

**'The blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies': Reading Freud in
(be)hindsight**

*Damien W. Riggs
School of Psychology
The University of Adelaide*

Abstract

This paper argues for an understanding of Freud's 'queer' contributions to social psychology, and posits the ongoing utility of psychoanalysis for developing social psychological approaches to understanding both same-sex attracted identities and heteronormativity. Through an elaboration of two key areas of Freud's work, namely his implicit critiques of heteronormativity and his explicit support for the rights of those who do not identify as heterosexual, I propose that the problematic aspects of psychoanalytic theory must be placed alongside the considerable gains to be made from the application of Freud's work to theorising within social psychology. In particular, I suggest that the understandings of identity and desire as formulated through psychoanalysis demonstrate the always already queer nature of social psychology through its engagement with psychoanalysis. I conclude by highlighting the ongoing tools that a psychoanalytic social psychology may provide for challenging heteronormativity and privileging non-normative accounts of subjectivity.

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* takes as its focus a range of readings of the historical interrelationships between psychoanalysis and social psychology, with the intent of producing potentially new directions for social psychology through an examination of its long-standing relationship to psychoanalytic concepts and writers. In this paper I take up this exciting challenge by examining some of the possibilities that the work of Freud produces for engaging in both analyses of heteronormativity and examinations of the lives of those of us who do not identify as heterosexual. My argument will suggest that current social psychology work on the topic of sexuality may benefit from a continued engagement with the work of Freud, with a particular focus on how Freud's own engagement in what we may retrospectively deem 'queer theory' in many ways pre-empted current queer theoretical critiques of individualism within psychology. I will also suggest that despite what appears to be something of an aversion for Freud within social psychological studies of sexuality, his work provides us with a very clear elaboration of how heteronormativity functions, and thus how it may be (or indeed already is being) challenged. My interest, then, is less about explicating the relationship between queer theory and psychoanalysis (though see Dean and Lane's (2001) excellent collection for examples of this), nor is it about examining the implications of queer theory for psychology (as Minton, 1997, has so excellently done), but rather it is about examining some of the aspects of psychoanalytic theory *under Freud*¹ that have contributed to social psychological knowledge (see Curtis, 1991, and Hinshelwood & Chiesa, 2001, for more on this), and which therefore demonstrate the long-standing queerness of both social psychology and psychoanalysis themselves. In this sense, I use the term 'queer' not to refer to particular identities, but rather to a mode of critique that is wary of binary structures, and which seeks to challenge social norms for their oppressive functions, whether intentionally (as per 'queer theory'), or unintentionally (as per Freud's radical revisioning of sex – one, it has been suggested, he often appears to not have been entirely aware of: see Ragland, 2001).

To introduce these arguments I first elaborate upon my choice of title for this paper. The quote that forms the first part of the title – 'The blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies' – is taken from the now infamous *Letter to an American mother* (Freud, 1951). In the letter, as many readers will no doubt be well aware, Freud responds to the mother's apparent concern over her son's 'homosexual identity' (to use Freud's terminology). Freud assures her that whilst "homosexuality is assuredly no advantage... it is nothing to be ashamed of". Freud went on to state that if the mother was seeking a 'cure' for her son, "we cannot promise to achieve it". Freud

¹ The 'queerness' of psychoanalysis (as I use the term) was of course greatly extended in the work of Lacan (Ragland, 2001). His work in part consolidated some of the disparate, and at times conflicting, aspects of Freud's work, and extended them in new and exciting ways. My interest in Freud's work reflects what I see as the greater uptake of his work within psychology as compared to that of Lacan. This may reflect, in part, the greater incompatibility between Lacan's theorizing of psychoanalysis and the individualism of psychology (see Parker, 2003a, for an elaboration of this last point).

admitted that whilst “In a certain number of cases we succeed in developing the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies which are present in every homosexual, in the majority of cases it is no more possible”. In utilising a portion of this sentence in the title of this paper, my intention is to highlight the location of Freud’s letter within the broader context of his work, and in particular his writings on both homosexuality *and* heterosexuality. Despite suggestions to the contrary, Freud wrote in numerous places about the experiences of ‘male homosexuals’ (and to a far lesser extent about the experiences of ‘female homosexuals’), and his accounts present a range of formulations of what may be termed ‘reasons’ for homosexuality. However my interest here is not to ascertain their liberalness or otherwise, but rather to highlight that as equally as Freud spoke of homosexuality in ways that at times demonstrate the limitations of his contributions to the rights struggles of people who do not identify as heterosexual (though more on that later), he also spoke of the limitations of heterosexuality and its normative relationship to reproduction.

