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**FREUD'S THEORIES
OF LOVE & THEIR
APPLICATION TO
TREATMENT OF
LOVE CONFLICTS**



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Although Freud made many seminal contributions to the psychoanalytic theory of love, he never unified them into a single major work as he did with his studies on childhood sexuality, dreams, and psychoanalytic technique. This made his writings on love more difficult to understand and left Freud vulnerable to the criticism that he confused sexual instincts with love. In a detailed review of Freud's writings on love, Martin Bergman has identified three major theories of love contributed by Freud. Freud paved the way for subsequent investigations into love, and his theories have been useful in understanding and treating patients with various love pathologies. This paper will briefly summarize the highlights of Freud's basic contributions to love and their application to clinical work with a patient in the midst of a love triangle.

Freud's first theory of love was made possible by his discovery of infantile sexuality and of the impact of the child's early caretaking experiences on later adult love. In his "Three Essays on Sexuality" (Freud 1905a), Freud stated that in the early years of love the erotic desires of a child are focused on early caretakers, especially the parents. The mother or her

surrogate become both the first love and sexual object and serves as a template for subsequent loves. "There are good reasons why a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the first prototype of every relation of love. The finding of a love object is in fact a re-finding of It" (p. 222). This extremely important discovery about love, however, requires much greater elaboration. On the surface is his statement that the model of a child sucking at his mother's breast in the basic prototype might be taken to mean that the re-finding process involves part objects and not complete relationships. Freud also implies that an incestuous fixation may interfere with later adult capacity to love. As Bergmann (1987) has pointed out, Freud thus explored a problem at the core of all love relationships. The next love must recall the old, but this will not result in happiness if incestuous guilt is also reawakened. A new love may triumph over the incest barrier, thus leading to mastery of conflict. Freud further elaborated that formative early-life experiences may cause an individual to develop "pre-conditions for love." When these preconditions are neurotically rigid, subsequent adult choices of love partners may also be neurotically determined.

Freud's second theory of love grew out of his studies on narcissism and his discovery that in love narcissistic cathexes are shifted from the self to the love object. A disappointment in the primary love object could result in a narcissistic object choice or in difficulty in loving. Freud's writings on narcissism also emphasize that identification plays a crucial role in the

process of falling in love. In his 1914 essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” he included a classification of love reflecting his awareness of the fluidity of self and object representations and of the importance of early identifications. In this classification, a person may love:

1. According to the narcissistic type

- a. What he himself is
- b. What he himself was
- c. What he himself would like to be
- d. Someone who was once part of himself

2. According to the anaclitic type (attachment type)

- a. The woman who feeds him
- b. The man who protects him

In the clinical case to be presented, this classification has some use. However, transfers of libido from self to object can result in various problems. Over-idealization and excessive investment in the other can impoverish the lover’s sense of self and set the stage for subsequent disappointment when expectations are not met. Similarly, unrequited love can be such a disappointment that the lover gives up the quest for a lover and remains narcissistically fixated on himself. Furthermore, Freud’s theories of narcissism, ego, and ego ideal allow for an explanation of what happens when one falls in love. The normal tension between ego and ego ideal leaves the

lover feeling incomplete and discontent with himself. When the love object is idealized and libido transferred, the ego ideal is projected onto the loved object just as in childhood the child idealized the parents. When love is reciprocated by the loved object, the self is loved by the ego ideal and elation and bliss may ensue. The exchange between ego ideal and the beloved, as Bergmann points out, takes place unconsciously: “Only the experience of bliss becomes conscious.”

