

# Freud: who seduced whom?

Modern psychoanalysis depends on theories derived from Freud's work with his patients.  
But he may not have recalled his own work correctly

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**F**REUD invented the form of psychotherapy called psychoanalysis in the 1890s. His conclusion that infantile sexual wishes persisted outside awareness in adults—and could bring about psychopathology—was crucial to the subsequent development of psychoanalysis by Freud and his followers. But what if part of the evidence, Freud drew on to support his conclusion turned out to be dubious? If this was the case, the history of psychoanalysis might appear very different. The reasons why such dubious evidence became the foundation of his later work would also reveal some interesting things about Freud's own mind.

Much of Freud's early work with patients was concerned with the cause of a condition known as hysteria. Definitions of hysteria have varied over the centuries, and the boundaries have been imprecise. In recent years the term "hysterical" has been applied to patients with a variety of complaints which seem to take a physical form, but for which no physical basis can be found.

The ancient Greeks attributed hysterical symptoms to the wandering of the womb throughout the body. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the nervous system replaced the uterus as the favoured source of the disease. By Freud's time, a theory of "hysteria" based on the nervous system was giving way to a psychological one. He believed, as did many of his contemporaries, that "hysteria" was a single disorder, with many clinical expressions, and his various attempts to explain the disorder reflected that assumption.

In one of his early reports, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", which he wrote in 1896, Freud put forward the idea that hysteria has its origins in infantile sexual experiences. In several subsequent accounts he repudiated this view and substituted other theories. These revised theories have been pivotal for the development of modern psychoanalysis.

In 1914, for instance, Freud wrote of a "mistaken idea" he had had about hysterical patients, which he said might have been almost fatal to psychoanalysis. He acknowledged that previously he had been inclined to accept statements made by patients in which they ascribed their symptoms to passive sexual experiences in the first years of childhood. This 1896 idea, which has come to be known as the seduction theory, he was now rejecting. He said that the infantile sexual traumas his "hysterical" patients had reported to him were not true; they had imagined them. He did not explain how he had come to this conclusion.

In 1925, in his *Autobiographical Study*, Freud again mentioned an "error" which he said might well have had fatal consequences for the whole of his work. He wrote that "under the influence of the technical procedure" which he had used previously, the majority of his patients had reproduced from their childhood scenes in which they had been sexually seduced by an adult. "With female patients the part of seducer was almost always assigned to their father." He had believed these stories, he said, and "discovered the roots" of the subsequent disorder in these experiences of sexual seduction in childhood. However, he said he had later been "obliged to recognise that these scenes of seduction had never taken place", and that they were only imagined. Again, he did not explain how he had come to recognise that the stories had been false.

Even later, in 1933, he wrote that in the period in which his

main interest had been directed to discovering infantile sexual traumas, "almost all" his women patients had told him that they had been seduced by their fathers. He had been "driven to recognise in the end that these reports were untrue," he said, and so had come to understand that hysterical symptoms are derived from imagined events and not from real occurrences.

A few months ago I became interested in some recent research on Freud by Han Israëls, a Dutch scholar of Freud, and by the previous research of Frank Cioffi, a philosopher at the University of Essex. I realised that Freud's label, "seduction theory", is a misnomer, as the theory seems to encompass the whole gamut of possible childhood sexual experiences, including being raped. This theory linked hysteria with any experience of precocious sexual arousal by another person. However, the name "seduction" has gained widespread currency, so I shall use it here.

As I reread Freud's 1896 papers, in which he first presented the seduction theory, I realised that his patients had not told him of their experiences of sexual seduction; rather, he had inferred from his analysis of their symptoms that they had had such experiences. "At the bottom of every case of hysteria," Freud reported in 1896, "there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood but which can be reproduced through the work of psychoanalysis in spite of the intervening decades." He believed this was "an important finding, the discovery of a *caput Nili* [source of the Nile] in neuropathology . . ."

