

Let's Spit on Freud

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Abstract

The study challenges Freud's view of human development as a male-centered process and for its focus on the presence or absence of the penis. In pamphlet style, the study traces the critiques of patriarchy, androcentrism, and phallogocentrism raised by feminist thinkers Lonzi, Irigaray, and Rubin, and psychoanalysts such as Torrey, in light of Federici's gender attribution studies, as well as neuroscience and evolutionary studies. The result is that the process of sexual and gender identification requires both a historical memory of the cultural processes, within which meanings of sexuality are negotiated, and an awareness of the psychological mechanisms underlying the salience of sexual characteristics through which gender attribution is understood and mediated. The study concludes by acknowledging the complexity of human sexuality and the importance of cultural and ethical considerations.

Keywords: Freud, Lonzi, Irigaray, Patriarchy, Androcentrism, Phallogocentrism, Gender/Sex Attribution, Evolutionary Psychology, Neuroscience

Come On, Let's Spit on Freud!

It is time. The time has come in this society that is becoming aware of the damage and limitations of patriarchy and phallogocentrism. I think it can be done: a good spit at Freud, who theorized and normalized human development as an all-male, all-phallic, all-Oedipal process. He forced us to think of a woman as a little man who recognizes as a fact the superiority of the man and her own inferiority because she is emasculated [1]. Do you remember what "the world's most beloved feminist thinker" [2], wrote about Hegel? "The Hegelian servant-master relationship is a relationship internal to the male human world, and to it the dialectic in the terms exactly deduced from the presuppositions of the seizure of power attaches. But the woman-man disagreement is not a dilemma: it is not expected to be resolved because it is not posed by patriarchal culture as a human problem, but as a natural given". (16) Come on, replace Hegelian with Freudian and servant-master with mother-son, then woman-man disagreement with daughter-father, and it all adds up.

Let's spit on Freud!

As theorized by Freud regarding the process of sexual identification, the presence or absence of the penis characterizes the sexual identity of human beings, such that, for most men, the penis is a possession to be proud of [3], while, for women, a reason for envy is missed penis

[4]. Recognizing that one has or does not have a particular set of genitalia is equivalent, for Freud, to recognizing the gender to which an individual belongs. "I have a penis" means "I am a boy, and I possess what my father possesses," and "I do not have a penis" means "I am a girl, and I will never possess what a father possesses." In this system, gender identity is a penis-centered, phallogocentric genital identity. As US anthropologist Gayle Rubin wrote: "The alternative presented to the child may be rephrased as an alternative between having, or not having, the phallus. Castration is not having the (symbolic) phallus. Castration is not a real 'lack,' but a meaning conferred upon the genitals of a woman ... The phallus is, as it were, a distinctive feature differentiating 'castrated' and 'noncastrated.' The presence or absence of the phallus carries the differences between two sexual statuses, 'man' and 'woman.'" (i.e., ([39], 191)).

Freud's thinking, therefore, presupposes an apophatic (i.e., negative, implying knowledge obtained by negation) way of knowing female identity. A child does not know what a female is, but it knows what a penis does. A female also does not know what she is, because she is nothing but a non-human or a non-human phallus. Literally, the female is nothing but an absence or an incompleteness, a hole to be completed or filled [5].

We spit on Freud, who instilled in us the suspicion that all this was in accordance with nature and not, as we naively believed, merely the



result of social constructions, gender stereotypes certainly not universal, but culturally evolved from monstrously modified memes in now remote Judeo-Christian epochal niches. We spit on Freud because if this abomination is only the outcome of (deviant) cultural processes and not the natural and universal process of an individual's identification between the polarity of the sexes, then there is hope. There is hope in an overcoming of the patriarchal model; there is hope in regaining a sexuality that is not reduced to the presence vs. absence of a penis.

When the Erectile Function is Impaired

The pervasiveness of this phallogocentric view of sexuality that conditions male and female behaviors became very clear to me when I conducted a psychoeducational course with patients with spinal cord injury of the Unipolar Spinal Unit of the Hospital "S. Maria della Misericordia" in Perugia, Italy, both male and female, with para- or tetraplegia due to trauma [6-11]. The intervention aimed to improve the sexual health and pleasure of the participating patients and their partners. Men with erectile dysfunction, inhibited ejaculation, loss of sensation, and physical limitations had concluded that their sex life was over [12]. Their resistance to imagine that, lacking erectile function and genital sensitivity, they could relive an orgasm and rediscover satisfying sexual pleasure was clear. Their masculine identity, their manhood, was irreparably injured.