Freud’s third theory of love is the most misunderstood and emerged in his paper “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915a). Bergmann (1987) has assessed Freud’s struggle with the problem of how the drive for sex (a sexual instinct) can develop into love. Bergmann concludes that Freud never fully resolved this problem. Love could not be explained within the confines of instinct alone. However, Freud did make an important contribution to love theory as he struggled to get beyond instinct theory. He wrote:

The case of love and hate acquires a special interest from the circumstances that it refuses to be fitted into our scheme of instincts. . . . We are unwilling to think of love as being some kind of special component instinct of sexuality . . . We should prefer to regard loving as the expression of the whole sexual current of feeling. . . . [1915a, P-133]

Although Freud was discontent also with this idea of love as the whole current of feelings, this was nevertheless an extremely useful concept by which, as Bergmann (1987) carefully explains, Freud thereby has proposed

that all sexual wishes have been concentrated upon one person. The lover only seeks those sexual pleasures which he enjoys with the loved object and has no interest in any other. The loved object is idealized as the source of all sexual satisfaction. This line of thought gradually evolved into the notion that love is not an instinct but that it is the total ego which loves its objects (Bergmann 1987). Bergmann's proposal has important clinical implications. The capacity to love may be viewed as an ego function. The individual's manner of loving and acting sexually provides insight into the lover's emotional history and patterns of ego functioning, sexual and relationship fears, and defenses. As an ego function, the capacity to love has understandable developmental origins, strengths and weaknesses, and specific characteristics that can be clinically evaluated.

Freud made another contribution to work with love problems through his discoveries of transference and countertransference issues. As therapists for the lovesick and love worn, we face many unique challenges; empathic immersion in the minds of the patient opens us to intense emotional pressure, and patients show up in our dreams and fantasies. We are required to process our own countertransference reactions carefully in order to maintain perspective and to help the patient master powerful emotional forces within. Thus, we have to balance introspection and countertransference management and attunement to the patient with awareness of expanding theories of love and be able to use current theory as

a guide to understanding the patient's problems. This interplay between our theoretical views and our capacity for empathic interaction, I believe, is essential to a successful therapy. For we are both participants in the therapy as well as observers of it.

Thus, Freud's three theories of love enable us to understand different problems in loving and being loved. We can sort out the imprinting of early love experiences and the development of a "love template." We can assess the individual's preconditions for loving, different fixation points, and capacities for investment in the love object. We can understand what happens intrapsychically when one falls in love and how the ego functions in the process of love. We can evaluate various aspects of the individual's "re-finding process" and the unconscious motives for love choices. These ideas can be applied to a specific case, as will now be demonstrated.

CASE PRESENTATION

A 29-year-old graduate student sought my help because he was torn between two loves: his wife of 5 years and his girlfriend of 10 months. He began to feel distant from his wife shortly after the birth of their daughter, now 18 months old. He said he still loved his wife and did not wish to leave her. But he was never able to feel fully sexually satisfied with his wife. Now he felt passionately swept away by a 21-year-old woman in his program. They shared an immediate chemistry. One night when his wife had taken their baby to visit family, he and the younger woman went dancing and then made love. At first he thought of it as just a sexual diversion. She was playful and her lack of sexual inhibition seemed to liberate him sexually. He felt totally gratified. Then he became so obsessed with her that for the

first time in his life work seemed unimportant, and he let his graduate research slip.

His wife complained about his frequent absences and his loss of interest in sex, but she did not voice any suspicions. She trusted him, he said with a sigh. He felt he had no justification for the affair because his wife was a loving, devoted, attractive woman and a good mother. Unlike so many people in the midst of these types of split-object love triangles, he did not devalue or blame his wife for his outside affair. In fact, he still loved and admired her, although he faulted her for his lack of sexual satisfaction with her.

He had a great deal of guilt about the affair, guilt magnified by his strong religious convictions. Thus tormented by conflict, he knew he could not indefinitely continue the involvement with both women. For several sessions, he compared the two women and sought a deciding factor with which to make a choice.

He described his girlfriend as colorful and sexually exciting, but also as immature, moody, and unpredictable. He had the uncanny feeling that he had known her before. She taunted him to flaunt their affair in public and to leave his wife. He could not.

Early in therapy he demanded that I give him an answer about whom to choose. "Doctor," he said, "you're the expert, so what do I do?" His question surprised me for I hardly knew him and did not feel I was in a position to offer him advice, even if I was inclined to do so. I could only guess at the origins of and the underlying motivations for his split-object love affair.

I said that I could not tell him what to do, but that I could help him to understand himself so he would know what choice to make. I also confronted him about his evasiveness and pressed him for more information.