My use of a quote from the *Letter*, therefore, is intended to highlight what I believe is a useful thread in Freud’s work: “a picture of heterosexuality”, as Fletcher (1989, pp. 93-94) paraphrases it, that represents “a casualty ward of psychic cripples and walking wounded, of [heterosexual] male impotence and [heterosexual] female frigidity”. Whilst in the letter Freud suggests that a ‘cure’ could entail a resurrection of the seeds of heterosexuality that he appears to believe available to all people, we may read his statement in quite another way. If we are to consider the word ‘blighted’ as referring not to something that homosexuality does to heterosexuality – that it ‘blights’ the ‘normal’ development of heterosexuality – but rather that heterosexuality is always already blighted, then we come somewhat closer to what often appears in Freud’s formulation as an understanding of heterosexual, reproductive genitality as an inadequate and always compromised outcome of the Oedipal order. Indeed the word ‘germ’, whilst for Freud perhaps explicitly referring to the ‘germ’ or ‘seed’ of heterosexuality, may instead be read as making reference to heterosexuality itself as a germ in the modern sense – as pathogenic or diseased.

Of course this rendering of Freud’s position on heterosexuality is entirely my own account, and one that playfully tropes upon what Edelman (1991) has referred to as the (be)hindsight of psychoanalysis. In a cleverly constructed examination of representations of gay male sex, Edelman demonstrates how psychoanalysis is always engaged in the project of reconstructing events from the past so as to examine them in the present, but that such reconstructions ultimately entail the fabrication or at least fantastical elaboration of the past through the lens of the present – hence psychoanalysis operates through (be)hindsight – it views past events ‘from behind’ in order to make sense of them in the present ‘from the front’ (see also Mitchell, 2000, for an elaboration of the functioning of psychoanalysis in this way). To read Freud’s *Letter* (along with other works, as I will do throughout this paper) through the lens of (be)hindsight, is to look at the ways in which a queer sensibility was foundational to the work of psychoanalysis. Thus rather than elaborating a specifically queer historical moment to the psychoanalytic project (in

the form of a particular school, or writer, or topic), my intention is to elaborate, with the benefit of (be)hindsight, how psychoanalysis has always been a 'queer project', and that its multiple extrapolations to social psychology (of whatever variety or focus) have thus introduced varying forms of this queerness into social psychology. Having elaborated this line of thinking, I conclude by exploring some of the possibilities that sympathetic re-readings of Freud's work may create for work within social psychology that seeks to queer normative readings of sexuality.

'The normals'

Throughout much of his work, but in particular in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1953a) presents us with an image of heterosexuality that draws our attention to its problematic status as the privileged form of sexuality. We may see this in the way in which Freud used the term 'normals' to describe a category, rather than to accord to the people in that category a privileged position (other than the one they already enjoyed). His reference to heterosexual people as 'the normals' and 'normals' suggests an understanding of heterosexuality that both acknowledges its position as a social norm, and its numerical preponderance, whilst not according this any value other than one of facticity – heterosexuality may be considered a norm based upon the number of people who identify as such, but this does not make it inherently more valuable as a sexual identity in psychoanalytic terms. Indeed, Freud suggested that "In the psychoanalytic sense the exclusive sexual interest of the man for the woman is also a problem requiring an explanation, and is not something that is self-evident and explainable on the basis of chemical attraction" (footnote 11: This third edition of the *Three Essays* was originally published in 1914). Freud thus provides us with an account of heterosexuality that refuses to accord to it a privileged location other than the one already accorded to it under heteropatriarchy. 'Heteropatriarchy', in this sense, may be understood as the governing framework through which bodies are rendered intelligible in relation to the dominance of white-heterosexual-middleclass-masculinities. That Freud's theories should be so clearly androcentric may therefore largely be read as the product of the (hetero)norms promoted under heteropatriarchy. This does not of course excuse Freud's inability to engage more adequately with the experiences of women (of all sexualities), though it does in part acknowledge how his own social location as a nominally heterosexual man living under heteropatriarchy was productive of his (in)ability to theorise female sexuality (see Ragland, 2001, for more on Freud's engagement with 'the feminine').