When a man matures into the belief that his sexuality is penis-centered, he also becomes convinced that having and using an erection has to do with masculinity. Bernie zilbergeld [13], an American psychologist who has addressed pressing issues about men and the women who love them, warns men who are in constant danger of losing their masculinity and identity in a phallogocentric society: "Men in our culture walk a thin line. Like their fathers and grandfathers, they must be sure their behavior conforms to what is considered manly. It takes very little—maybe as little as one failure or one sign of weakness—to lose one's place in the charmed circle of men and to be called 'lady,' 'woman,' or 'pussy'—all signifying a non-man or less than a man. But if a man isn't a man, what then is he? The answer most men seem to believe is: nothing at all." [13] "Nothing at all," because without phallus one is an absence, a void: we spit on Freud and his Judeo-Christian androcentrism.

When Losing Genital Sensitivity Does Not Compromise Female Sexuality

As I continued my studies and research on the sexuality of people with spinal cord injury, I was also not surprised to find that while the male sexuality of people with spinal cord injury was most often discussed, with extensive research on erectile function, the female sexuality of women with spinal cord injury was largely ignored [14-16]. This is not surprising in the context of Judeo-Christian androcentrism, which limits women's sexual role to reproductive function within the family and the ability to stimulate and satisfy men's sexual appetite [17], thus denying women the experience of sexual pleasure [18]. Since a spinal cord injury does not impair the receptive function of the female sex organs, nor the reproductive capacity of women [19], the major problems for women after a spinal cord injury usually focus only on the perceived attractiveness of their bodies [14], that is, as a function of male sexuality. In an androcentric and penile understanding of human personal and sexual identity, the loss of genital sensitivity does not compromise female identity—according to Freudian thought—or the sexual role of women—according to Judeo-Christian thought. On the contrary, loss of genital sensitivity guarantees the virginal and chaste role of women [18,20,10] (see also the traditional practice of female genital mutilation in Islamic cultures, which involves more than 200 million girls and women in 30 countries around the world: https://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD.pdf). Women with spinal cord injury, although deprived of a vaginal orgasm, do not complain of a lack of a clitoral orgasm, perhaps because they did not feel they were entitled to one even before the

traumatic event [21].

It was then that I realized what Carla Lonzi [2] had bitinglly "written": "Man is Logos, woman is Eros means man is penis and woman is vagina. Man is satisfied in the encounter with an object, woman is satisfied by exalting herself with a subject." (85)

Let's spit on Freud and all his derivatives. Or rather—correct me!—on Judeo-Christian stereotypes and all its (Freud's) adjuncts. What was in the name of the Father, first, and the Son, later, Freud took it from the Book and handed it over to science. We spit on Freud, and in doing so we are not alone in our vilification. With us is Luce Irigaray [21], Belgian philosopher, psychoanalyst, linguist, feminist, and director of research at CNRS in Paris, who denounces male blindness in sharp words: "The 'reality' of the girl's castration could be summed up as follows: you men can see nothing, can know nothing of this; can neither discover nor recognize yourselves in this. All that remains, therefore, is for me, for her (or them), to accept this fact. As a biological fact! The girl thus 'enters' into the castration complex in the same way as the boy, like a boy. She 'comes out' of it feminized by a decision, which she is duty bound to ratify, that there cannot be a nothing to be seen. The idea that a 'nothing to be seen,' a something not subject to the rule of visibility or of specula(riza)tion, might yet have some reality, would indeed be intolerable to man." (50)

And if she was not enough, also on our side is the great psychoanalyst E. Fuller Torrey [22], who was not afraid to pronounce his instances against the dominant US psychoanalytic thought with a book like *Freudian Fraud: The Malignant Effect of Freud's Theory on American Thought and Culture*, daring to write, expressis verbis, that "The assertion that women are envious of men's penises has been tested ... to be false" ([22], 221), and that "Freudian theory is inherently misogynistic and patronizing" ([22], 250).