He then revealed that I was his third therapist. The first had sided with his wife and lectured him about his duty to wife and child. The other seemed to accept his involvement in the affair so much that he feared the therapist

was encouraging a lack of responsibility on his part. Now he openly wondered on what side I would come down.

I will pause here to make some observations about neutrality and preconditions for love. Experience with patients in the midst of various types of love conflicts cautions us against premature conclusions. Love-torn patients need, above all, someone who will maintain neutrality and help them confront their conflicts and assess their life circumstances. Freud, of course, spoke in favor of neutrality and also illuminated some of the dynamics of love triangles. His statement that “all love is a re-finding” made clear that adult choices derive from childhood experiences and unresolved oedipal-conflict “preconditions” for love. These preconditions could be more or less rigid and might compel a man to love only women in need of rescue, or compel woman to love exploitative men. One might be endlessly involved in replaying oedipal conflicts, and an incestuous fixation might inhibit adult love. In this case, the patient’s motivations for his affair were concealed by his evasiveness. His preoccupation with his girlfriend had an obsessive quality. Furthermore, the likelihood that he might wreck his marriage led me to infer the possibility of a superego-instigated need for self-punishment. For it seemed he could not allow himself to fully enjoy the pleasures that his wife offered. I further wondered if he was one of those men described by Freud who had a Madonna-whore split and who could not blend love and sex in the same relationship. The uncanny feeling he had about the girlfriend, as if he had

known her before, led me to the conjecture that she was a transference figure from his past, and represented an additional instance of re-finding that complicated his love life. There may be many “re-findings” in the course of one’s life, subjecting everyone to the need to master a variety of love and sexual temptations.

Before I could assess his underlying motivations, I had to better establish our working relationship and demonstrate to him how we could work together to advance understanding.

I then told him that he was ignoring the third alternative, which I had just outlined, and that suddenly coming down on any side would preclude careful understanding of what was going on and how his conflicts about love had developed. He was silent, and for a while we sat quietly taking stock of each other. I reflected on the various possible meanings of his behavior and waited for him to reply. Then he reluctantly told me this story about his marriage.

He had met his wife after being jilted by another woman. His wife-to-be soon soothed his hurt feelings as she was apparently immediately smitten by him—it was easy to see why. He was a handsome, athletic, and intelligent man who, when not brooding, was very enthusiastic, especially about his research work. After almost a year of dating he agreed to marry his wife, although he did not feel romantic or passionate about her. He felt a strong affection for her, but married her mostly because she was so obviously in love with him and because she was a dependable caretaker who made him feel important. This reassured him, just when he needed it

most. Deeply touched by her caring ways and also by her parents' affection for him, he felt he had acquired the love of a whole family. With this material one could infer that his marital love choice was "anaclitic," a love attachment based upon the Freudian classification of "the woman who feeds him."

With her consistent nurturing he did better than ever in his graduate research and studies. He emphasized the importance of his science career and his hopes for making original discoveries. He reported that his wife's one major complaint before the recent disruption was that he was a workaholic who put his research work before her. He joked that research was easier and more important to him than intimacy.

As we worked together he revealed that he was afraid of love—as if loving his wife would make him a "love hostage." He liked her to say that she loved him, but he could not reciprocate. He was plagued by fear that something would disrupt their relationship and he would have to leave. He began preemptively to withdraw and to push her away. Thus, he risked causing exactly what he feared.

When she became pregnant he was supportive and dutiful, but he felt himself becoming even more guarded and distant.

With the birth of their daughter he felt abandoned, as if his wife cared only about the baby. His conscious jealousy made him feel quite petty, and he expressed shame at what he called his "darker side." His attitude toward his wife also changed: he no longer trusted her. At the same time he realized that he was seriously overreacting to her. His account of the early years of his marriage highlighted what we regularly observe: that almost every quirk one has will be intensified during a long relationship. He became aware of his longing for but fear of love.