It is doubtful whether "finding" and "discovery" are the best words to describe what Freud was reporting. "The fact is," he wrote in the same paper, "that these patients never repeat these stories spontaneously, nor do they ever in the course of a treatment suddenly present the physician with the complete recollection of a scene of this kind." As he saw it, the memories were unconscious—that is, outside the patient's awareness. It would be useless, he said, to ask a hysteric about childhood traumas because "traces are never present in conscious memory, only in the symptoms of the illness". He believed that the traumas had left their marks in the form of the symptoms and that by reading these symptoms he could discern the nature of these traumas and what had caused them.

Freud's patients knew nothing about these scenes. He found that they were "indignant as a rule" if he warned them that such scenes were going to emerge. In 1896 he wrote: "Only the strongest compulsion of the treatment can induce them to embark on a reproduction of them. While they are recalling these infantile experiences to consciousness, they suffer under the most violent sensations, of which they are ashamed and which they try to conceal; and even after they have gone through them once more in such a convincing manner, they still attempt to withhold belief from them, by emphasising the fact that, unlike what happens in the case of other forgotten material, they still have no feeling of remembering the scenes." So it seems that neither before nor after their sessions with Freud did his patients recall the alleged early sexual experiences, which according to him had occurred before they were four years old.

There is other evidence that these "experiences" were theoretical requirements of Freud's thinking, rather than memories of his patients. Leopold Löwenfeld, a Munich psychiatrist, described and criticised Freud's 1896 theory in both the

► 1899 and 1903 editions of his book *Sexual Life and Nervous Disease. The Sexual Sources of Nervous Disorders*. In this volume, Löwenfeld reported how he had happened to come across one of the patients on whom Freud had used his "analytic method". According to Löwenfeld, the patient was certain that "the infantile sexual scene which analysis had apparently uncovered was pure fantasy and had never really happened". Löwenfeld found it "difficult to understand" how Freud could still maintain that the "pictures" that had arisen in his patients' minds had been

memories of real events, and still more so that Freud could consider this assumption proven in each single case of hysteria.

Freud himself distinguished between his hysterical patients and other people who did report sexual experiences remembered from childhood. "We have heard and acknowledged," Freud wrote in 1896, that "there are numerous people who have a very clear recollection of infantile sexual experiences and who nevertheless do not suffer from hysteria . . . According to our understanding of the neurosis, people of this kind ought not to be hysterical at all, or at any rate, not hysterical as a result of the scenes they consciously remember. With our patients, those memories are never conscious. The scenes must be present as unconscious memories; only so long as, and in so far as, they are unconscious are they able to create and maintain hysterical symptoms."

In other words, Freud was inferring the occurrence of traumas in the early childhood of hysterical patients, not hearing accounts of them. The advice that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once gave to a friend in a letter seems relevant. Writing about Freud, Wittgenstein said: "He is full of fishy thinking and his charm and the charm of the subject is so great that you may be easily fooled . . . So hold on to your brains."

The seduction theory involved further "fishy thinking". In Freud's 1925 version of this theory, the seducer in most cases had been an adult, and in female cases the culprit had "almost always" been the father. Freud repeated this last point, about the father, in his 1933 version. However, earlier accounts had told a different story. In 7 of the 13 cases Freud had reported in 1896, the supposed assailants had been "blameless children". These were "mostly brothers who for years on end had carried on sexual relations with sisters a little younger than themselves".

The only other abusers he cited in relation to these 13 cases were nursemaids, governesses, domestic servants, and teachers. Later in 1896, in reporting on 18 cases, which included these 13, Freud added to the previous list of abusers only adult strangers and "a close relative"—without indicating that relative's identity. He did not mention fathers in the 1896 papers. Nowhere did Freud explain or even indicate this basic discrepancy between his initial reports and his later stories about those same cases.

Fisher still was the manner in which Freud rejected the seduction theory. He might have done so on failing to find any new patients with hysteria who showed evidence of sexual experience in early childhood. But that is not what Freud said had happened. He had changed his mind, he alleged, about the original patients, though he never indicated how many of those 18 patients he had changed his mind about. In 1914, he said



that the theory "broke down under the weight of its own improbability and contradiction in definitely ascertainable circumstances", but did not say what those circumstances were. Without knowing the circumstances, we cannot judge how valid the reasons were for Freud's change of mind. But it is doubtful that there were any such circumstances.