Male Recognition Bias in Sex Assignment

While I am here urging you to this extreme gesture, I do not hide from you a certain uneasiness. I confess to you, indeed—and I am sorry to do so now that I had almost convinced you—that other studies I have conducted on what cognitive processes lead a human being to attribute male or female sex to another individual have somewhat dulled my iconoclastic fury. Indeed, I told myself that if, contrary to Freud's phallogocentric bias, male and female sexual characteristics (e.g., penis and vulva) possess the same salience (i.e., the same capacity to attract an individual's attention, acquire relevance, and influence thought and behavior), then the attributions by participants of one sex to images of pictures with equally distributed male and female characteristics would have to be equally distributed fifty percent for each of the sexes, all the more so if I had minimized the observer's ability to make a conscious, reflexive, reasoning-controlled judgment, often subject to cultural bias.

Let me tell you more about what I did.

From two frontal nude photographs of a man and a woman, I used software to cut out body parts of each model and recombine them by matching primary sexual characteristics (external genitalia), secondary sexual characteristics (breasts, hair, beard, etc.), and faces (male and female) according to a combinatorial calculation. This resulted in 120 images, ranging from photos of the original model with either all male or all female features, to images with half the features of one or the other equally recombined. Then, using special software, I quickly administered these images to 1,706 Italian adults and 30 Chinese adults, asking them to assign only one sex to each of the 120 nude images: male or female. The results were impressive and statistically powerful. When the penis was visible in an image, the Italian and Chinese participants assigned male sex significantly more often (84.3–88.4%) than female sex when the vulva was visible (69.6–73.3%). In other words, when male external genitalia were visible, the odds of attributing male sex were 5.688 compared to 1.823 for attributing female



sex when female genitalia were exposed. In addition, sex attribution certainty was higher when participants made male sex attributions compared to female sex attributions. The male face also appeared to be an excellent predictor of male sex attributions and, when associated with the penis, overshadowed all other female cues. Moreover, it took respondents longer to attribute female sex than male sex in the presence of the penis than in the presence of the vulva. As if to say, it takes more cognitive effort and greater difficulty to ignore the penis than the vulva. Assigning female sex when the individual could be male requires a more careful and demanding attention and decision-making process, which also involves inhibiting this (Freudian) male bias [23,20].

The strength of these findings, combined with those obtained from neuroscientific and evolutionary psychology studies, took me far beyond an ethnomethodological approach to reading the phenomenon [24], based on an assumption drawn from the standard social science model [25], according to which gender is a social construction, that a world of two 'sexes' is a result of the socially shared, taken-for-granted methods which members use to construct reality [24].

Neuroscience studies have shown that our brains form dichotomous us/them categories (based on differences in social status, race, gender) with impressive speed [26,27]. It takes only a 50-millisecond exposure to the face of a person of another race to activate the amygdala, the center for processing anger and fear (for more on the functions of the amygdala, see <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amigdala>), but not the area of the fusiform gyrus dedicated to face recognition, as it does for faces of one's own race [27]. Similarly, the brain groups faces by gender or social status at about the same speed [26]. We also know that an emotional response of fear is more likely to be conditioned by an angry male face than by a female face, and by an adult face than by a childish face [28,29].

All this, reread from an evolutionary perspective, makes, in my opinion, understandable the need for a ready recognition of us/them versus gender oriented by a male bias [20]. In fact, this psychological mechanism may have evolved to avoid the greatest danger: an adult (angry) male. Moreover, because humans rely on simplifying decisions, especially in cases of ambiguity, time pressure, or complexity [30-34], they often resort to heuristic strategies. For example, a person must avoid mistaking a man for a woman at all costs, rather than the other way around. Lowering one's defenses because one has assumed that one is in the presence of a female rather than a male is more likely to cost one's life than mistaking a female for a male. For this reason, male sexual characteristics assume the function of salient targets of attention in gender detection (signal) [35]. In the case of ambiguity in the detection of gender cues, humans have had to avoid a false negative (detecting a female when she is a male) at all costs, because it is certainly riskier than a false positive (detecting a male when she is a female). Moreover, as applied psychometrics has shown [36], the false-negative error (i.e., the Type I error rejecting the null hypothesis [H0] when it is true: detecting a female when there are male characteristics) and the false-positive error (i.e., the Type II error accepting H0 when it is false: detecting a male when there are no male characteristics) are mutually exclusive (inverse correlation). This type of correlation can be justified only if the two errors are affected by the same condition, i.e., in the case of gender detection, by the presence/absence of male sexual characteristics, but not if the conditions are different, i.e., affected by the presence/absence of male and female sexual characteristics.

