

Feminism & Psychology

<http://fap.sagepub.com/>

The Freudian Coverup

Florence Rush

Feminism & Psychology 1996 6: 260

DOI: 10.1177/0959353596062015

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://fap.sagepub.com/content/6/2/260>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Feminism & Psychology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://fap.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://fap.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://fap.sagepub.com/content/6/2/260.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - May 1, 1996

[What is This?](#)

Florence Rush



FEATURED REPRINT

The Freudian Coverup

Florence RUSH

In 1905 Dr Sigmund Freud presented the world with his theory on infant sexuality. He informed a society still deep in Victorian prudery that very little children had strong erotic drives. His theory shocked middle-class sensibility at first, but eventually this same middle-class society came to find Freud to be quite right. Today it is almost generally agreed that children have erogenous zones and sexual feelings, but, since Freud's interest focused on the psychosexual aspects of human development, he gave little attention to other infantile endowment. He chose not to notice that just as children are sexually aware, so are all their other faculties intact, and therefore they know when they have been humiliated and exploited. So when Freud claimed that children who reported sexual abuse by adults had imagined or fantasized the experience, he was quite wrong. Children know the difference between reality and fantasy, often with more accuracy than adults, and sexual advances are in fact made to children in the course of everyday life. To insist that these advances are imagined is to underestimate a child's perceptive capacity, create doubt and confusion, undermine self-confidence, and provide the food upon which nightmares are nourished.

I remember that as a child I struggled with a nagging fantasy in which I pleaded desperately with disinterested adults to acknowledge my fears. Considering that I had been told that my tonsillectomy was 'not that bad' or that the dentist whose hands were between my legs was really 'fixing my teeth', my concern was not unfounded. Somehow I knew even then that if one is ignored or not believed too long and too often, one can lose one's bearings, panic, and even go mad. As I grew older it was some consolation to learn that I had no monopoly over the theme of my nightmare; many were so intimate with its horror that it

became a favorite motif in literature and art. Franz Kafka was a master at communicating the anxiety resulting from general disregard of personal fear and sense of danger. The world of science and suspense fiction is permeated with the eerie loneliness of distorted reality. But my favorite is the 1944 film *Gaslight*, a tale which so impressed public imagination that still today the word 'gaslight' is used to describe an attempt to destroy others' perceptions of reality and, ultimately, their sanity.

In summary, the plot — set in the Victorian era — has Charles Boyer marrying Ingrid Bergman, not for love, but to gain access to her home, where precious jewels were hidden. Once ensconced in her house and impatient to embark on his treasure hunt, Boyer planned to get rid of his wife. He calculated to unnerve her so that eventually she would agree to be 'put away'. To accomplish this, he simply altered the world in which Bergman lived and trusted. When she sent a servant on an errand, he assured her that the order had never been given; a pair of scissors placed on a table could not be found there, only to turn up elsewhere; and when the gaslight flickered, he convinced her that it was not the light but her perceptions that were failing. Gradually she became unsure and unsteady, and soon was so shaken that she could barely function. Boyer pretended concern, suggested a doctor, a rest cure, but just as she was on the brink of total collapse Joseph Cotten (always vaguely in the background) arrived to expose the scoundrel and rescue Bergman's reality, confidence and sanity.

Because so many identified with the victim, this movie enjoyed great popularity. Personally I know I have been 'gaslighted' frequently in my lifetime, not the least traumatic instance being the denial of my own molestation. I recognize, however, that the gaslighting procedure, as it applies to the subject of sexual abuse, is far more serious than a Victorian suspense story and more effective than one man's treachery. It evolves from widespread indoctrination. Sigmund Freud, whose theories have enormous influence on modern thinking, knew that the sexual abuse of children existed, but he could not reconcile the implications of that abuse with either his self-image or his identification with other men of his class, and thus he altered his telling of reality. Eventually he succeeded in gaslighting an age into ignoring a devastating childhood reality and a very serious social problem.

A FREUDIAN DISCRETION

Early in his career Freud believed that little girls often experienced sexual abuse because his patients predominantly women, consistently reported childhood instances of sexual molestation. Many of Freud's patients suffered from hysteria, a common Victorian ailment affecting middle-class women. The symptoms included loss of voice or appetite, compulsive vomiting, sneezing, coughing, temporary blindness, deafness, paralysis, or epilepsy, and these symptoms, with no discernible organic base, were resistant to medical treatment. Since his

hysterical patients repeatedly reported sexual abuse, most often naming their fathers as the abusers, Freud drew a causal connection between sexual abuse and neurosis. Before he formulated his better-known theories he framed the 'seduction theory', in which he pointed to a direct connection between sexual abuse in childhood and adult hysteria. But this repeated and persistent incrimination of fathers by his patients made him uneasy, and, never quite comfortable with the seduction theory, he mentioned it publicly only in the year 1896 and not again until much later (1933), when he was able to reassign the abuse to female fantasy and disavow it as erroneous:

Almost all my women patients told me that they had been seduced by their father. I was driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue and so came to understand that the hysterical symptoms are derived from phantasies and not from real occurrences (Freud, 1966: 584).

