Regarded as the father of psychology, Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis and one of the most influential doctors of the 20th century. He introduced new theories, changed the way people thought and left an impact on the field of psychology seen even in the 21st century. But along with his theories of the unconscious, and the development of therapeutic techniques, he was also notorious for controversial concepts...

Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex was based on the belief that young children experienced an unconscious desire for their opposite-sex parent. It was considered a necessary part of the phallic stage of psychosexual development (between three to five years of age), and Freud believed it could lead to paedophilia if not resolved in time. The Oedipus complex was taken as the ‘physical reproduction of patriarchy’, and as leading to the different sexual roles in our society today.

Freud also had controversial views on women, believing that their lives were dominated by sexual reproductive functions. He even wrote, in 1925’s ‘The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes’ that ‘women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own’. To Freud,
women were simply men without penises (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2008), so naturally he introduced a stage of ‘penis envy’ – where a woman realises she does not possess a penis, and experiences an envy of the male, which accounted for much of female behaviour. Freud claimed that the only way they could overcome this penis envy was to have a child of their own – even going as far as to suggest they wanted a male child, in their efforts to gain a penis.

His theory was unfairly based on a model where there was no place for femininity unless directly related to masculinity. Women were viewed as forever feeling morally inferior to men, who were said to have more developed superegos than women. This, according to Freud, was a problem that could never be resolved.

Helene Deutsch was first woman to join Freud's Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1918, having published the first psychoanalytic book on women’s sexuality. She was one of his pupils, and built upon his theories in her study of woman’s psychological development, believing that women had a ‘passive-masochistic sexuality’, and were born only for reproduction. According to her, a young girl's lack of penis meant she stopped identifying with her father and went on to develop fantasies of being raped. Deutsch believed that the ‘rape fantasy’ was an integral part of female sexuality, and with this the idea of a woman's personality being determined by her lack of penis was strongly reinforced in society.

In his own time, Freud's concept of penis envy was criticised by psychoanalyst Karen Horney. Her critiques actually led to the formation of feminist psychology, and she introduced the idea that men were affected by their inability to bear children, calling it ‘womb envy’. She explained that men felt envious of the ‘biological functions of the female sex’ (like breastfeeding, pregnancy), calling it ‘males striving for achievement as overcompensation’ (Linda Brannon, in her book Gender: Psychological Perspectives). Horney reasoned that Freud's theory of penis envy made more sense when it was taken as a metaphor; penis envy was a symbolic longing for the social prestige and position that men experience. Thus, women felt inferior because of the freedom and social status they lacked because of their gender, not because of their literal lack of the phallus.

Freud responded to her, writing: ‘We shall not be very greatly surprised if a woman analyst who has not been sufficiently convinced of the intensity of her own wish for a penis also fails to attach proper importance to that factor in her patients.’ According to Freud, Horney's development of concept of womb envy was rooted in the penis envy she herself experienced.

Fifty years after Freud, feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin released A Desire of One’s Own (1986), where she wrote of how the Oedipus complex only encouraged the patriarchal hierarchy. She further wrote on how penis envy was not because of the lack of phallus as Freud described, but because of socio-cultural reasons – making it an irrelevant part of female sexuality.

Horney and Benjamin's take on penis envy perhaps makes a lot more sense than Freud's ideas in the 21st century. As proposed by Clara Thompson in a 1943 paper, social envy – ‘a sociological response to female subordination under patriarchy’ is more suitable. It's understandable how women might feel envious of the power and prestige men have in most societies around the world. From sexualised comments on the street to a 10 per cent wage gap, men still tend to be in positions of dominance.

A large number of psychologists spoke out against Freud, but the concept of penis envy had been created and the damage done. But beyond a slightly silly theory with some symbolic use if not taken too literally, was there a more insidious impact? Was penis envy an escape route for abusers that affects us even today?

Salvaging his career?

Hysteria, defined as ungovernable emotional excess, originated from the Greek word for uterus, hystera. It was a disease attributed only to women. Symptoms included nervousness, hallucinations and most of all, emotional outbursts. Freud treated hysterical women by talking to them, and concluded that psychological trauma and hereditary predisposition caused hysteria. During his 1900 study of a patient, Dora, she alleged that she had been molested as a child by a family friend, only to have Freud dismiss her claims and suggest she imagined the advances.