In regards to its privileged location, Freud contributes to the deconstruction of heteropatriarchy by suggesting that despite its privileged location, the heteronorm is one that is in many ways an illusory construction – there is no one heterosexuality, and there is certainly no heterosexuality that is free from what he termed 'perversions': "The very wide dissemination of perversions urged us to assume that the predisposition to perversions is no rare peculiarity but must form a part of the normally accepted constitution" (1953a, p. 171). Here again Freud refers to heterosexuality not as normative in a factual sense (in that it is the norm because

it should be or because that is the 'right' way for society to be structured), but because it is 'normally accepted' as such. Roughton (2002) summarises this well in his suggestion that "From the standpoint of nature and species survival, we do not fulfill our role if we do not participate in reproduction. But from the standpoint of the individual's life experience, [Freud] does not say that alternate sexual behavior is a disorder. And he explicitly says that, even if we call sexuality abnormal with regard to reproduction, it is not necessarily associated with any other abnormal functioning" (p. 743). Freud's repeated tying of heterosexuality to reproduction, whilst complicit in the normative function served by such a presumption, nonetheless allows for an understanding of queer sexualities as not necessarily deviant in regards to their potentially non-procreative purposes. Whilst Freud's understanding of reproduction is limited to one that sees it as a product of heterosexual penetrative sex, this again reflects his location within a social context whereby this was the only norm, rather than necessarily any prohibition within his own thinking upon reproduction in the context of queer families.

Thus in two distinct ways Freud's account of heterosexuality may be seen as providing a critical challenge to the assumption of heterosexuality as the normal state for all human beings. In the first he critiques precisely the claims to normality that inhere to heterosexuality, in his suggestion that heterosexuality itself is never 'normal', and that 'perversions' circulate amongst heterosexual people much the same as they do within any population. Second, Freud provides us with a critique of heteronormativity itself, and in particular its assumption of heterosexuality as a biological norm through its association with reproduction. In this sense, and as Fletcher (1989) suggests, Freud's elaboration of the Oedipus complex(es)² was very much an elaboration of an understanding of the functioning of such complexes as differentially functioning *orders* – Freud was not attempting to assert that the various complexes he describes were 'real' in an *a priori* sense, but rather that they reflected the ways in which Victorian society was structured around a set of heterosexual norms. Read as such, Freud's account of psychoanalysis was not prescriptive, in that it asserted that heterosexuality *must* be the norm, but rather it was descriptive of a social context wherein heterosexuality *was* (and indeed is) the socially sanctioned norm.

Finally, in reference to Freud's position on heterosexuality, and in making use of the trope of (be)hindsight, it is possible to view his writings as making both implicit and explicit reference to heterosexuality's reliance upon homosexuality. This was explicit in Freud's notion of the 'polymorphous perversity' of infancy and his conceptualisation of bisexuality as the normative position for both adults and children. Freud's theorisation of how the desire of an opposite-sex love object comes about was very much a challenge to the assumption that children are 'born heterosexual' (Kelleher, 2004). As he cautioned in his study of 'homosexuality in a woman' (Freud, 1953b), "One must remember that normal sexuality too depends upon a restriction in the choice of object" (p. 151). Freud suggested that children

² See Lewes, 1989, for an elaboration of Freud's changing accounts of differing Oedipal complexes.

move from a pre-oedipal state in which their conceptualisation of self and other is defined by need rather than desire, to an engagement with the Oedipus complex(es) that locate the child within a relationship to particular norms in relation to desire and love objects. In this sense, Freud looks back to infancy to project forward from it the formation of heterosexual desire as an *a posteriori* effect of infant bisexuality. In other words, Freud examines how particular instances of child-parent interactions result in the formulation of heterosexual desire, and how such desire is sanctioned within particular social contexts. In his preface to the third edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (published in 1914) Freud states, “the occasional factors play the principal role in analysis, and are almost completely worked up in it, while the constitutional factors only become evident *from behind* as elements which have been made functional through experience” (p. 130, emphasis added). In regards to the formation of heterosexual desire, then, Freud’s focus on ‘occasional factors’ is one that eschews arguments of the period in which he wrote that sought biological explanations for behaviour, and which instead sees such biological justifications as only being rendered intelligible ‘from behind’ – that they can only be seen to play a causal role because the ‘occasional factors’ allow them to be read as such.