More at ease with the fantasy rather than reality of sexual abuse, Freud was even more comfortable when he could name the mother rather than the father as the seducer. When he implicated the mother, however, he assured us that maternal seduction was based on reality:

It was only later that I was able to recognize in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women. And now we find the phantasy of seduction once more in the pre-Oedipus pre-history of girls; but the seducer is regularly the mother. Here, however, the phantasy touches on the ground of reality for it was really the mother who by her activities over the child's bodily hygiene inevitably stimulated and perhaps even aroused for the first time, pleasurable sensations in her genitals (Freud, 1966: 584. Emphasis added).

Before Freud could conclude that seduction by fathers was a fantasy, he had to be rid of his earlier theory. Since men did not complain of maternal seduction Freud limited the 'imagined' abuse to a specific female problem: 'I was able to recognize in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the *typical Oedipus complex in women*'. To remove the onus from fathers, Freud found it necessary to undermine the perceptions of his female patients. Unable to accept the father as seducer, he exchanged female veracity for female fantasy. And perhaps this shift can be better understood if we look at Freud the man, who, endowed with his share of human imperfection, had a history of withholding or altering information that did not suit him.

In the process of exploring the human psyche, Freud courageously exposed personal weakness, conflicts, anxieties, and neurosis but he withheld facts and feelings in two major areas — areas he established as vital to the understanding of the human personality: childhood and sex. At age 29, in anticipation of a curious posterity, he destroyed all his early work, notes, and diaries because he said he 'couldn't have matured or died without worrying about who would get hold of those old papers' (Robert, 1966: 11). But even in later life, when

fortified by success and prestige, he was still unable to trust a scientific and interested public, and so the story of Freud's childhood is unknown to us. And if little is known about his childhood, less is known about his sex life.

Freud formulated the Oedipal complex, the theory of innate erotic attraction of children to parents of the opposite sex, and he gave us the 'libido theory', or sex energy as a vital life force. Yet this man who saw the sex drive as a dominant factor in personality development, and the struggle to sublimate sexual gratification as essential to practical survival, to the mature psyche, and to all of civilization, for that matter, told us nothing of his own sexual impulses, sexual conflicts, or experiences.¹ What makes this concealment even more surprising is the fact that Freud used his life, his conscious and unconscious being, as a prime tool for understanding and explaining all of human sexuality. His theories evolved from self-analysis and the interpretation of his own dreams, yet he never once revealed a masturbatory fantasy, or a sexual passion, nor did he ever associate 'one of his dreams with an erotic desire or a woman' (Robert, 1966: 63). It should come as no surprise, then, that Freud also saw fit to censor what he thought was other ill-advised information. In a footnote to the 1924 edition of his *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), he confessed that he had altered some studies for reasons of discretion. In two cases he had substituted an uncle for a father as sexual abuser:

I venture after the lapse of so many years to lift the veil of discretion and reveal the fact that Katharina was not the niece but the daughter of the landlady. The girl fell ill, therefore, as a result of sexual attempts on the part of her own father (Freud and Breuer, 1966: 174).

And he added a similar footnote to the case of Fraulein Rosalia H.: 'In this instance, too, it was in fact the girl's father, not her uncle', who was the seducer (Freud and Breuer, 1966: 211). In the light of Freud's rather arbitrary employment of discretion, his conclusions regarding female fantasy or the female personality can reasonably be questioned (Freud, 1953a). And were it not for the accidental recovery of Freud's correspondence with his one-time friend and colleague, Wilhelm Fliess, the story of his very subjective need to cover for the sins of the fathers and renounce the seduction theory would have been lost to us.

THE FLIESS CAPER

The account of the Fliess letters is a lively and exciting tale in itself. From 1888 to 1902, when they quarreled, Sigmund Freud and his good friend, W. Fliess, a Berlin nose-and-throat specialist, engaged in prolific correspondence. Central to their friendship was a mutual interest in the sexual aspects of the human condition, and Fliess had developed his own sex theory, which he felt would 'explain the phenomena of life and death'. Freud admired Fliess tremendously and found in his friend a man of supreme intellect and impeccable judgement. He welcomed