Freud had initially ascertained or guessed at a childhood seduction in a patient. But how could he have disproved its occurrence? Did he approach the fathers of his patients? Did he ask them, as Cioffi once imagined, "Your

daughter, sir, has alluded to some striking peculiarities in your sexual character. I wonder whether, in the interests of science, you would care to authenticate and perhaps enlarge on them?" Freud did not say he had done this. But even if he had, what—as Cioffi suggested—would a denial have proved?

It is possible to disprove a particular imputed seduction, or to rule out a certain suspected seducer. But proving that no seduction had ever occurred would be impossible. The alleged events had happened before the patients were four years old and outside their memories. Further, among the "seducers" were just about all the people who could have come into contact with the child, including strangers, so possible sexual relations with all of them could never be ruled out. Given that the "seductions" were apparently based not upon patients' reports, but upon Freud's reconstructions of his patients' childhoods from their symptoms and their behaviour in sessions with him, no facts could contradict these "seductions". So Freud could not have based his decision to disbelieve in the seductions on factual evidence for their non-occurrence.

Other issues arise. Freud later said that his patients had invented stories of seductions. But it appears that he was inventing certain memories of his own. He was saying that his former patients had told him stories about memories of seductions that had not occurred; and in doing so, he was telling a story about memories of being told things that he had not been told. He was saying that they had alleged they had been seduced—and that he had been seduced by their stories.

Had he forgotten what he had written in 1896? Had he simply not reread these papers in the intervening years? Freud used to point out that memory lapses are analogous to censorship in books of proscribed information and ideas. He believed in looking for the motives of forgetting. He was fond of quoting Friedrich Nietzsche: "I did this says my memory, I cannot have done this says my pride, and remains inexorable. In the end, memory yields." Perhaps Freud was too proud to admit what had really gone on with his patients.

But he had admitted erring in having believed his patients' stories (even if they had never told the stories). So he was capable of admitting having erred. Perhaps there was another reason for Freud's apparent memory lapse. Was he knowingly engaged in invention? Did Freud deliberately rewrite the history of his own work?

The matter is crucial for the history of psychoanalysis: in later writings Freud said that his patients had invented stories of sexual seduction to mask repressed memories of their infantile sexual wishes. Writing in 1925, in *An Autobiographical Study*, he said that as far as his patients' psychological symptoms were concerned "psychical reality was of more

importance than material reality". He had, he now said, "in fact stumbled for the first time upon the Oedipus complex, which was later to assume such an overwhelming importance". He said that at the time—that is, in 1896—he had not recognised it "in its disguise of phantasy". By "phantasy" he meant his patients' allegedly imagined reports of early sexual seductions. "Only later," he wrote in 1933, had he been "able to recognise in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women". That was why, according to Freud, his patients had invented stories of being seduced.

Why, then, had Freud invented their stories? Let us apply to him the same logic he had applied to his former patients. According to Freud's own theory, he might have been hiding his own earlier wishes to "seduce" or "assault" them, with stories that they had been sexually abused in childhood. It was as if Freud's mind had completed the circle by eating its own tail—or tale. If Freud's patients had never told him these stories, then what is regarded today as powerful evidence for the Oedipus complex never existed.

Freud's daughter Anna once wrote that "keeping up the seduction theory [by which she meant the theory that hysteria was due to real childhood seduction] would mean to abandon the Oedipus complex, and with it the whole importance of phantasy life, conscious or unconscious phantasy". She added: "there would have been no psychoanalysis afterwards"

Freud had arrived at the Oedipus complex by inferring in therapy sessions—and from his own self-analysis—the presence of infantile sexual fantasies. He had arrived at the supposed sexual seductions by similar means. If he acknowledged that the seductions had never occurred, this implied that his method for discovering the occurrence of seductions had been unreliable. The same could have been said of the Oedipus complex. Perhaps that is why Freud later alleged that his patients had told him about the seductions, rather than saying he had reconstructed them.