In Freudian terms, we would say his ambivalent reactions were overdetermined. It was clear he had no clue to the nature of his repressed conflicts and the life experience from which they were derived. His fears of

being a love hostage bring to mind more recent analytic studies, such as Stoller's (1982) work on symbiosis anxiety in men and men's fears of loss of masculinity as they attempt intimacy with a woman; Stoller highlighted the regressive fear of feminization and castration through merger. Edith Jacobson (1971) also emphasized that the establishment of a solid self-representation would lead to a cohesive self. But fear of re-engulfment by the intrapsychic representative of a parent might be displaced later onto a love object, causing anxiety and withdrawal.

Bergmann synthesized the work of Mahler on separation and individuation with accompanying clinical problems in loving. "The symbiotic phase leaves a residue in the form of a longing for merger. This is re-evoked when one falls in love" (p. 240). This may trigger irrational fears of engulfment. This is most likely when the relationship with mother was strained. When the rapprochement phase is not successfully resolved, lovers may repeat the need to love and return again and again setting the stage for endless cycles of getting closer, only to push away. These other developmental studies helped me to understanding the genesis of some of his problems in this patient's early difficulties with his wife.

To continue the clinical case, the patient could not make any sense out of his difficulties in loving his wife and his negative overreactions to her. He worried that he was just incapable of maintaining a serious long-term commitment. He wondered what I thought, and I reminded him that he had not told me much about his background and I would not conjecture.

But I pointed out that if he left his wife for his new girlfriend, the same thing might happen with her. He was startled, but reluctantly agreed. This was really his first insight. And so he and I developed a pattern of working together, and in spite of periodic disruptions which caused him to become irritable, defensive, and withdrawn, our relationship deepened.

Let me emphasize this: I tried to discern his recurrent pattern of discontinuous intersubjective transactions with me. There was an underlying organization. His evasiveness, his demanding tendencies, and his extreme affective sensitivity helped me to understand the difficulties he experienced and caused in an intimate relationship. He was also a very appealing man whom I wished to help. It was obvious he had suffered some deep emotional wounds. His loneliness and his fearful longing for closeness were palpable. He then came to a session in a very angry mood and again demanded my opinion. "Should I stay in my marriage or leave?" This renewed pressure highlighted his underlying difficulty with self-regulation. Unable to tolerate his tension state he attempted to evoke it in me, and I tried to balance the tension state through insightful awareness of what was transpiring for both of us.

I tried to see the message in his demanding advice and to translate it back to him in words that clarified the motive for his pressure and the nature of his inner affective state. I conceptualized and interpreted this central theme: I am being forced to make a decision before I am ready. I then viewed this as a transference reenactment highlighted by intense affect. My dilemma was how to interpret this reenactment so as to engender insight and forestall

acting-out.

So I told him that we should view his pressure on me to make his choice as a symptom of his problem, a clue to something he had been through before. I reminded him about his evasiveness concerning his past family experiences, a clue that he had to avoid something unpleasant. “Could it be,” I said, “that you were forced to make a very important choice in the past before you were ready, a choice that had a big impact on your life and that you did not want to make?”

There was a dead silence and I thought I had missed the mark. He filled up with tears and then said, “Yes, my mom made me turn my back on my dad. He was a hopeless drunk and she hated him, so he left. But I loved him.” Then we sat in stunned silence, together, and he seemed even more surprised by what he had said than I was. Then he outlined his traumatic childhood, one filled with frustrated developmental longings. These were events that which had distorted his “love map” and caused him many intrapsychic difficulties with intimacy, surrender, and love.

He was the younger of two children, with an older sister, born to a former combat marine and a fundamentalist Baptist woman. Father had impregnated mother before they married. They tried to hold their marriage together by having another child. His birth, when his sister was 3, not only distressed her but destabilized the family. Father was poor. Mother blamed father for wrecking her life. She degraded his father in front of him. Father became an alcoholic and flaunted his visits to local prostitutes.

But father adored him, his only son, and sought relief from mother's harangues by playing with him and teaching him about music, sports, and hunting. The patient tearfully recounted how father would perch him on his lap while they listened to records, especially songs of Sammy Davis, Jr. Father also regaled him with stories of his combat experiences in the Korean War. Father, thus, was a passionate and exciting figure with whom he could be a child. But father was also inconsistent and unavailable or drunk. Mother forced his father to leave and took her anger at father out on the patient. She dished out bible lessons and harsh punishment so that he "would not end up like your [his] bum father." She bluntly told him to "forget your father." Photos of him were removed; contact was forbidden. Father truly disappeared. Thus, there was a basic split in his love experiences with a fundamentalist mother and a hard-drinking marine father. It was impossible for him to integrate these conflicting object relationships. And, because mother forced him to be silent about his father, his disturbing memories were buried, where they formed the unconscious strata for later love problems. There was rage at his mother, and he lived in fear of losing control over his anger and being thrown out as well.