his comments and criticisms regarding his theories, findings, and even his writing style. But as Freud became more secure in his work, he looked to Fliess less, and finally the men separated over scientific differences. Freud destroyed all his correspondence from Fliess, but his own letters, which included elaborate and detailed drafts and notes, were retained by Fliess. After Fliess' death in 1929, his widow sold a packet of 284 pieces of correspondence to a Berlin bookseller, Reinhold Stahl. Knowing that Freud would destroy the letters if given the chance, Frau Fliess gave Stahl instructions that they were not to fall into Freud's hands. Later, when the Nazi regime forced Stahl to flee to France, he offered the letters to Mme Marie Bonaparte, a student and disciple of Freud, who perceived their value and happily purchased them for 100 pounds. She took the packet to Vienna and apprised Freud of the letters' existence and of the transaction, but, indignant that they had been brought to light, he ordered them destroyed, and even after Bonaparte read portions to him to convince him of their scientific importance, he was adamant. 'I don't want any of them to become known to so-called posterity', he said (Stewart, 1969: 2). Bonaparte defied this order and deposited the correspondence in a safe deposit box at the Rothschild bank in Vienna during the winter of 1937–38. When Hitler invaded Austria, she employed her status as a Greek princess and was permitted, under Nazi guard, to remove the contents of the box. She then placed the documents with the Danish legation in Paris, but when their security was again threatened by Nazi invasion, the letters, wrapped in waterproof, buoyant material (in case of a mine explosion), finally crossed the channel and reached England in safety. There they were transcribed and edited by Anna Freud and Ernst Kris, and finally a volume of 168 letters and notes, selected from a total of 284 pieces of correspondence, was published in 1950 under the title *Origins of Psychoanalysis* — eleven years after Freud's death.

I found the correspondence, more than any history or intellectual process, the work of an extremely complicated, imaginative and talented human being. Nowhere does a novel reveal as artistically the ambivalence, ambition, courage of a man in a personal struggle. These letters more than any information officially released by Freud, precisely demonstrated *his* unconscious connections, and from beginning to end tell why he could no longer abide his own seduction theory.

FATHER FREUD AND OEDIPUS REX

During the early years when he published *Studies on Hysteria*, in collaboration with Joseph Breuer, Freud was already well into the exploration of the human unconscious in search of the secrets of neurosis. Having discovered 'free association', a method whereby both he and his patients could explore hidden emotions in an atmosphere free of judgement and censure, Freud listened carefully and intently to his patients. But however clearly he recognized the existence of repressed thought and feeling, he did not, at that time, doubt that a real

experience was the cause of hysteria. 'I have come to the opinion that anxiety is to be connected, not with a mental, but with a physical consequence of sexual abuse', he wrote to his friend Fliess (Bonaparte et al., 1954: 79–80). Freud later pinpointed vulnerability to sexual trauma as occurring during 'primary sexual experience (before puberty) accompanied by revulsion and fright' (Bonaparte et al., 1954: 126).

In the year 1896 Freud presented his seduction theory in a group of three papers broadly titled 'The Aetiology of Hysteria'. This work was a public challenge to heredity as the cause of hysteria, and, in bold opposition to general medical opinion, Freud named social rather than biological causes of neurosis. He identified the specific excitement of the genitals resulting from sexual abuse in childhood as the trauma that brought on hysteria and cited 18 cases, not one lacking in a sexual experience, to support his theory (Freud, 1953b: 203). Moreover, in addition to this case evidence, Freud certainly realized that his Victorian world was notorious for its sexual license, particularly in the sexual abuse of children. He could not have avoided news scandals exposing the existence of large numbers of children in the brothels of Europe, the active international white-slave traffic in children, or the available statistics on increased sex crimes against children. Hardly ignorant of the social climate, Freud cautioned, 'It seems to me certain that our children are far oftener exposed to sexual aggression than we should suppose' (Freud, 1953b: 203). To Fliess, Freud continued to present case material to further substantiate his hypothesis. He named seduction by fathers as the 'essential point' in hysteria, and in one particular case uncovered a veritable nest of incestuous abuse. After persuading one patient to speak, he related her story to Fliess:

Then it came out that when she was between the ages of 8 and 12 her allegedly otherwise admirable and high-principled father used regularly to take her to his bed and practise external ejaculation (making wet) with her. Even at the time she felt anxiety. A six-year-old sister to whom she talked about it later admitted that she had had the same experience with her father. A cousin told her that at the age of 15 she had had to resist the advances of her grandfather. Naturally she did not find it incredible when I told her that similar and worse things must have happened to her in infancy. In other respects hers is a quite ordinary hysteria with usual symptoms (Bonaparte et al., 1954: 195–6).