As suggested by the US experimental psychologist Carlos D. Navarrete [37], gender categorization could act as a heuristic cue to potential danger only when the specimens are male. This evolved cognitive mechanism occurs in both males and females. In fact, for all individuals (e.g., infants and females), the risk of socializing with a male is greater than with a female because males tend to be physically stronger and more aggressive. In this view, thinking it is a female when it is a male is potentially more dangerous to human survival than the re-

verse. Therefore, the state of greatest danger (male) is subtracted from the state of no danger (non-male). In other words, in order to survive, it is much more convenient to err on the side of female gender attribution than male gender attribution. These errors in judgment are determined by cognitive mechanisms evolved by natural selection that "occurred despite the fact that subjects were encouraged to be accurate and were rewarded for the correct answers" ([34], 1130). As an evolved automatic mechanism, the male bias functions as a cognitive constraint within which culture has been shaped and transmitted by those memes [38] that we now call patriarchy, androcentrism, and phallocentrism, through imitation, education, religion, philosophy, politics [17,18] ... and Freud.

Although the operation of cognitive biases is not "attributable to motivational effects such as wishful thinking or the distortion of judgments by payoffs and penalties" ([34], 1130), the cultural context and parental environment, however, provide that ecological niche in which such automatic behavior is reinforced and rewarded, i.e., the motivational power of stereotypes, myths, beliefs, ideologies, and pseudoscience [10].

Attribution Operates with a Binary Code

It pains me to say this, but even Freud hypothesized the existence of a universal, fast, and fairly reliable cognitive mechanism of sex recognition. As he taught: "When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is 'male or female?' and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty" ([1], 113). And this distinction—as I explained above—is not made by deliberating on two polar and opposing options (male/female), but on the presence/absence of a single sex identifier: the male's penis. Attribution operates with a binary code of type 0/1. Gender identity is, therefore, a penis-centered genital identity: affirmative (presence) for the male gender, apophatic (absence) for the female gender.

As Thomas W. Laquer [40], US historian and sexologist, elected to the American Philosophical Society in 2015, summarizes well: In the one-sex model, dominant in anatomical thinking for two thousand years, woman was understood as man inverted: the uterus was the female scrotum, the ovaries were testicles, the vulva was a foreskin, and the *vagina was a penis*. This account of sexual difference, though as phallogenic as Freud's, offered no real female interior, only the displacement inward to a more sheltered space of the male [40].

Conclusion

And now a hysterical bolus chokes my throat, drying up what little saliva remains of the heroic gesture. Freud was right (sic!). Rather, he invented nothing, a slave, too, to that mental mechanism, evolved long before psychoanalysis, that makes so difficult and counterintuitive any form of gender equality, the struggle against patriarchy—of abolishing male and phallogenic supremacy, opposed as they are by those evolved decision-making processes for solving gender attribution problems conveyed by our biological nature.

But there is a cultural and ethical level of human sexuality that cannot be reduced to the constraints of our cognitive distortions, where the meaning of our existence finds its place beyond the genetic selfishness that makes the male the dominant usurper of differences. Therefore, although I believe that cultural stereotypes and prejudices that lead to sexual discrimination and oppression are not a simple and arbitrary cultural product, but the concretization of evolved cognitive constraints, the sedimentation of cognitive processes within which cultural contents are understandable and transmissible, this does not mean for me the justification of human behavior as biologically determined. Rather, recognizing the universality and pervasiveness of these cognitive mechanisms should help us understand why, after millennia of civilization, gender discrimination resists cultural progress and gender equality movements [41]. Promoting gender equality requires both a historical memory and an awareness of the psychological



mechanisms underlying the salience of male sex characteristics [42], which mediate gender attribution in the brain within milliseconds and make us resistant to change. Hold your saliva, and if you think you have the power, go ahead and change the title to this essay!

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