The role of psychoanalysis in getting at factors ‘from behind’ demonstrates its implicit queerness – it is predicated upon an assumption that what is there is not really what we see – that we cannot trust claims to factuality without exploring why those claims are made and what purposes they serve. To view heterosexuality with (be)hindsight, then, is to view it as a series of occasional factors that are worked up into an argument for the constitutionality of *the heterosexual subject*, when in fact such constitutionality only comes as result of the ‘occasional factors’ of heterosexuality being enshrined by *legal* constitutions that bind heterosexuality and reproduction to intelligibility. As a result, the status of heterosexuality as a social norm forever founders upon the occasionality of its existence: it is only with the ‘benefit’ of heteronormativity that we come to see heterosexuality as constitutional of the very norms that make it possible. In this sense, and much like recent arguments made about the constitution of racism (e.g., Gilroy, 2005; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005), it is not heterosexuality (or racial categories) that produces discriminatory hierarchies *per se*, but rather it is heteronormativity (or racism) that produce heterosexuality (and racial categories). In this sense, heterosexuality *as constitutive* can only be read as such *from behind* – from the position where heterosexuality is presumed to be the norm – when in fact it is a product of ‘occasional factors’ (such as the misreading of children’s behaviours as heterosexually orientated in the context of a heteronormative society). Such misreadings of what is presumed to be children’s inherent heterosexuality reveal “our culture’s contradictions over childhood sexual orientation: the tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them asexual” (Bond Stockton, 2004, p. 283). Freud was thus fundamentally involved in producing a queer critique of heterosexuality that exposed its ‘queer’ foundations, both explicitly in suggesting that bisexuality was the default sexuality, and implicitly in psychoanalysis’ account of how constitutionality only appears after the letter – that it can only be read as such *backwards* through a lens of normativity.

'The inverts'

Freud's account of what he termed 'inversion' is of course forever troubled by the limitations placed upon him as a result of living within a social context that sought to vilify same-sex desire. Yet, at the same time, his support for the rights of same-sex attracted people, and his placement of 'inversion' outside of the category of 'perversion', are significant. Whilst it is true that Freud's treatment of what we may retrospectively identify as lesbian clients was to some degree indicative of a greater refusal of lesbian desire than was his treatment of gay male clients (Magid, 1993), he nonetheless provided opportunities for the radical potentialities of all non-heterosexual identities to be explored (Fletcher, 1989; Hamer, 1990; Parker, 2003). As such, and as Burack (1995) suggests, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater – just because there are moments where *in his practice* Freud displayed a relatively negative view of same-sex desire (and in particular the desire of 'homosexual women' – see for example 'The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality in a woman', 1953b), there are equally instances *in his theory* where Freud does quite the opposite. In particular, Freud discusses issues of same-sex desire and identity in ways that, for the time, were quite radical.

The primary example of Freud's radical theorisation of issues relevant to same-sex attracted people appears as a critique within *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of the work of Ulrichs and his suggestion that same-sex attracted people constitute a 'third sex'.³ As Freud states, "A very considerable measure of latent or unconscious homosexuality can be detected in all normal people. If these findings are taken into account, then, clearly, the supposition that nature in a freakish mood created a 'third sex' falls to the ground" (p. 171). Freud saw the push for rights through what would now be termed 'identity politics' as unproductive as it required same-sex attracted people to prove our difference in terms that privileged a reproductive norm (see Dean & Lane, 2001, for an elaboration of this point in regards to current lesbian and gay politics).⁴ Likewise, and as the previous quote highlights, due to the fact that Freud saw the similarities between heterosexual and same-sex attracted people as far more important than the differences (in regards to the formation of desire in relation to both an original bisexuality and a heteronormative social context – the 'Oedipal order' as Fletcher, 1989, has termed it), notions of a biological basis to sexual object choice were in his view of no greater (though not necessarily of any less) import than alternate accounts of sexual object choice. Additionally, any focus on notions of a 'third sex' would serve to maintain a focus on same-sex attracted people as *the* site of difference, rather than focusing on each individual person's

³ Writing in the late 1800s, Ulrichs spoke out about the inherent rights of people (including himself) who he described as a 'third sex' – he claimed that 'Urnings' (same-sex attracted men), 'Urningin' (same-sex attracted women) and 'Uranodioning/in' (bisexual people) were born as such, and were thus entitled to rights. Ulrichs spoke openly about his own same-sex attractions and spent his life writing about the rights of same-sex attracted people.

⁴ It should be noted here that Freud's comments on the work of Ulrich (and Krafft-Ebing) and their role in early queer rights agendas was largely a theoretical critique of their approach. Despite his reservations about their approach, however, he was nonetheless a signatory to documents circulated at the time in support of law reform in regards to queer people (see Abelow, 1993, for an elaboration of this).

differential identifications. Abelow (1993) summarises this position in the suggestion that “the corollary of the ‘humane’ ascription of minority status was this: that people outside the minority need no longer think of themselves as in some important way homosexual, too” (p. 391). In eschewing an ‘ethnic minority’ understanding of same-sex desire, Freud’s elaboration of the functions of the Oedipus complex importantly took into account the relative un-fixity and multiplicity of *all* sexual identities, rather than just focusing on non-heterosexual identities.