Despite continued evidence, Freud never again, after the 1896 presentation, publicly promoted his seduction theory. True, his theory was poorly received, and Krafft-Ebing ridiculed it, but Freud's reticence was hardly the result of adverse opinion; even then he was prepared to create a disturbance (Freud, 1953c: 303–4). It was Freud's own faltering conviction that prevented risk of further exposure. Though staunch on sexual trauma as the cause of neurosis, he was extremely unhappy with the father as seducer, and though able to name him in the privacy of the Fliess correspondence, he was unable to do so publicly. Consequently, his 1896 papers were weak on identifying the perpetrators of the sexual trauma; he cited almost as many categories of sexual abusers as he cited

actual cases, and created a series of unlikely contradictions. The grown-up stranger as sexual abuser was the most infrequent offender, he said; nurses, maids, governesses, teachers, and near relations were more often responsible. But children of the same age (or very close) and of the opposite sex, such as brother and sister, most frequently created sexual trauma (Freud, 1953b: 203–4). This large category of predominantly female offenders did not fit the illness in question. Hysteria was primarily a female affliction (a ‘male hysteric’ was hard to find), and the sexual assaults Freud mentioned were heterosexual. Furthermore, in general discussion of sexual assault and hysteria, he always referred to the abuse of children by adults. Suddenly to claim that the largest number of offenders came from among children of the same age was a contradiction. The only credible abuser was the ‘near relation’, whom Freud mentioned in passing but did venture to say ‘initiated sexual intercourse’ more often than one thinks (Freud, 1953b: 203–4). That Freud’s inconsistencies reflected his need to protect fathers was substantiated as more than a possibility by the editors of the Standard Edition (a collection of Freud’s work). They noted that in his 1896 papers on hysteria, Freud intentionally omitted and suppressed the role of fathers just as he had in the earlier *Studies on Hysteria*. The subjective reason for Freud’s cover-up was revealed to him (and us) when he began to explore his own disturbing and complex reactions to his father’s death.

The 1890s was for Freud a troubled time. He was afflicted with what he termed ‘anxiety neurosis’. He was worried about his heart and about dying; he endured painful migraine, urinary tract irritation, a spastic colon, and gastronomical symptoms, plus agoraphobia and a neurotic fear of missing trains. But his father’s death climaxed his anxieties.

His father’s death evoked in Freud such intense conflict and suffering that he felt compelled to examine himself — to search inward for the cause of his extreme reaction. This journey resulted in self-analysis, interpretation of his dreams, and the beginning of the psychoanalytic process. It brought him to his own unconscious motives and drives by taking him back to memories of childhood experiences. It was these memories that made him aware of his own early sexual feelings. He told Fliess that at age two he had seen his mother naked and recalled that his ‘libido towards *matrem* was aroused’ (Bonaparte et al., 1954: 219). The knowledge of his own youthful sexual feelings destroyed for him forever the myth that children were sexless; children, he now knew, had erotic feelings.

As he traveled further into his past, he found that his desire for his mother had stirred hostility toward his father, and when he looked at this complex of infantile sexuality — desire for his mother and hatred for his father — he understood his own extreme anxiety as guilt resulting from an unconscious paternal death wish. Conscious now that he harbored deep paternal antagonism, Freud confided to Fliess in an unpublished letter (dated 11 February 1897) that the number of fathers named by his patients as sexual molesters had truly alarmed him; with the father as prime abuser he had ‘inferred from the existence of some hysterical features in his brother and several sisters that even his father had been

thus incriminated' (Jones, 1961: 211). But when it was later revealed to him in a dream that he was feeling overly affectionate toward Mathilda, his daughter, he understood that 'the dream of course fulfills my wish to pin down a father as the originator of neurosis and put an end to my persistent doubts'.

Freud was becoming convinced that the suspicion he directed against his own father and himself and his acceptance of his patients' stories of seduction were prompted by his need to 'pin down the father as seducer'. Based on personal inclination, he presumed that all his patients had the same need and therefore came to suspect that their stories of fathers as seducers were 'defensive fictions'. Freud continued to delve, and with the discovery of his death wish toward his father and the ensuing guilt, he quite assured himself that he had reached the roots of his own 'neurotica'. As he solved his own problems, however, he simultaneously relegated his patients' testimony to fantasy, discarded his seduction theory, and replaced it with the incipient Oedipal complex. He was not at all unhappy to make these changes, and, in October 1897, one year after his father's death, he wrote to Fliess that his conviction of his patients' seduction as fantasy left him feeling triumphant.

Today 'Oedipus complex' is a household term; however, the Oedipal myth as representative of a universal pattern of family interaction was a rather capricious selection. Though Freud associated the story with his own experience and that of some of his Viennese patients, its interest as a specifically Greek experience is surprisingly slight. Oedipus killed his father and married his mother quite by accident, and there is no suggestion, even in the play by Sophocles, that he was responding to some unconscious desire or reflected a universal pattern.

A far more dominant theme in Greek mythology is parental fear, hatred and slaughter of children. Ouranos, the cosmic sky god, imprisoned his children in a cave until his son Kronos castrated and supplanted him. Kronos, fearful of competition from his children, ate them all as soon as they were born. Rhea, unhappy mother, rescued Zeus; Zeus conquered and supplanted Kronos, but took the same precautions as his father and swallowed Metis, whom he had impregnated. Laius pierced the feet of his son Oedipus and left him exposed to die; Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the gods; Medea slew her children to avenge her husband's infidelity, and the daughters of Cadmus, founder of Thebes, also violently destroyed their children.