Freud had actually started off as a supporter of the oppressed, initially working on the effects of trauma and bringing to light the sexual abuse that went on in families. He believed that sexual abuse in childhood was responsible for many of his patients’ neuroses and other mental health problems, and Freud was the first psychiatrist to believe his patients were telling the truth. His early papers in the 1890s embraced the mechanism of dissociation, and he gave a speech called ‘The Etiology of Hysteria’, in April of 1896. Freud strongly believed his ‘Seduction theory’, and wrote in letters to close friends about the autopsies where he’d seen something ‘of which medical science preferred to take no notice’ – bodies of children that had been raped and murdered.

Unfortunately, his colleagues maintained that a child’s report of sexual abuse was a symptom of
pseudologica phantastica – a pathological fiction or fantasy. They were appalled at Freud's ideas, and choosing to save his career and reputation, Freud chose to follow suit in dismissing the victims' claims. This was what prompted him to introduce the 'Oedipus complex' and penis envy as an explanation for patients 'fantasising' their rape.

There are several theories as to why Freud abandoned his initial claims, ranging from denial of his own personal experiences, attempts to salvage his career after the speech in 1896 or the knowledge that in a society where so many influential people were abusers, his claims would go unheard. His decision was later called a 'failure of courage rather than a clinical or theoretical insight' by psychoanalyst Jeffrey M. Masson.

**Close to home**

In 1897 Sigmund Freud had carried out a self-analysis, making himself his 19th patient. He reached the conclusion that he and his siblings all showed the same symptoms of hysteria – which implied that they too, had experienced sexual abuse as a child. The idea was unthinkable, and it is speculated that Freud declared his patients' stories as fantasies to protect his own family.

Florence Rush, in her 1980 book *The Best Kept Secret*, wrote that Freud clearly avoided blaming fathers at all costs. In his cases the abusers were sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles and even governesses, but never fathers, even going so far as to incorrectly publish an article blaming a 14-year-old's uncle as the one who molested her, but revealing decades later that it was in fact her father. Masson also believed that Freud's decision was influenced by abusers he knew personally. One of his closest friends, Fliess, was suspected of having molested his own son. Freud would often confide in Fliess, sending him letters discussing how he believed that hysteria, or psychological disturbances were a result of sexual abuse. Upon realising that Fliess himself was guilty of such abuse, Freud felt forced to give up his theories and evidence.

In her book, Rush wrote 'the world listened to Freud and paid little heed to the sexual abuse of the young' (p.96). Masson backed her up, arguing in 1985's *Assault on Truth* that 'Freud knew about child abuse and its destructive consequences but suppressed the information and attributed memories of rape to fantasy'.

In his desperate attempts to salvage his career and gain popularity, Freud had normalised the despicable practice of adults 'initiating' children into sex, and paved the way for not only a major setback to the feminist movement of that time, but also the field of psychology for years to come. His dismissal of females and their 'hysteria' (a cover-up for the PTSD they suffered) led to gaps in research of PTSD and other traumas, which would go on to affect the soldiers of WW1. As a book reviewer in *New Scientist* said, '[Freud] excommunicated anyone who... wanted to criticise parents... He set back our understanding of child abuse by a hundred years' (27 April 1996, p.49).

Others joined the criticism of what they called 'the Freudian cover-up'. Florence Rush, a social worker in the 1970s, exposed Freud's reluctance to reveal the offenders, as they were not only seen as respectable men in society but also his own friends. Victorian men were thus able to hide their illegal and immoral sex practices. Freud, she believed, only demanded that the sex be practised with utmost discretion to ensure that the 'surface of Victorian respectability' was in no way disturbed. Any attempt to expose the violator only exposed the victim's own alleged sexual motives, stigmatising them further; 'concealment was their only recourse'.

In 1971 Rush presented a paper on child sexual abuse at the New York Radical Feminist Conference. She argued that child sexual abuse was a symptom of institutionalised patriarchy, of female powerlessness, and of mainstream family structures which we are ‘encouraged to uphold no matter how often we witness the devastatingly harmful effects of this arrangement on women and children’ (Satter, 2003, p.454). Rush inspired a number of feminists like Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Louise Armstrong (1978). They tried to make the public realise how the silence and stigma around child sexual abuse was a defence of gender privilege and hierarchy (Olafson et al., 1993).

Even today, stigma still surrounds the traumatised, with victims often believing that they deserved, wanted or imagined their abuse. The dismissal and blatant lack of acknowledgement of traumatic violence remains, and may do so as long as it is supported by Freud's legacy.

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**Key sources**


