

## Reflections on Freud's Theory of Homosexuality

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As a therapist who is interested in queer theory and works closely with the LGBTQ community, I read Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* with curiosity and some tempered skepticism. While many queer theorists have criticized psychoanalysis for historically pathologizing non-hetero-normative forms of sexual expression, a closer examination of Freud's own writings on the subject suggests a far less demonstrative position than is often attributed to him. My reading of Freud's essay on "sexual aberrations," in which "inversion" is discussed at some length, suggests a thinker who was grappling to formulate a comprehensive theory of sexuality, while remaining circumspect in his conclusions about homosexuality.

A great deal has been made of Freud's progressive perspective on homosexuality and his pronouncement that psychoanalysis should not be promoted as a treatment solely to "cure" same-sex attraction. Indeed, Freud's moral views on the topic appear to be quite enlightened for his time, especially when contrasted with the more antiquated assertions he propagated about female sexuality. Historians often cite a letter written by Freud in 1935 as evidence of his benevolence towards homosexuals. In this letter, Freud responds to a mother who expresses concerns about her son's homosexuality and asks whether psychoanalysis might be used to change his sexual orientation. Freud's response, written in English, is notable:

I gather from your letter that your son is a homosexual. I am most impressed by the fact that you do not mention this term yourself in your information about him. May I question you, why you avoid it? Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.). It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime and cruelty too (Freud, 1935, pp. 423-424).

As this document illustrates, Freud was opposed to criminalizing homosexuality as a "vice" or "degradation," however, a closer examination of his written thoughts also suggests he was far from definitive in his theoretical thinking about the topic. His assertion that he considered homosexuality to be a "variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development" could and often was misinterpreted by others to suggest Freud viewed homosexuality as a deviation from "normal" human sexual development and, in the most literal sense, "pathological."

Freud takes up this topic in his seminal work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in which he argues that "normal sexual life" requires resolution of the Oedipal complex, "in which the pursuit of pleasure comes under the sway of the reproductive function and in which the component instincts, under the primacy of a single erotogenic zone, form a firm organization directed towards a sexual aim attached to some extraneous sexual object" (Freud, 1905/1975, p. 63). Given the primacy he places on the Darwinian notion of natural selection, one might expect Freud to have concluded that "normal" sexual development requires an *object* choice of the opposite sex, thereby fulfilling the species' primal instinct to procreate. However, his writings were never so doctrinaire to suggest such a reductionistic conclusion. Rather, Freud takes a more ambiguous stance, being careful not to equate homosexuality with a "perversion," rather referring to same-sex attraction as an "inversion."

While there is much to criticize in Freud's theory of sexuality one needs to be careful not to confuse what Freud *actually* wrote with the writings of his followers, many of whom were more than willing to twist Freud's ideas to support their own homophobic theories and practices.

For some neo-Freudians, any variation from the biological “norm” of heterosexual coital intercourse was thought to be “deviant” and evidence of a personality disorder in need of a “cure” through psychoanalysis.

Freud’s thoughts on sexuality were quite revolutionary when one thinks about them in the context of the post-Victorian era in which he was formulating his central ideas on human sexuality. His thinking stands in stark contrast to the prevailing moral positions propagated by the Church and many European states at the time. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, as in later writings, he rejects the conventional wisdom that sexuality is biologically determined (by gender) and thus pre-ordained at birth. Instead, he describes human sexuality as a complex developmental process, ever-evolving as the individual interacts with the environment and one that takes a range of different expressions. For Freud, the sexual drive had no predetermined *object* choice for discharge and so a person could be attracted to someone of the opposite sex, the same sex, or even both. Similarly, Freud argued that the method of sexual gratification could widely vary among people: whether it be concentrated on the genitals, the mouth, or any of the many erogenous zones of the human body. In exposing these diverse ways in which sexuality could be expressed, Freud openly challenged the puritanical notion of morality. Instead of maligning certain sexual practices as “degenerate,” he saw many such practices as a part of normal sexual development.

Freud argued that sexual desire begins not at puberty, as was believed at the time, but much earlier in the child’s development and persuasively argued that childhood sexuality was “polymorphously perverse,” in that the objects and methods of sexual satisfaction are multifarious and undifferentiated. These polymorphously perverse tendencies include homosexual desire. Despite its negative connotation in today’s vernacular, Freud did not equate the word “perversion” with “abnormality” or “degeneracy.” For him, the word had a more neutral connotation and was not restricted solely to sexual acts and thoughts that deviated from heterosexual intercourse.

Freud’s conclusion that sexual desire begins with a universal bisexuality or “polymorphic perversion” helps to explain how he understood homosexuality. He states in *An Autobiographical Study* that homosexuality can be traced back to “the constitutional bisexuality of all human beings” (Freud, 1925/1935, p. 38). Exclusive heterosexuality, he suggests, is far from given but rather evolves through a long and difficult process requiring the progressive repression of the original objects and methods of sexual desire. Thus, he implies that the existence of heterosexuality is in fact dependent on the repression of homosexual desire, a phenomenon that is universal to all of us. He goes on to conclude that because homosexuality is part of our “constitutional” nature, it “scarcely deserves” being categorized as a perversion (ibid).

Rejecting homosexuality as a fixed biological condition affecting a minority of the population, Freud argued (in a footnote added to *Three Essays* in 1915): “all humans are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious... Indeed, libidinal attachments to persons of the same sex play no less a part of factors in normal mental life than do similar attachments to the opposite sex” (Freud, 1905/1975, p. 11). In this quote, we see Freud as objective scientist, rather than social critic. However, there were times when Freud could be quite outspoken on the topic and contemptuous of those who spoke “with moral indignation and without understanding.” (Freud, 1925/1935, p. 37). Personally, I think Freud understood that homosexuality was not an illness in need of “correction,” but that social homophobia was frequently the source of much of the anxiety and depression many gay men and women experience when forced to repress their own *natural* same-sex attraction.

## References

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