If Freud had been inclined to view neurosis as the result of fear of the unconscious wish of parents to eliminate their offspring, he might have suggested the 'Heracles complex'. Heracles, famed Greek hero, in a period of temporary madness, killed his beloved wife and their six children. When he regained his sanity, he took upon himself the 'Herculean' challenges of the Twelve Labors in repentance. Although I hardly advocate this story as an example of universal parent-child relationships, it would seem that anxiety growing out of childhood dependency and fear of adult authority and destructive powers is a much more plausible cause of neurosis than guilt from the questionable unconscious wishes imputed to children by Freud.

As long as Freud held to his own experience and unconscious motives, his discoveries were credible. That he desired his mother, competed with his father, and found this conflict at the root of his neurosis, I believe. But to suppose from these personal insights that the testimony of his patients was fictitious requires mental acrobatics. It is much more reasonable to attribute Freud's denial of the reality of female sexual abuse to his own subjectivity, which he projected into a universal infantile–parental hostility. Freud, no matter what he felt, never actually incriminated fathers; he never mentioned them publicly as sexual abusers and even took upon himself to alter information in order to protect them. His conflicts about his father may have caused him anguish and guilt, but he never once incriminated other fathers.

It is too bad that Freud was so resistant to the possibility of female childhood seduction, for, had he followed through, he might have come to believe — as I and many others do — that there were, in addition to sexual assault, other causes of female neurosis. He might have come to see that the middle-class Victorian woman afflicted by hysteria suffered from many abuses that frustrated and repressed her normal inclinations toward human growth and achievement. Freud's patients were talented, bright and ambitious women, who, in addition to being sexually exploited, were discouraged from activity and deprived of rewards or recognition commensurate with their energy, interests, intelligence and skills. Though influential in removing hysteria from the sphere of physiological disturbance, Freud was unable to admit that women could contribute beyond the role of passive wives and mothers, and he too held that they were inherently defective. As a result, he could not acknowledge that they suffered from sexual abuse and social inequality and discrimination. I am as weary as anyone of belaboring Freud's misogyny, but his theories on sexual abuse of children and female deficiency are so closely allied that his bias cannot be avoided.

The female — without a penis — was biologically inferior, Freud contended, and therefore she could only achieve an approximation of human completion by the 'acquisition' of the penis through sexual intercourse and by eventually bearing a child (preferably male). When the male child matured, no matter how severe his castration anxiety, with his penis still intact he could manage to overcome castration fears, but the female, forever penisless, must always look to a man to achieve any degree of human status; her fantasy of being seduced therefore represented an actual biological need to make up for her natural deficiency. The seduction fantasy represented her everlasting desire for the coveted penis and was implicit in her biology. Therefore, Freud found that the incestuous wish of little girls for their fathers was a 'predisposition into traumas giving rise to excitation and fixation' (Freud 1953c: 300). As the child was biologically ready, any external stimulation such as masturbation, sex play with other children, a dream or a wish could trigger the seduction fantasy, or the wish for a penis.

With the elimination of the seduction theory and the adoption of the Oedipal complex in females, Freud had come full circle. The seduction theory maintained that hysteria was a neurosis caused by sexual assault, and it incriminated

incestuous fathers, while the Oedipal theory insisted that seduction was a fantasy, an invention, not a fact — and it incriminated daughters. When Freud replaced the seduction theory with the Oedipus complex he relieved himself of his 'neurotica' and vindicated fathers, but implicated daughters. However, one must remember that when Freud arrived at the seduction theory, he did so by listening carefully and intently to his female patients; when he arrived at his Oedipal theory, he did so by listening carefully and intently to himself. His monumental *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the result of self-analysis and the basis for all his later theories, came from *his* memories, *his* dreams and *his* experiences, and, unfortunately, his theories strongly bear the stamp of *his* personality and *his* time, sex and class. The value of certain Freudian insights is not here denied, but in his attempt to shape a particular personal conflict into a universal mold, he reverted from a cultural to a biological determination of neurosis. This shift was damaging to the female, for it was she, not the abuser, who bore the brunt of her own seduction. This so-called 'seduction fantasy', this myth of the incestuous wish for the father, became integral and inevitable to the woman's nature, and therefore, even if actually assaulted, the problem was not the assault but the result of her innate compulsion to possess a penis.

If a female child developed normally (that is, had faith that someday she would grow up, be married, get the penis, baby, and all), Freud assured us, she would not be overwhelmed by the flood of anxiety and guilt coming from the incestuous desire for her father, and an external stimulus — an actual seduction — would be harmless. Freud therefore cautioned the world never to overestimate the importance of seduction and the world listened to Freud and paid little heed to the sexual abuse of children (Freud, 1953d: 118).

A FREUDIAN GASLIGHT

The Western world, America particularly, took Dr Freud very seriously indeed and, in compliance with his instructions, was careful not to overestimate a real seduction — or the importance of any concrete reality, for that matter. In fact, the complex of inner drives gained such ascendancy in the public mind that the psyche was considered capable of dominating the external world.

Disciples of Freud who accepted penis envy as axiomatic soon surpassed their master and firmly established female 'organ inferiority' as the crucial problem of molested children. Melanie Klein, known for her psychoanalytic work with the very young, held that little girls, even under ages two and three, were governed by the primacy of the penis and were desperately driven to possess the coveted male genital (Chassequet-Smirgel, 1970: 94–112). Helene Deutsch told us that the organless female child was endowed with an 'erotic-passive attitude toward the father' and so saw him as her seducer (Deutsch, 1973: 258). While Karl Abraham, one of Freud's earliest followers, readily conceded the reality of sexual abuse, he argued that since *not all* little girls were molested, there must be

something very wrong with those who were. The abused child, he assured us, was preinclined toward her own violation. Sexual assault could not be regarded as the 'cause of the disease' for the woman who suffers from hysteria. As a child she 'yields to the trauma' (Abraham, 1954: 53) of sexual assault, and 'already has a disposition to neurosis or psychosis in later life' (1954: 62). This particular contribution by Abraham was applauded by Freud and has since become the rationale identifying the peculiar personality needs of sexually abused little girls (Freud, 1953c: 300).

What can be the consequences of such thinking? Only confusion, resulting in a distortion of reality, total misunderstanding of female sexuality, and extensive damage to the confidence, pride and self-worth and dignity of children. The reasoning is illogical. It categorically assigns a real experience to fantasy, or harmless reality at best, while the known offender — the one concrete reality — is ignored. With reality sacrificed to a nebulous unconscious, the little girl has no recourse. She is trapped within a web of adult conjecture and is offered not protection but treatment for some speculative ailment, while the offender — Uncle Willie, the grocery clerk, the dentist or the child's father — is permitted further to indulge his predilection for little girls. The child's experience is as terrifying as the worst horror of a Kafkaesque nightmare: her story is not believed, she is declared ill, and, worse, she is left at the mercy and the 'benevolence' of psychiatrically oriented 'child experts'.

I am often reminded by today's experts in the new psychologies that Freud's theories are now outdated. With the advent of ego, group and reality therapies and the miracle of weekend marathons, we are told that Freud is passé, the Oedipal complex is a period piece, the idea of penis envy is quite gauche. But though the words may have changed, the melody lingers on and Freudian concepts are more popular today than ever. Students of the human services today — doctors, nurses, educators, social workers and parents, who perhaps never heard of 'infant sexuality' or 'penis envy' — readily accept that children are sexy; that they participate in, and even instigate, their own molestation; and that, in the famous words of every child molester, 'the kid really asked for it'. From a 1970 book on sex education, we have a variation on the main Freudian theme:

There is the incontrovertible fact, very hard for some of us to accept, that in certain cases it is not the man who inaugurates the trouble. The novel *Lolita* ... describes what may well happen. A girl of 12 or so, is already endowed with a good deal of sexual desire and also can take pride in her 'conquests'. Perhaps, in all innocence, she is the temptress and not the man (James, 1970: 118).

In 1968 a book entitled *Vulnerable Children* by Cindy Burton discussed some 30-odd studies on the sexually assaulted child from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. The conclusion emphasized the prevalence of victim participation and the harmless nature of the assaults. As a matter of fact, one could soon be convinced that the molester was the real victim and, further, that the victims were not victims at all, but juvenile delinquents acting out their pathology. Burton

suggested that the pathology found in the delinquent girl 'may also account for the participation sometimes apparent in sexual assault cases' (Burton, 1968: 98). Since the sexually abused child could so easily be classified as delinquent, her victimization could be viewed not as a social injustice, but as her deviant and antisocial behavior. And those trained to understand and help are grounded in and generate an inordinate amount of anti-female bias.

It is indeed strange how psychology is used not to help, but to trap and ensnare the female. The myth of consent — that is, the female desire to get a man, to have a penis — is used to explain victim participation and therefore accepts as inevitable the sexual abuse of children. The tragedy is that this myth is believed and that so often the victims are punished. Once a child has been raped or molested, no matter how impressive the psychological nomenclature describing her plight or how sophisticated her caretakers, the little girl is an outcast, a nymphomaniac, a whore.

I worked as a social worker with children for many years and during one period in a home for dependent and neglected girls. The children were between 7 and 17, and not one had escaped sexual abuse. If a child showed no visible scars, it was assumed that the experience was harmless, but if she had problems, was difficult, angry, failed in school, attracted boys, or got pregnant, she was diagnosed as acting out her incestuous wish for her father or other sexual fantasies.

