Gender Bias in Developmental Psychology Textbooks: The Example of Sigmund Freud

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Abstract:

The vast majority of textbooks in developmental psychology, child psychology, and human development include a chapter or section on theories of development. The theories described are most often the theories of dead white Western men ([1], p. 129). However, what has traditionally been excluded from these selected theories are the beliefs about and treatment of women by these male theorists. One example is Sigmund Freud. His theory of psychosexual development is usually part of the canon but not his ideas about the differences in development between women and men. This article describes the problem of gender bias in the theories described in developmental psychology texts, explaining that much of this bias related to Freud and the other male theorists, is what is not reported rather than what is said. Suggestions are provided as to how to correct this injustice in developmental psychology texts and courses.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

Gender bias in the field of psychology has historically been an issue that has gone underreported in the literature. This is especially true in developmental psychology textbooks. For example, G. Stanley Hall is often described as the father of American developmental and child psychology, but his belief that women should not go to college is not included. The psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson and the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg are also reported, but not the fact that the research studies that contribute to the development of these theories are conducted on male populations [2]. The same things can be said about Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychosexual development. The purpose of this article is to describe Freud’s views concerning female development and propose alternatives to how Freud and his theories can be discussed in human development texts. Why is this important? During the 20th century, developmental psychology texts reported Freud’s theories, particularly his psychosexual theory of development, but did not report that his researches were based on male development and inferred to female development[3]. In the 1990s, several research studies conducted and theoretical arguments proposed to address this inequitable treatment of gender inequity in psychology and human development texts[3, 4]. More recent publications have also reported gender bias in developmental psychology texts [2]. However, current texts continue to discuss Freud and others without referring to their beliefs and practices regarding gender issues [2]. This article is divided into the following three sections. The first
The second section describes alternatives to Freud’s theory of female development. The last section provides suggestions for reducing gender bias in the theoretical presentations of both developmental psychology textbooks and in the content of undergraduate and graduate courses in human development.

2. Freud’s Theory of Female Development

Sigmund Freud explains in numerous publications his beliefs concerning female development [5, 6]. While all of Freud’s writings on female development are too numerous to report, some of his most salient beliefs include, the development of penis envy in females, the passive nature of women, the tendency of women to develop neuroses more than men, the lack of inventions and discoveries made by women, and the inferior ethical development of women as related to men [5].

Freud and his followers study male development and then attempt to apply their findings to females. Freud [7] said, We have been in the habit of taking as the subject of investigations the male child, the little boy. With little girls, so we have supposed, things must be similar, though in some ways or other they must nevertheless be different (p. 306). Freud went on to say, The point in development at which this difference lay cannot be clearly determined (p. 306). Still, Freud delegates the development of the female child to a subordinate position through his emphasis on penis envy. Freud remarked, They notice the penis of a brother or playmate at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis ([7], p. 309). Thus, during the phallic stage of psychosexual development, girls realize they are inferior to boys, according to Freud. This is rarely, if ever mentioned in introductory developmental psychology texts. Usually, a cursory and superficial explanation of the stages of development is presented. Students, especially in lifespan courses of development, barely have time to name the psychosexual stages of development, much less consider why there is a phallic stage of development for girls as well as boys.

Another differentiation Freud makes between women and men is that women are essentially passive while men are active [8]. Freud has disdained for passivity and his views of women are sexist and patronizing throughout his lifetime. According to Roazen [5], Freud continued to conceive of a woman as a defective man (p. 470). Some historians have pointed that this view of women may have been influenced by Freud’s wife, Martha Bernays. Martha has been described as passive and did not take an interest in Freud’s work or research [5, 9].

Women are also more neurotic than men according to Freud. This is especially true with regard to hysteria [5]. Freud does admit, however, that society’s expectations of sexual abstinence for women before marriage is also responsible for a higher level of neuroses in women [10]. The result is that when the girls parental authorities suddenly allow her to fall in love, she is unequal to this psychical achievement and enters marriage uncertain of her own feelings ([11], p. 176).

Freud also believed that women were inferior when it came to inventions and discoveries (Freud, 1933). This belief can also be traced all the way back to his book on religion, Totem and Taboo [8]. In Totem and Taboo, Freud postulated that man first lived in a primordial band or horde, which was dominated by a father who monopolized all the women ([5], p. 260). Anthropologists scoff at this notion of primitive herds and other researchers such as Stone (1976) have traced civilizations back to numerous matriarchies and matrilineal societies. In addition, during Freud’s day, women in many countries were not allowed to receive a patent for their inventions and have to acquiesce or attribute their inventions to men in order for an invention to be patented. This was certainly true in the case of Catherine Littlefield Greene who invented the cotton gin, although this was attributed to Eli Whitney [2, 12].

Finally, Freud believed that women were inferior with regard to ethical development [7]. Freud said,
I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men ([7], p. 314). Of course Freud is not the only culprit in developmental psychology texts that report inferior moral development in women [2]. For decades, Lawrence Kohlbergs theory of moral development has appeared in numerous texts on human development, reporting or implying the inferior moral development of women. What is missing from these sources is the fact that Kohlbergs research was done on males. Fortunately, Carol Gilligan has weighed in on the topic and shown that women are not inferior in moral development, but they are different [13].

