

Psychodynamic Theories and Gender

What is gender? Often times individuals perceive gender based on an individual's biological sex, even though gender and biological sex are two very different concepts. Due to societal norms individuals often think that genitalia is assigned to a specific gender and that gender has certain roles and behaviors that are expected. Gender is a very socially construct phenomenon and Joan Berzoff explains it perfectly when she stated "Being female, lesbian Asian, and poor at the turn of the twentieth century will differ from being female, white, and upper class at the turn of the twenty-first century (pg. 269)." Psychodynamic theories such as ego theory, psychoanalysis, and object relations have been used for decades to explain gender.

One of the first to begin to theorize around gender was Sigmund Freud; however, his ideas have had many critiques throughout the years. To be able to discuss the critiques of Sigmund Freud's theories around gender we first must discuss Freud's ideas. First and foremost Freud thought that women are masochistic, narcissistic, and less morally developed than men. Freud had many theories and beliefs that are hard to conceptualize today, but you have to remember that gender is socially constructed and he was a product of the Victorian Era. Freud theorized that all little girls are actually little men. Through this idea Freud speculated that girls are unaware of their own vagina and think their clitoris is a small penis (pg. 270). Freud then thought that when girls finally realize that they are not male they become envious of males and become heterosexual almost by default. It is believed that this all happens within the Phallic stage. Also, within this stage girls break their ties with their mother (original love objects) because they realize that they too, do not have a penis and they are disappointed with them because they did not provide them with a penis (pg. 270). Due to this oedipal issue with their mother, girls develop weaker superegos than males. No matter how much you disagree with these theories many of Freud's beliefs are very important concepts in understanding women's psychological development today.

The first wave of Freud's critique came about in the late 1920's and 1930's. Karen Horney (1926) was among the first to challenge Freud's idea around penis envy. Horney stated that, "penis envy was not an intrapsychic event, but rather a societal one" (pg. 271). Horney also made the point that women were not envious of the male anatomy but instead envious of their power, opportunity, and resources. Furthermore Horney challenged Freud's view of penis envy altogether. Horney believed that girls did not envy boys at all but boys actually envied girls due

to the fact that they can bear children. She thought this was one of the factors that contributed to the domination of females by males (pg. 271).

Much of the second wave criticism came in the 1960's through the 1980's when feminism was at its peak and women's differences, such as moral development, relationships, and their empathy were viewed as strengths. Irene Fast (1984) suggested, "That envy is ubiquitous to both boys and girls. Each gender wants what it cannot have, and envy is a result of a child's cognitive awareness of difference" (pg. 272-273). In addition to Fast, Nancy Chodorow (1974) believed that boys develop their gender identities by separating from their first love objects, their mothers. When this happens boys develop a sense of self and become more independent than girls. On the other hand, Chodorow believes females never break that tie with their mother and never develop a sense of self. However, girls have different kinds of relational skills and capacities than boys do, such as empathy. Basically, Chodorow believed that boys are more independent and girls were more relational (pg. 274). Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) believed that because children relied completely on their mothers they wanted to control them. This is very similar to the ideas of Horney around the domination of the more powerful beings (pg. 273). Others such as Jessica Benjamin (1988) were also influential feminist psychoanalysis that critiqued Freud's theories around gender.

During the same time the feminists were theorizing around family power relations and inequality among parenting arrangements, other theories were focusing on female development using a self-in-relation model. From this model female infants were thought to continually be in relations with others, and never separating from their mothers. Based on these theories of never separating and constantly being in relationships, it was believed that females developed greater empathy and attunement. Carol Gilligan (1982) questioned Freud's beliefs around women's inferior moral development. Gilligan believed that women had different reasoning compared to their male counterparts however it was not inferior or defiant (pg. 277).

The theorist within the third wave of criticism, from 1990's to the present, believed that gender cannot be understood outside power relations and that gender is socially constructed. Theorists stated that within the previous waves of gender development the lack of attention to social class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and the influence it has on gender identification was a major issue (pg. 278). Since the early 1990's many questions arose, such as do all women (mothers) produce boys that are separate and autonomous? Are all girls relational?

Can males be empathetic? Is gender a stable construct across social classes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations (pg. 279)?

Works Cited

Berzoff, J., Flanagan, L., Hertz, P. (2016). Psychodynamic theories and gender. *Inside out and outside in* (4th ed.)(pp. 269-285). New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield