Parker, I. and Shotter, J. (eds) (1990) *Deconstructing Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Chapter Fourteen

PSYCHOANALYFIC FEMINISM:
DECONSTRUCTING POWER IN THEORY AND *THERAPY*

[pp. 196-207]

Janet Sayers
[jvs@ukc.ac.uk]

Feminism has adopted a variety of perspectives and strategies from psychology, as well as from other disciplines, in seeking to understand and remedy the ills done women by existing sexual inequalities and divisions in society. In this chapter I shall be concerned particularly with feminism's use of psychoanalytic psychology. I shall start with its structuralist, and subsequent post-structuralist use of Freudian theory, and end with recent uses of post-Freudian British School psychoanalysis within feminist theory and therapy.

My specific focus will be the place of psychoanalysis as a means of deconstructing the fantasy, understood as transferred from parental figures on to the therapist, that all power resides 'in' the individual - in the self or other, child or parent, patient or therapist. This will involve tracing a shift that has occurred in psychoanalysis from Freudian attention to the transference into therapy of infantile fantasies of omnipotence and patriarchal authority to post-Freudian attention to mothering understood variously in terms of power and nurturance. It also serves as an example to social psychology of the deconstruction of power in social relationships, in this case in the social relationships structuring psychoanalytic practice.

FREUDIANISM AND PATRIARCHY

Freud explicitly rejected the reduction to power of psychoanalytic concern with parent-child, therapist-patient relations. (It was on this point that he broke with his erstwhile follower, Alfred Adler.) Arguably, however, issues of power were central to the genesis and [197] development of Freud's technique. In *Studies in Hysteria,* Freud, (1895) describes giving up hypnotism as a means of recovering the otherwise unconscious memories fuelling hysterical symptoms because his patients resisted his authority in seeking to hypnotise them.. Instead, he pressurised them to recall in full consciousness the memories associated with the first occurrence of their symptoms. This, in turn, led to the development of psychoanalysis's 'fundamental rule', free association. Using this method, Freud (1896) soon found patients recalled scenes of sexual seduction in infancy in association to their symptoms. Later, largely on the basis of his own self-analysis, he came to understand these memories as constituted by Oedipal fantasies of sexual possession of the mother in rivalry with the father. Freud (1923) hypothesised that all children - girls as well as boys - initially construe genital sex difference as signifying the father's power to punish with castration the child's realisation of its desire for the mother.

Freud (1912) had already traced the resistance of patients to obeying his rule of free association to an effect of their transferring on to him the power they first invested in the father -

men resisting this rule out of rivalry with him as father-figure, women resisting it in so far as they fell in love with him as they had first fallen in love with the powerful figure of the father in infancy. Later, Freud (1937) observed that cure can founder in men due to their unconsciously equating submission to the analyst's treatment as tantamount to submitting to castration by the father. On the other hand, he said, cure in women can fail in so far as they entertain the fantasy that only by acquiring a penis-as it were from the therapist as father-can they get better.
Given the obstacles to cure posed by his patriarchal authority -an authority arguably equally used in the directiveness of today's behaviour and cognitive behaviour therapy - Freud (1912) sought to turn this disadvantage to good effect by interpreting and seeking to make conscious the 'transference' into therapy of patients' fantasies about the power and authority of their actual father.

This father-centred and phallocentric approach hardly seems promising stuff out of which to forge feminist theory and practice! The Left, however, has long looked to psychoanalysis and its account of psychology and subjectivity as means of supplementing [198] Marxism and its seeming one-sided focus on economics to the neglect of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis has seemed particularly promising in this respect because, like Marxism but unlike non-psychoanalytic psychology, it recognises the dialectical interplay of appearance and reality. In Marxism this is theorised in terms of the contradictions of economic base and ideological superstructure, in psychoanalysis in terms of the contradictions of unconscious and conscious thought (Sayers 1986) - contradictions often repressed in orthodox (and radical) social psychology.

In the late 1960s, especially under the influence of French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser's essay 'Freud and Lacan', it seemed that Freudian psychoanalysis offered feminism a means of explaining the persistence and reproduction, at the level of psychology and ideology, of patriarchy. For it seemed, according to the researches of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, that, whatever the variations between societies in their surface appearance, the underlying structure determining relations both within and between societies is always one of patriarchal kinship exchange of women by men.