Despite the enormous importance psychotherapy places on sexual experience, I was taught never to deal directly with the sexual abuse of a child in treatment. Annie, age 12, had been in an incestuous relationship with her father for two years before she came to the Bloomington Home. The father was in prison, not for incest, but for robbery, and Annie's mother, in deep depression, was hospitalized. I thought I might help her to understand that her father was the guilty one, and he was the one to be ashamed. But my supervisor would have none of that, and he handed me the formula straight from the book. The actual event did not shame her, he continued. It was her deep, unconscious, incestuous wish for her father that made her feel guilty. One must listen carefully, be sensitive to the nuances of the child's fantasies, and at the right moment help her to understand that her shame evolved from her own deep sexual desires.

Although women — young women and even children — do not talk freely about their molestation, there are few who consciously, or otherwise, avoid the subject. For women who have not been believed or had the opportunity to confront their molester (with adult support), there is always a sense of unfinished business; there is always the rancor of boiling humiliation and rage that remains after an unchallenged insult. When the subject of sexual abuse of children received some media exposure as a result of feminist discussions on the radio, in lectures and in articles, many women approached me and finally found an opportunity to ventilate their long-festering secret. In their stories, the psychiatric conspiracy of avoidance or distortion of the sexual-abuse problem was prevalent. One young woman, 15 years old, gave the following account:

From 9 to 14 I was constantly 'felt up' by my orthodontist on my breasts during my weekly visits. He tried to be sneaky and pretend that he was wiping the instruments off — but I knew. The day of the last visit, after five years, I told my mother. She didn't call the orthodontist, but sent me to a therapist. I told my therapist, but he hardly talked about it, and finally said I was disturbed because deep down I really enjoyed it. I didn't talk about it any more.

I discovered that women were as shocked and disturbed by the lack of sympathy and acknowledgement of the problem as by the incident of sexual abuse itself. When Sigmund Freud ventured to explore the cause of his neurosis, and uncomfortably suspected his father to be his seducer, he took great pains to ferret out the reality of something he vaguely remembered. He checked into his past and was relieved to discover that 'my father played no active role', but that an elderly, ugly nursemaid 'was my instructress in sexual matters'. This supposedly took place when Freud was under age 2, but Max Schur, in his study of Freud, found the possibility of any actual seduction very unlikely (Schur, 1972: 125–36). Freud's effort to verify the cause of his own anxieties has been hailed as courageous, whereas a similar investigation by a child or a woman is today discouraged.

Alice B., with the same driving curiosity as Freud, and with much greater cause and anguish, tried to reach the roots of her 'neurosis' and anxiety, but her psychiatrist would have none of it. By the age of 25, without the ego or status of a Dr Freud, she was rebuffed:

I don't remember when it started. I was so little. My father was always putting his hand under my dress and messing around, and he would come into my bed at night and fondle me. He never had an erection, but I could feel his wetness. He was gentle and he never lied. I mean if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have survived, but I suppose if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have had to worry so much about surviving. Everything was destroyed because of him. I didn't know what he was trying to do. School was destroyed because I couldn't learn. When I was 13 I actually had an orgasm, but at first I thought he was trying to kill me.

I'm sure my mother knew. Since I've grown up, my aunts have told me he was always feeling them, and my cousin had an experience with him too. I used to try to scare him away, make noises and stuff. I felt dirty and my mother didn't like me; she liked my brothers better.

My father is now dead. Before he died I wrote him a letter about what happened. I wanted to confront him with it, to talk to him and ask him why he did it. And he wrote me this incredible letter. He said he didn't know what I was talking about and that it wasn't nice for a girl to write a letter like that to her father.

I really feel that this thing with my father destroyed my life. I have no confidence, I never did. At 24 I went to a psychiatrist, but you know they don't talk. But I was upset and talked about it so very much that he finally said that what happened to me was very common, but he said, 'I think your most important problem is your mother. Your father didn't have anything to do with your unhappiness' (this and the following testimony are cited from personal interviews conducted by the author over the past four years).

With no less courage than Freud and brave enough to confront her father-molester, Alice tried to rescue herself and her sanity. But, with the exception of her aunts, she was engulfed in a world bent on covering up for fathers, no matter what the cost to human reason and dignity.

In another testimony, told in the third person in an attempt to keep distance from the trauma, another child actually groping for protection also found only insult and frustration at the hands of her psychiatrist and family:

A girl of 10 is alone in a quonset hut. The front door slams and her father enters — a handsome man with a ready smile. She runs to hug him. He sheds soggy gloves and a flight suit, and they talk of trivial things. How nice to have a warm, affectionate father.

Later he stops her in the narrow hallway and hugs her again. It feels different. But why? This happens several times, always when they are alone. One morning he kisses her on the mouth. Why does it seem so different than the kiss on the cheek? He tells her not to mention this to her mother. She can't understand why it must be a secret.