Shortly after his parents' separation, father was killed while driving drunk. His grief was compounded by humiliation when he was teased by schoolmates about father's drunken-driving death. This was a great blow and he felt he had to prove that he would not turn out like his father. He was troubled with intense shame and self-doubts, in spite of splendid academic and athletic achievements. He secretly blamed his mother for his father's death.

These basic interactional patterns with his mother were repeated with his sister and cast a shadow over his latency years and adolescence. He had many difficulties in negotiating all of the developmental tasks of his youth: serious problems mastering castration fears, establishing a positive image of his own body, forming a positive gender identity. Although he dated, he avoided intimacy, as it always seemed to threaten him with disappointment.

He felt liberated when he went off to college. He hung out with the guys and drank a bit. He had casual sex to prove he could do it. However, there was always a lingering sense of inadequacy and fear of rejection by women. So he mainly threw himself into his studies and excelled in science.

When he went on to graduate school he was extremely lonely and was more receptive to a relationship. He fell in love, only to be jilted. Wounded and disorganized by this loss, he first sought to steady himself by extraordinary efforts at his research. When he met his future wife, her immediate admiration and affection was immensely reassuring and helped him to bolster his injured self-esteem. He felt safe with and comforted by her. They had a quiet intimacy. But, he felt frustrated because he did not feel passion and he blamed her for his lack of response.

As our joint efforts continued, it was clear that as the clock of fate had ticked and as he had become a father himself, an intrapsychic upheaval was triggered. He recalled many previously repressed feelings about his own father. Similarly, the birth of his daughter disrupted his marital relationship, and it triggered a sense of loss and displacement similar to the feelings of his older sister when he was born. His wife could not appreciate the magnitude of the inner changes in him. He then was vulnerable to an affair.

We worked further on his conflict about therapy. His desire for treatment collided with his need to avoid the painful memories of his past. Therapy, as with his other intimate relationship, stirred his feelings up and was a traumatic reliving of his traumatic past. My interpretation about the reenactment gave him hope that the repressed memories of father could finally be addressed. His mother's prohibition about remembering his father

was thus modified by his engagement with me. He felt closer to me.

We were then able to take another look at his feelings for both his wife and his girlfriend and to try to remove barriers to intimacy and its consummation.

He had the powerful feeling of literally being pulled apart, a reliving of the original childhood experience of being pulled apart by his parents. He could not bear the pain of having to give one of the women up. Anytime he felt a shift within himself or thought I was pushing him in one direction or the other, he became sad, then angry, and the work stopped. This divergence of desire reached all the way back to his earliest object relations and the shame he felt about obeying his mother's command to reject his father. Resolution of his current love conflict as well as its developmental roots required a careful elaboration of all his thoughts and feelings about each emotionally charged relationship, including his wife, his girlfriend, and in parallel focus his father and mother. The process in therapy, then, was of a slow, detailed remembering, repeating, and working through as described by Freud. This was also a process of mourning for the inevitable loss he would sustain.

Gradually, as he made connections between disappointment with his parents and his adult love dilemma, he achieved an inner-sense of awareness that the affair was motivated by his need to set up a situation in which, this

time, he was going to make his own choice.

He needed the affair to reverse the painful humiliation and passivity of childhood. As a child he felt forced to give up his father and to endure pain. Now, he would choose and he would inflict the pain.

Fearful of rejection all his life, he now had an insurance policy should his wife leave. He was finally in command. Of course, the reality was sadly different than his unconscious fantasy.

The reworking of the past also led to his realization of his irrational negative and distorted feelings about his wife. He could see how he had projected the negative images of his mother onto her in a maternal transference and had scapegoated her with disavowed aspects of himself. He then worked through his long-denied rage at his mother. As this occurred he felt less resentment toward his wife and they grew closer. Next, he had to reassess his girlfriend and discover the special meaning she had for him.