Structuralist psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, had sought to integrate this observation with Freudian theory. And it was this approach that Juliet Mitchell (1974) took up in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism.* Like Lacan she described the child as initially entertaining the fantasy of being everything the mother desires, this being represented by the phallus in patriarchal society. True, we are generally unaware of this fantasy. The reason for this unconsciousness, and here Mitchell reiterated Freud, is that we repress it from consciousness in infancy as a result of then interpreting sexual difference as signifying the father's power to punish with castration this fantasy's realisation.

Freud's theory of the Oedipus and castration complex, Mitchell asserted, thus explains the psychological acquisition and reproduction of patriarchal relations from one generation to the next. As a result of these complexes the boy comes to identify with his father's authority. He foregoes possession of the mother in recognition of this power with the promise of eventually acceding to it. By contrast, the girl, construing her lack of a penis as signifying that she can never realise patriarchal power in her own right, turns from the mother to the father and subsequently to other men to achieve indirectly the power the penis seemingly conveys.[199]

PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINISM

Since the early 1970s post-structuralists have taken issue with structuralist psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism to the extent that they seemingly mistake patriarchy and capitalism as more monolithic than they are in fact. In part inspired by the then plethora of political movements - of women, Blacks, gays, and so on - seemingly only tangentially related to the centrality accorded by Marxism to class struggle, French historian Michel Foucault and his followers insisted that power is not located in a single site, or class. Instead, they argued, power is everywhere. It is produced and resisted equally in all walks of life, domestic and occupational alike. Specifically, they maintained, power is produced and resisted through the disciplines and discursive practices whereby each area of social life seeks to demarcate itself from the next. Psychoanalysis, Foucault (1979a) claimed, is no different from other discursive practices in this respect. In particular he likened it to the Catholic confessional. Like the priest, he observed, the analyst institutes a veritable inquisition into the analysand's most intimate experience. In the name not of religious but of psychoanalytic doctrine - namely the supposed curative effect of making conscious the unconscious - analysts incite analysands to free associate and talk about their experience in sexual terms. Psychoanalysis thereby marks out a discursive domain - the body and its pleasures as essentially sexual - a domain in which power is exercised through analysts encouraging and analysands resisting talking about their experience or accepting the analyst's interpretation of it as sexual.

Individual subjectivity - even the seemingly innermost sexual heart of the self- is thus understood by Foucault not as preceding social and linguistic relations but as produced by them. Adoption of this approach within feminism went along with increasing attention to Lacan 's account of language. Mitchell had emphasised the structuralist aspects of his work, his recasting of Freud's theory of the Oedipus and castration complex in terms of the reproduction, at the level of ideology, of the patriarchal structures described as universal by Lévi-Strauss. Increasingly poststructuralist-minded feminists concentrated on Lacan's deconstruction, in terms of language, both of our narcissistic self-regard as whole and undivided and of our persistent tendency to conflate power with its symbolic and bodily representation, to reify it as though it resided 'in' particular individuals, in men say. [200]

Lacan (1977), read now as a post-structuralist, developed Freud's account of infantile narcissism into what he termed the theory of 'the mirror stage'. According to this theory, the toddler, still experiencing itself as in bits and pieces - as plaything of every passing bodily whim and passion - becomes enraptured by its reflection in the mirror. For its reflection presents itself to itself not as fragmented but as integrated and whole. Lacan claims that it is the infant's identification with this reflection, that is with an image that is actually external and alien to itself, that initiates the illusion of the self as whole. It also originates, he says, the capacity to represent oneself outside oneself in language by the personal pronoun, 'I'. He thereby deconstructs the omnipotent fantasy of the self as whole and undivided, showing it instead to be founded in the illusory elision of division - of inner and outer - at its very inception.

As well as adopting Lacan's mirror stage theory, poststructuralist feminism also adopted his account of the castration complex to deconstruct the otherwise fixed seeming meaning of words and symbols. This involved reiterating Lacan 5 insistence on disabusing the persistent illusion, described by Freud (1915) in his essay 'The unconscious', that words are one and the same as the things they represent. In Lacan's terms, this is to collapse the signifyfier into the signifyfied, to mistake man, say - or the penis - for the power or phallus he represents when, in fact, the penis is not the phallus. Instead, he insisted, the meaning of the phallus, like all terms in language, is given by the antithesis of the presence/absence of that which it signifies, in this case the penis.