In this sense, and as those who have sought to bring together social psychological and psychoanalytic concepts have suggested, psychoanalysis is central to any attempts “to revivify the *psychological* in social psychology... without reproducing individualist discourse” (Gough, 2004, p. 263). Otherwise, as Burack (1995) suggests of feminist critiques of psychoanalysis, there is the risk of reintroducing oppressive discourses about same-sex attracted people precisely at the moment where we attempt to challenge them. For instance, if we are to identify the individualism of many psychological accounts of identity as detrimental to constructing accounts of non-normative identities that incorporate multiple desires and which take as their starting place non-heterosexual (rather than heterosexual) desire, then refusing the insights as to the fragmentary nature of identity as afforded us by psychoanalysis may ultimately close down opportunities for discussion. Similarly, recent calls for the rights of same-sex attracted people have often involved recourse to an essentialist notion of rights that, as Freud pointed out, founders upon the multiple and complex ways in which all forms of desire come into being. Developing accounts of such rights that take into account multiple (and often contradictory) subject positions may be made possible, in part, through an engagement with Freud’s work (Riggs, 2006). As such, not only may psychoanalysis be viewed as a useful reading practice for challenging heteronormativity, but it may also be a useful way of reading non-heterosexual identities in ways that refuse essentialist accounts of identity formation (Riggs, 2005).

In regards to anti-essentialist accounts of non-heterosexual identities, and despite the use of language that often appears to dismiss or downplay the validity of such identities, Freud’s writings at times provide us with opportunities for thinking about alternative accounts of identity formation – particularly those that refuse recourse to biology. For example, in his account of ‘homosexuality in a woman’ (1953b), whilst Freud struggles to validate his patient’s desires on her own terms, he nonetheless acknowledges the fraught position of heterosexual women *vis-à-vis* the heterosexual coital imperative and its role in (hetero)patriarchy’s oppression of all women, thus giving rise to an account of same-sex desire amongst women that sees it as a viable and intelligible identity in response. As a result, Freud’s engagement with same-sex desire continues to offer us means of understanding the ways in which norms are resisted, and how they are rewritten to queer ends. Whilst attention has rightly been drawn to the androcentrism of Freud’s theory, there is nonetheless a place called for his work in the development of complex accounts of lesbian subjectivity (e.g., O’Connor & Ryan, 1993).

Conclusions

As this issue of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* highlights, in formulating a psychoanalytically informed social psychology it is important to remember that we are not re-inventing the wheel. Psychoanalysis has long engaged with topics of interest to social psychology – in this instance matters pertaining to discrimination, social norms, and identity. Indeed, early work aimed at challenging anti-gay discrimination drew broadly upon psychoanalytic theories (e.g., the development and subsequent usage of the term ‘homophobia’). Reading Freud with (be)hindsight (as those broadly labeled as queer theorists have previously done, e.g., Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1994) does not require revisionist or optimistic thinking. Rather, it requires being open to the paradoxes in psychoanalytic thought, and in particular the juxtaposition between its negative usages, particularly in America and the UK (see Lewes, 1988; Twomey, 2003, for an elaboration of this), and the intent of Freud to provide a radically different approach to understanding sexuality and desire. By reading the project of heteropatriarchy (and its enmeshment with the project of imperialism via colonisation) as always already containing its own ‘blighted germ’, it may be possible to consider some of the ways in which a psychoanalytic social psychology may contribute to the deconstruction of heteronorms and to the privileging of the diverse experiences of same-sex attracted people. Importantly in this regard it is useful to consider the ways in which psychoanalysis and its theories of subjectivity may provide a useful bridge between queer theory and social psychology. From such a vantage point it is possible to understand why a reading of the intricacies of Freud’s writing is useful precisely because he often appeared to struggle with his own location within a range of social hierarchies, and because in so doing his theories create multiple opportunities for engagement and extension. One need only consider his apparent obsession with Leonardo da Vinci to understand that queerness has always been at the heart of the psychoanalytic project, and that bringing this to the fore will assist in examining the repressions and disavowals that have often kept the issues facing same-sex attracted people relegated to the margins of social psychology.

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