Late one night she is sleepily aware of him slipping into her bed. His large warm hand gently rubs her stomach, caressing her beneath the flannel night-gown ... her chest, her thighs, her genitals. Something is wrong. Would he do her harm? Not daddy! She wakes alone. Was he there?

This recurs regularly for two years. She wants to tell her mother but cannot. It has been going on for so long, and she is ashamed. She does not know why. She tries to avoid her father. She is 12 now. When he touches her it makes her sick.

She is 13. She is taking a bath. When she comes out her father corners her. She is very frightened. She hates him, loathes him. She runs and hides under the house. When her mother returns she tells her. She tells how her father had sexually molested her for three years. Her mother turns quite pale.

'Do you realize what you are saying?'

'Yes.'

'Don't tell your grandmother.'

A week later, the girl is sent to the Navy psychiatrist. He puts his hand on her leg and tells her that all little girls attempt to seduce their daddies. The next morning she is sent to live with her grandmother in Alabama.

IS FREUD TO BLAME?

To hold Freud responsible for a 70-year 'gaslighting' episode is pointless. He lived in an age in which logic, reason, and science supposedly supplanted religious mysticism — an era which required scientific rather than religious authority to justify brutal social injustice and inequities. Freud filled the bill. His theories, surrounded by scientific aura, allowed for the suppression and concealment of the sexual exploitation of the female child.

The Freudian cover-up — the refusal to name the offender — was more than one man's attempt to hide illegal or immoral sex practices. Victorian men were permitted to indulge in forbidden sex provided they managed to keep their

activities hidden. Adultery, practised with impunity, was kept under wraps, and prostitution, which operated with police sanction, simply had to avoid public exposure and scandal. Within Freud's own circle, his biographer Ernest Jones was implicated in sexual adventures with his patients and little girls, but he managed — at some financial cost and the resignation of a job — to avoid public scandal (Roazen, 1974: 355). The excesses of the loving and exuberant Ferenczi, known to be intimate with his patients and his wife's daughter, were tolerated by Freud and his circle (Roazen, 1974: 359). Freud, who regarded the incest taboo as vital to the advance of civilization, appeared to demand only that forbidden sex be practiced with tact and discretion so that surface Victorian respectability was in no way disturbed.

The little girl, then, with her innate passion for a penis, is — as in Christian doctrine — the temptress Eve and, if she is violated, the nature of her sexuality renders her culpable. Any attempt on the part of the child or her family to expose the violator also exposes her own alleged innate sexual motives and shames her more than the offender; concealment is her only recourse. The dilemma of the sexual abuse of children has provided a system of foolproof emotional blackmail: if the victim incriminates the abuser, she also incriminates herself. The sexual abuse of the child is therefore the best-kept secret in the world.

NOTE

This is reprinted, in slightly edited form, by permission of the author/copyright holder.

1. In his private letters to his friend, Wilhelm Fliess, published after his death (1950), Freud did reveal some sexual desires, dreams, and feelings. He did not intend, however, that these letters be brought to public attention.

REFERENCES

- Abraham, Karl (1954) 'The Experiencing of Sexual Trauma as a Form of Sexual Activity', in *Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Bryan and A. Strachey. New York: Basic Books.
- Bonaparte, Marie, Freud, Anna and Kris, Ernst, eds (1954) *The Origins of Psychoanalysis, Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887–1902*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey. New York: Basic Books.
- Burton, Cindy (1968) *Vulnerable Children*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Chassequet-Smirgel, Janine (1970) 'Feminine Guilt and the Oedipus Complex', in J. Chassequet-Smirgel et al. (eds) *Female Sexuality*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Deutsch, Helene (1973) *The Psychology of Women*, Vol. 1. New York: Bantam Books.
- Freud, Sigmund (1953a) 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', *Collected Papers, Vol. III*. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, Sigmund (1953b) 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', *Collected Papers, Vol. I*. London: Hogarth.

- Freud, Sigmund (1953c) 'On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement', *Collected Papers, Vol. I*. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, Sigmund (1953d) 'Psycho-Analysis', *Collected Papers, Vol. I*. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, Sigmund (1966) *The Complete Introductory Lectures of Psycho-Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud, Sigmund and Breuer, Josef (1966) *Studies on Hysteria*. New York: Avon.
- James, John (1970) *The Facts of Sex*. Princeton, NJ: Vertex Books.
- Jones, Ernest (1961) *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Basic Books.
- Roazen, Paul (1974) *Freud and His Followers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Robert, Marthe (1966) *The Psychoanalytic Revolution*, trans. by Kenneth Morgan. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Schur, Max (1972) *Freud: Living and Dying*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Stewart, Walter A. (1969) *Psychoanalysis: The First Ten Years, 1888–1898*. London: George Allen and Unwin.