Reiterating Freud, Lacan asserts that this antithesis, and the power of the father that it represents, is first recognised in the castration complex of late infancy. And, again like Freud, he argues that it is this complex, and the recognition of patriarchal power it involves, that first forces a gap between the infant and its initial omnipotent fantasy of being one with the mother. It thereby also initiates the use of words to signify this gap.

Lacan views psychoanalysis as quintessentially 'a talking cure', as operating through the analysands' capacity to use words to signify the separation between themselves and their desire. Only by articulating the gap between what one wants and what one has, it seems, can one take effective action to begin to bridge it. And [201] this involves dealing with the painful fact that gratification in reality is always more limited than in fantasy.

POST-FREUDIANISM AND MOTHERING

Lacan might have insisted that psychoanalysis is essentially a talking cure. Meanwhile psychoanalytic therapy had generally moved on from this, Freud and Breuer's (1895) early characterisation of their approach to therapy. Indeed Lacan's 'return to Freud' was in large measure a reaction against this post-Freudian development - a development that included increasing attention to the therapeutic value of not necessarily verbalising but hearing with, and containing the analysand's anxieties. These anxieties, in turn, were now understood less in terms of sex, desire, and a patriarchally-oriented castration complex than in terms of mother-related conflicts of love and hate. And the containing, as opposed to verbalising, function of the analyst was likened to that of the mother in holding and caring for her baby, both physically and emotionally.

This move from focus on the place of the analyst as powerful father to that of the analyst as mother, understood not only in terms of nurturance but also in terms of power, was determined by a number of factors. Within psychoanalysis it was fostered by the extension of its techniques to the treatment of children - an extension pioneered by Anna Freud and Melanie Klein on the basis of the teaching and mothering experience socially accorded their sex. Using the insights afforded by this experience Klein and her followers in the sc-called 'British School' of psychoanalysis increasingly drew attention to the place of the mother - often somewhat neglected by the father-centredness of Freudian theory - in conditioning our psychology and subjectivity.

This new-found emphasis on mothering was also reinforced by factors external to psychoanalysis. Concern about rising urban crime led to the establishment, in the 1920s, of Child Guidance Clinics aimed at advising mothers how best to bring up their children without risk of their becoming delinquent. Mothers, it seemed, were the best targets for this advice given their greater physical involvement in child-rearing. In a sense, however, this development involved the state appropriating the erstwhile [202] disciplinary power of men in their role as *pater familias.* This power was now mediated via the advice given to mothers by experts such as psychologists and social workers - a development since documented by Foucault's followers (see Donzelot 1979; Rose 1985). Analysts also contributed to this movement. Many became involved in working with, and writing about delinquency (see Aichorn 1925; Bowlby 1944; Anna Freud 1949; Klein 1927; Schmideberg 1933; Winnicott 1943). And their work was often central to the training of Child Guidance staff It was also often cited in legitimation of the closure of the day nurseries instituted to enable women to contribute to the War effort of 1939-45 (see Riley 1983). Other developments during the war years also strengthened the focus of psychoanalysis on the

mother. Psychoanalysis now increasingly joined forces with non-analytic psychiatry, as it had in the First World War, in treating the psychological casualties of war. In the process psychoanalysts found themselves increasingly involved in treating psychotic as well as neurotic conditions. Freud had argued that the lack of transference in psychosis makes it impervious to psychoanalytic treatment. Since then, and with the development of child analysis in the inter-War years, analysts increasingly came to view psychosis in children (see e.g. Klein 1930) and adults as effect not of problems in relation to the father (as Freud, 1911, had implied in the Schreber case), but as a product of disturbance in the infant's earliest, pre-Oedipal relation to the mother. Many argued that such disturbance called for the supplementing of verbal interpretation by empathic mirroring and nurturant mothering. And this approach in turn has now come to inform analytic treatment of neurotic as well as psychotic conditions.