He remembered when he first felt swept away. His wife was out of town with the baby. He and his girlfriend went dancing. She had picked a tune on a jukebox in the bar where they danced. It was the old Sammy Davis, Jr., tune "What Kind of Fool Am I?" The lyrics were the password to his heart. They danced, went to her home, made love, and in subsequent pillow talk she told him her life story. She, too, was the child of a troubled family and had suffered

similar misfortunes. This impacted him quite powerfully as he had always been ashamed of his past and had not talked to his wife about it in any detail. In fact, out of shame he had kept his wife from having much contact with his mother and family. The girlfriend was the first person to whom he had ever confided details of his father's tragic death and his forced repudiation of his father. With his imperfect girlfriend, cut, as it were, from the same cloth, he felt a sense of acceptance. He recognized the uncanny feeling that he had known her before and that the girlfriend really understood him. This was a very powerful instance of refinding.

He then realized that he viewed his girlfriend as a reincarnation of his father. She drank, played games, acted crazy, and made him feel special. His girlfriend touched the taproot of father's love. The repressed returned—an old love refound in her. He felt grief for the disrupted years of his childhood, the losses caused by his parents' divorce, and the burden of having to forsake his father. His girlfriend was indeed a refound love object of childhood, as Freud wrote, and this example illustrated that there are many potential "refindings" in each of our lives.

He then became very defensive about his girlfriend, as if I was attacking her. He acted out by trying to provoke his wife into quarrels. Intuitively, she must have understood that something important was happening, and she was able to avoid being drawn into the conflicts that, in fact, were with himself. He

wished she would act like a bitch so he would feel justified in being angry with her. His misperceptions of her became unmistakably clear. Instead, his wife held her composure and won his respect.

But his girlfriend grew frustrated, accused him of misleading her, threatened to tell his wife about the affair, and progressively alienated him. He saw he was testing each woman for constancy and came to appreciate his wife's maturity and true love for him. He then realized that he had fought his sense of disorganization, triggered when he became a father, with the affair. As he gained a heightened awareness of the multiple unconscious determinants of his attraction for his girlfriend, he was able to carefully think things through. He had to work his way through a great deal of anguish, the repressed memories of an unhappy child whose parents could not love one another and of a child who was forced prematurely to choose. He now understood that his research was sublimation of his need to search for answers and to find a precious and missing part of himself, namely his lost bond with his father and his identification with him. He was ready. He now was in charge and could make his choice. He sought to achieve intimacy and love with his wife.

The affair changed him in some positive ways. He had discovered that he had a capacity for sexual passion and could be playful and tender. He shed his split image of women as either mothers or whores, and could see his wife,

not as a transference representative of his fundamentalist mother, but as the real-life person she was. His superego conflicts and his religious inhibitions were attenuated and the incest taboo avoided. Free also from anger at his mother he no longer worried about being a love slave and could relax with his wife. Furthermore, he was now able to concentrate all of his sexual and love feelings upon her, and his fantasies about sex with other women faded as his wife requited his passion.

Second, he needed secrecy no longer, and openly discussed his father's alcoholism and the family problems with his wife. She understood! Her compassion was quite touching. They grew closer. He felt love for her.

There were many other positive changes as well. Fortunately, his girlfriend found another lover and never retaliated against him.

One never knows exactly how a love triangle will work out. The human desires to love and be loved, to known and be known, will always motivate people to seek solutions to situations where love is compromised. While we cannot tell people what to do, with enriching psychoanalytic theories we can help them to understand their motivations and pursue happiness.

Freud's three theories of love—along with other seminal discovering on infantile sexuality, dreams, and psychoanalytic technique—ushered in a new era in the understanding of love problems. Love was now understood as a

psychological phenomenon. Once love is clearly appreciated as an intrapsychic process and an interactive process, love can then be studied in greater depth. Further advances in the psychoanalytic theory of love would subsequently occur, making it possible to provide more effective therapy for those with problems in loving or being loved.

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