### Seduction or fantasy?

Freud presumed that an infantile sexual fantasy is less acceptable to a patient's conscious mind than a supposed seduction by another person in early childhood would be. Whether this is plausible I do not know. I believe that even in today's supportive climate, many people find it very painful to admit having engaged as young children in a real sexual relationship with an adult. Freud's patients' alleged seduction experiences were, he said, expressions of disguised infantile erotic feelings for the parent of the opposite sex. Yet among the people whom his 1896 papers had cited as "guilty of abuses", no mother or father was specifically alleged to have seduced a child. Even Freud's later versions of what had happened did not specifically incriminate mothers as sexual abusers. It seems arbitrary and unwarranted, then, for Freud to have argued that his patients' alleged stories of sexual seduction represented hidden sexual desires for their fathers or mothers.

In 1916, Freud gave another sort of explanation altogether—a "daring" explanation, he said—for "primal phantasies", such as Oedipal or seduction phantasies, which he labelled a "phylogenetic endowment". In these phantasies "the individual reaches beyond his own experience into primaevial experience at points where his own experience has been too rudimentary," he said. Events such as childhood seduction that emerge during analysis had once been "real occurrences in the primeval times of the human family" and children in their phantasies were remembering, so to speak, prehistoric events. If this was the origin of the phantasies, Freud is exempt from the need to find evidence of seductions, real or imagined.

With a few notable exceptions—mainly Israëls; the German psychologist Isolde Vetter; before them the American psychologist Jean Schimek; and Cioffi—generations of scholars,

biographers and psychoanalysts have accepted Freud's rewriting of his own history, despite published evidence from Freud's own pen in 1896. Why? The 1896 papers are in Freud's *Collected Works*, which are widely available.

Over the years, I read Freud's 1896 paper "The Aetiology of Hysteria" a number of times. I had even underlined passages that betrayed as false Freud's later versions of what had gone on with his patients. Yet I had failed to recognise the implications of these passages. For so many years, so many people, including Freud, have repeated his rewritten version of history that it has acquired the status of historical truth. His 1896 account so clashes with what has become received history that the disparity has largely escaped recognition.

Someone else who failed to recognise the clash is former psychoanalyst Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson. He argued that Freud had lacked the strength of character to sustain a belief in accounts of seduction by his patients, especially female ones. In his book *Assault on Truth*, published in 1984, Masson wrote: "Freud's female patients had the courage to face what had happened to them in childhood—often this included violent scenes of rape by a father—and to communicate their traumas to Freud, no doubt hesitating to believe their own memories and reluctant to remember the deep shame and hurt they had felt. Freud listened and understood and gave them permission to remember and speak of these terrible events. Freud did not think they were fantasies."

According to Masson, Freud's later repudiation of the seduction theory had been a "travesty of the truth"—not because the seductions had never occurred and therefore could not be repudiated, but because they had occurred.

Psychoanalysis can be criticised for giving too much weight to "phantasies" as causes of mental disorder and too little to real childhood events. Masson seemed to be chiding Freud for denying the causal importance of real events—though the only such events Masson's book dealt with are sexual: assaults, rapes and seductions.

More relevantly, Masson had misread the theory he was rhapsodising about. Freud's patients had faced what had "happened" to them in childhood and stayed unconvinced that anything of that sort had happened. The evidence for their failure to be convinced appears in an appendix to Masson's own book, which reprints "The Aetiology of Hysteria". I think that the belief that Freud was telling the truth about his patients' "accounts" of seduction—and that they therefore had not been telling the truth—may have encouraged neglect of seductions, rapes and assaults of children, on the grounds that stories of such events were probably fictitious.

According to Freud's former colleague Josef Breuer, Freud was "given to absolute and exclusive formulations". This, said Breuer, was a "psychical need", which he thought had led to excessive generalisation. Even more could this be said of Masson. That may be why neither Freud nor Masson answered certain important questions related to the subject matter of Freud's seduction theory—for instance, to what extent should people who allege having been abused as children be believed? Can the precocious arousal of a young child's sexuality by another person increase the child's susceptibility to emotional difficulties years later? Are sexual assaults and seductions more common in the childhoods of people who grow up to be mentally disordered than in people who do not?

Unfortunately, Freud's "seduction" theory and his comments about it, initially and later, bring us no nearer to the answers. These problems will be solved only by careful research. □

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Further reading Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Ed. and Trans. J. Strachey), Hogarth Press, London, 1953. Jeffrey Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, Collins, Toronto, 1984.