Faced with this mother-centred shift of psychoanalysis some feminists, as indicated above, have insisted on the value of returning to the more father-centred stance of early Freudian analysis as a means of understanding, in order to combat, the psychological persistence and reproduction of patriarchal power and authority. Many more have reacted against Freud's patriarchalism and phallocentrism - especially against his penis-envy theory of women's psychology. Some reject psychoanalysis altogether on this account. Others have adopted the ready-made alternative to Freudian father-centredness furnished by the [203] mother-centred theory and practice of post-Freudian, British School analysts such as Klein and Winnicott.
It is this approach that informs feminist therapy, at least as practised at London's Women's Therapy Centre. The Centre's 1976 co-founders, Susie Orbach and Louise Eichenbaum, use US sociologist Nancy Chodorow's (1978) Winnicott-influenced description of daughters' identification with, and sons' separation from the mother. They go on to argue that women's relative powerlessness and consequent dependence on securing men's emotional and economic support results in their quickly learning to serve the needs of men and others before their own. As a result, they say, women often become unable to recognise their needs either in themselves or as seemingly reflected in their daughters. They thereby often fail empathically to mirror, recognise, or meet their daughters' needs in the 'good enough' sense described by Winnicott. As a result the daughter's 'true self', as Winnicott (1960) might have put it, her 'needy little girl self', as Eichenbaum and Orbach (1985) put it, readily goes into hiding.

The solution, they argue, is to counter the social processes that cause women to become split off from their 'true self needs. This, say Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987), includes refusing to adopt a Freudian stance, which they characterise as disqualifying as unrealisable pre-Oedipal desire women's longing to have their unmet infantile needs of the mother satisfied. Instead, they argue, therapists should interpret and make conscious the resistance stemming from such repudiation of women's needs as this resistance is transferred on to the therapist qua mother. Otherwise women are liable prematurely to quit therapy in the belief that their needs are not sufficiently important, or out of fear lest they offend and tire the therapist as in infancy they seemingly tired and upset their mothers.

Other therapists at the Centre equally insist on the importance of interpreting the transference into therapy of feelings first apparently experienced in relation to the mother. But in a sense they seek to deconstruct rather than shore up the fantasy of the all-nurturant mother/therapist who, but for patriarchy's disqualification of women's needs, has the wherewithal fully to meet her daughter's/patient's every need.

In addition, Sheila Ernst (1977) draws attention to the negative aspect of women's sense of mergence with their mothers as [204] described by Chodorow. She cites the histories of

several of her patients to illustrate the harm done women by remaining wedded to the first relation with the mother, to the mother's childhood image of them. Far from fostering infantile sense of fusion with the mother, Ernst implies, therapy should help women overcome its crippling and constraining effects by becoming separate and independent. This involves the therapist gradually disillusioning the patient of the fantasy of identifying with, of being one with the therapist, just as Winnicott says the mother, after an initial period of absolute adaptation to the infant's needs, gradually fails perfectly to adapt to its needs thereby disillusioning it of the omnipotent fantasy of having the whole world at its command.

Therapy, according to Ernst again following Winnicott, also involves interpreting and making conscious - deconstructing - the grandiose illusion whereby recognition of the mother's separateness, and awareness of the dependence n her to which this recognition gives rise, is denied and refused in relation to the therapist. The task of therapy, in Ernst's terms, thus becomes one of freeing women from the alluring fantasy of omnipotence and grandiosity involved in feeling fused with the mother so as to escape and become independent of this feeling's all too real constraints. But this is no easy task, she says, given the tenacity with which mothers often hold on to their daughters as a result of the lack of power socially allotted them beyond home and family.

Resistance to the reality of separation and difference, writes fellow-therapist Marie Maguire (1987), is also fuelled by the considerable power invested in fantasy in the mother beyond the limited power actually accorded her as primary caregiver. She argues that recognition of difference from the mother initially evokes the feeling, described by Klein, that the mother is all-powerful container of everything good, the child feeling entirely empty by comparison. While boys are able to deal constructively with this feeling, says Maguire, through realising themselves as different but equal through achievements in work outside the maternal domain of hearth and home, girls are forced to compare themselves on this self same ground with their mothers in so far as they too are encouraged to become mothers. They are therefore more likely, says Maguire to react negatively to perception of difference and separation from the mother by enviously seeking to spoil the mother's seeming goodness. In this they seek to do away [205] with the seeming difference between them and their mothers that evokes such painful feelings of emptiness and depletion. This in turn gives rise to the fantasy, claims Maguire following Klein, of the mother as retaliating and envious destroyer of the daughter. Only by interpreting, working through - and thus deconstructing -these omnipotent fantasies, as transferred into therapy, of the self and mother as containing all that is destructive and bad, or all that is nurturant and good, she implies, can women begin to realise the reality of limitation, separateness, and difference that these fantasies otherwise impede.