Several researchers believe that Freud is no more biased than any other psychologists or scientists during the times in which he lived [5, 6, 9]. For example, Roazen[5] reported, Freuds attitudes toward women have to be evaluated in the light of his own times (p. 468). Even though we consider Freuds attitudes toward women and gender equity in light of the times in which he lived, alternative theories to Freuds theory of female development should be included in human development texts [3].

3. Alternatives to Freud’s Theory of Femal Development

What would be appropriate alternatives to presenting Freuds theory of psychosexual development in developmental psychology texts? There are multiple possibilities. Three of these will be explored here. First, developmental psychology texts should be updated to reflect Freuds views of female development. Second, Karen Horneys criticisms of Freuds views of female development should also be included. Finally, the explorations of Sigmund Freuds daughter Anna Freud should be considered. Anna Freud studies childrens development for decades [9], while Sigmund Freuds research is conducted on adults and inferred to childhood development [5].

Realistically, human development texts already have enough information about theories of development. However, a description of gender bias in Freuds psychosexual theory as well as in other theories is justified if students are to be encouraged to think critically. Students should be asked to critique Freuds stages and asked to ponder why there is a phallic stage of development described for girls as well as boys. Kohlbergs theory of moral development has been questioned for gender bias and many developmental texts now balance a discussion of his theory with the theory of Carol Gilligan [13]. The question we must ask is this. Is there a counter theory related to psychosexual development that can be presented along with Freuds views? The answer is yesthe feminine psychological development of Karen Horney.

Karen Horney has described another perspective on sexual development in girls. According to Horney [14], the girl has no reason at all to envy the boy. In her capacity for motherhood she has such indubitable biological advantages that one could rather think of the reverse, an envy of motherhood in the boys mind (p. 77). She goes on to say that productivity in work, inventions, and discoveries can be considered a male compensation for his inability to carry and produce a human life. Horney is just as bold as Freud in his conception of sexual development. She develops the term womb envy in boys to counter Freuds proposal concerning penis envy in girls [15].

While Sigmund Freud is included in most theoretical discussions of child development, unfortunately his daughter, Anna Freud is often omitted. This should be baffling to instructors of developmental psychology who are familiar with Anna Freuds work. For example, some human development texts discuss defense mechanisms, giving credit to Sigmund Freud for their development. However, it is Anna Freud who studied defense mechanisms and explains the nature of these [16]. Anna Freud, unlike her father, studies childrens development for many years and developed many theories of and specific approaches to child development and education. Some examples of her contributions include her work in
developing a continuum and scale for measuring the self-reliance or emotional dependency of children and adults. She catalogues normal and exceptional development of preadolescence and adolescence. Anna Freud extends the knowledge base of childhood development for multiple professionals including psychologists, educators, social workers, sociologists and human ecologists. She also organizes and leads a group of prominent researchers, including Erik Erikson and Margaret Mahler, in the study of personality development [2].

4. Conclusions: Suggestions for Reducing Gender Bias in Developmental Psychology

We have briefly presented Freuds theory of female development and alternatives to balance his biased views. Many current human development texts address the controversial nature of Sigmund Freuds theories, but not the issue of gender. For example, Lisa Fiore [17] discusses the acceptance and rejection of Freuds theories by major scientists of today. She reports, Eric Kandel, a 2000 Nobel Prize winner, called psychoanalysis the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind (p. 31). Fiori then describes the opposing view of Allan Hobson of Harvard Medical School who argued just as forcefully that scientific investigations of Freuds concepts reveal errors in major parts of his theory (p. 31). But, she does not mention at all the issue of gender in Freuds theories. Until the vast majority of introductory developmental psychology textbooks address this bias, we strongly recommend that the alternatives to Freuds theories proposed in this article be presented in human development undergraduate and graduate courses.

Paul Roazen[5] suggested that Freuds attitudes toward women have to be evaluated in the light of his own times (p. 468). Statements such as this are often made about attitudes toward women. There are two salient comments that can be made regarding Roazens excuse. First, there are other male contemporaries of Sigmund Freud who presents a vastly different view of women. Specifically Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, born two years after Freud, writes extensively about the female culture[10, 18]. Simmel explained that the cultural values of his day were determined by men. In fact, if women were allowed to create the cultural milieu of societies, what would result would be qualitatively different in multiple ways. The female sense of justice, which differs from the male in many respects, would create a different law as well [19]. Not every professional males attitudes toward women are as condescending as Freuds.

Second, we cannot help but wonder why gender issues are not treated with the same respect as racial issues. Should we excuse historical gender inequity when we would not do the same for racial or ethnic injustice? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is often implicitly, yes. For example, the world heroically does not tolerate apartheid in South Africa. However, today it looks the other way at gender inequity and injustice in many areas of the world. With this in mind, it may seem trivial to some readers that we would call attention to gender bias in developmental psychology textbooks. We think otherwise. We believe that gender bias in any form, no matter how seemingly small or great should be eliminated. Developmental psychology textbooks are but one example.

References

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