciting experiences, the amphimixis of pleasure and agitation of adolescent inductions into sexual and intoxicating experience, the management and mismanagement of upheaval.

Conclusion

As Franco Borgogno [18-21] points, if we take a more metaphoric stance on Ferenczi's 1908 text, we can see that the author approximates the effects of a premature ejaculation on women to the ones caused by a hasty analyst that is unable to hold within him or herself the patients' needs and is not successful in providing an interpretation that fulfills both members of the couple. Seemingly, many times the phallogocentricity of our theorizations in psychoanalysis had the same impacts on femininity, both on theory, and on the clinic, making it difficult to analysts to understand the complexity of the subject and leaving patients unsatisfied in their needs.

As we see, there are at least two benefits we can have in revisiting and retheorizing female sexuality: the first and more obvious one is that it gives us instruments to understand sexuality from a different perspective, other than the phallic one; but a more individual one, in its own terms, without imposing interpretations that lead to a phallic adaptation. And second, it opens the way towards political

discussions inside psychoanalysis since we can stop thinking in dichotomous terms and make a definite transition from the sex difference to the diversity of sexuality.

While examining Thalassa, it is interesting that, although Ferenczi was then working with men traumatized by the war, he turned to the conversion hysteria, which, at that time, guided several women to the psychoanalysts' offices. We can suppose that this has something to do with the feminine sexuality and its specificities that enable us to observe more clearly the amplification of pleasure by its aggregation and displacement. But, although Ferenczi was able to establish that connection between the hysteria and the war traumas, he seems to have overlooked some differences in male and female sexualities, which we expect to have rectified in this paper.

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