CONCLUSION - FORGETTING THE FATHER?

But where are the actualities of power in all this? Feminist therapists, as I have sought to show, clearly address issues of sexual inequality in their theories. Yet why does their practice seemingly pay so much attention to deconstructing the power - both actual and fantasised - of infant and mother to the neglect of that of the father? Why does it too singularly fail to recognise ways in which patriarchal authority and sexual difference and inequality also determine mothering, including the child's dawning awareness of separation from the mother?

It is not even as though British School analysts, from whom the feminist therapists I have been discussing derive much of their mother-centred approach, altogether neglect the place of the

father. Marion Milner, for instance, attributes the source of her patient Susan's omnipotent fantasy of being everything to her mother not only to her mother's repeatedly shoring up this fantasy - addressing her 'Oh Moon of my Delight', and inciting her to love her, 'Yes, the whole world' (Milner 1969: 325, 420n) - but also to her mother's failure to acknowledge that the lodger was Susan's father. Hence, according to Milner, Susan's fascination with and repeated acquiescence as a child in an elderly neighbour's exhibitionism. For the sight of his penis served to reassure her that all power - including that of the phallus - did not reside in her.
Some reasons have already been indicated why developments both within and outside psychoanalysis led to its greater attention to mothering. The exaggeration in feminist theory and practice of this focus to the neglect of the place of the father is however surprising given feminism's commitment to bringing to public [206] consciousness the iniquities of patriarchy. Furthermore, and paradoxically, feminism's new-found emphasis on mothering comes perilously close to repeating the compelling tendency of much non-feminist psychology toward mother-blaming.

On the other hand, psychoanalytic feminism's current attention to mothering is an understandable reaction against patriarchalism, including that of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is in keeping with feminism's concern to right the wrongs of patriarchy by developing a woman-centred, 'woman-identified-woman' theory and practice in the interests of forging the solidarity and caring warmth between women, including mothers and daughters, necessary to women banding together to improve their social lot.

The focus of feminist therapy on mothering is also not surprising given the lack of any obvious father-figure in woman-woman therapy in which the woman therapist - because of the social equation of her sex with mothering - is much more likely and immediately to elicit issues relating to the mother, and to become the target of issues concerning power just as the actual mother does because of her greater physical presence in the child's early life. As analysts Herman and Lewis observe:

> It is our impression, based on clinical experience, that daughters often displace their anger at their critical, aloof, neglectful, or absent fathers onto their mothers. Fathers' lack of interest in their daughters is accepted as an inevitable, even natural state of affairs, while any slight on the part of the mother is bitterly resented.
>
> (*Herman and Lewis 1986: 155-6*)

However understandable, the focus of feminist therapy on the mother carries the risk, as described in the family by Herman and Lewis and as in non-feminist psychoanalysis, of attending so much to power relations - both fantasised and real - operating within the parent-child, therapist-patient dyad that all sight is lost of the real inequalities of power by sex, race, and class that also conditions this dyad from without.

In a sense, Foucault glosses over this problem to the extent that he refuses any distinctions of power - including presumably those of inner and outer, fantasy and reality. Instead he insists that power is produced everywhere the same, inside and outside [207] therapy alike. By contrast, and even though it sometimes focuses so much on internal fantasy to the neglect of external reality, psychoanalysis rightly recognises that there is a distinction. And it is here, as I have sought to demonstrate, that its value to the deconstructionist project of Foucault and his feminist followers lies; namely in deconstructing and disabusing us of the fantasies of power, as transferred into therapy, that otherwise so obstruct our effectively challenging the

realities of its actual unequal distribution (Frosh 1987). Here lies, by the same token, the value of feminist psychoanalysis to the deconstruction of the power relations social psychology arguably needs to attend to outside therapy. [End of page 207]