Review Article

Sexual Orientation and Psychological Wellness in Women; Psychoanalytic Book Review

Suanada Agarwal ¹, Pilar Matud Zee ²

¹ School of Community & Global Health, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA 91711, USA; sundapatel@gmail.com
² Department of Computational and Quantitative Medicine, City of Hope, Duarte, CA 91010, USA; pilarmatud@gmail.com

* Correspondence: sundapatel@gmail.com

Abstract: One of the three sections of the field of research known as "Psychology of Women," "Female Psychology," is rarely the subject of books. 'Feminine Psychology' literature are more prevalent, and 'Feminist Psychology' texts may perhaps make up the majority of texts in this field. The annotated psychoanalytic bibliography, edited by Eleanor Schuker and Nadine A. Levinson, is a unique but crucial resource as a result. This book review evaluates the reprinted text for its ideas and original contributions to the subject, but it does so within the larger context of research into the psychology of women, contemporary culture, and the state of related fields of study. The review also places the book within a larger psycho-socio-cultural academic discussion about the conceptual meanings of the three (different) branches of feminist, feminine, and female psychology, concluding that the origins of these schools of thought are distinct, allowing for their individualization and continued relevance as distinct fields of study into the psychology of women.

Keywords: sexual well-being, female, psychology, psychoanalytic research

1. INTRODUCTION

Rarely does one come discover a book that is totally devoted to the Psychology of Women subfield known as "Female Psychology." As approaches to this field of study, "feminist psychology" and "feminine psychology" are far more prevalent, and both old and new publications contain a wealth of writing on the subject. In addition to those devoted to the Psychology of Women [1,2,3] and those that cover gender studies more broadly [4,5,6], "Feminist Psychology" has a number of authors, many of whom are well-known internationally [7,8,9], while "Feminine Psychology" has perhaps the longest history of texts devoted to its field, specifically those written by Karen Horney [10]. However, as far as we are aware, there are only two books that explicitly fly the flag for "Female Psychology"; Helene Deutsch's collection of psychoanalytic papers (reprinted in 1991 [11]) and the annotated psychoanalytic bibliography [12], edited by Eleanor Schuker and Nadine A. Levinson (2017) and first released by The Analytic Press in 1991. These two books are what we will discuss in the following paragraphs. The intriguing thing about both of these texts—which claim to be focused on "Female Psychology"—is that they adopt a psychoanalytic lens, even though they are very different in that Schuker and Levinson edited the collaborative efforts of
almost a hundred researchers to produce a "go to" text compiling over two thousand examples of 20th Century research into the psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis of women [12]. Deutsch's text is an assortment of essays. The first comment on this accomplishment should undoubtedly be one of praise for the authors for having completed an endeavor of such enormous scope, as it not only took a number of years to complete but also involved many people engaged in a variety of roles. Books such as Schuker and Levinson's 28-chapter bibliography [12] can be complex and frequently not easy to traverse; nevertheless, one highly good aspect of this book is the fact it is cleanly separated into five main categories. Each chapter within these sections begins with a brief introduction allowing the reader to understand what they are likely to encounter in the succeeding pages. In doing this, what the writers have achieved is a text which immediately allows readers to face their searching exercise in a logical, systematic, and probably most crucially, manageable fashion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The bibliography introduces the historical context for research on female psychology and women's mental health before listing thirty-eight of Sigmund Freud's own papers, which range in publication date from 1893 to 1940. Following this, early psychoanalytic writers such as Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, and Helene Deutsch are discussed. Freud's own 'best student' is also mentioned. This chapter, along with the two that follow on contemporary commentary and theoretical perspectives, help the reader grapple with the theoretical underpinnings of this field by outlining the influential thinkers and ideas that predated much of the work that today's researchers of women's mental health and psychological wellbeing take for granted. Section I is a crucial guiding resource for anyone looking to start a career in this field or learn more about the foundational knowledge from which this field has developed. It would also be highly advised for anyone looking to create instructional materials for theoretical and historical perspectives in courses on women's psychology or women's mental health. The texts listed in this section provide a strong reference list for the aforementioned uses in addition to tracing the beginnings of female psychology and a field that is currently largely unexplored by the larger movement for women's psychology research. The book's longest section, the Developmental Perspective, has twelve chapters and discusses a variety of literature, including works by Eleanor Maccoby, Lawrence Kohlberg, Nancy Chodorow, and Erik Erikson, who were pioneers in the field in the middle of the 20th century. Once more, this thorough analysis of developmental perspectives on female psychology offers a rich resource from which researchers can draw. However, what's most intriguing about this section is that it serves as perhaps the most overt indication that a psychoanalytic and life course perspective serves as the foundation for "Female Psychology" [13,14]. Adolescence and Early Adulthood are covered in detail in Chapters 9 and 12, respectively, and this section also includes chapters on transitional life events like the menstrual cycle (Chapter 10), pregnancy and motherhood (Chapter 14), and menopause and aging (Chapter 15). It is possible to continuously understand how women's mental health changes during these transitions thanks to the life course approach used in Section II, which also documents how these psychological changes have been recognized, recorded, and treated by psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychiatrists over time. In doing so, it also demonstrates the difficulties that women and psychological experts have encountered when addressing the developmental and psychological health of women specifically. The third section of the bibliography covers female sexuality, psychopathology, and character—a term that is likely no longer relevant in psychological studies today given the growing interest in the study of personality traits. A sizable section, Section III's seven chapters meticulously list a range of gendered health issues, including works on Gender Identity Disorders (Chapter 19) and even a
sizable list of works on Eating Disorders (Chapter 23), though noticeably with the main foci being on anorexia nervosa and bulimia. This chapter’s work on sexual abuse (Chapter 24) is also sensitively covered in this section. It starts with Freud’s case studies before moving on to Phyllis Greenacre and Sandor Ferenczi’s more general writings on women’s trauma and childhood trauma, as well as Irving Kaufman and Anna Freud’s publications that addressed parental abuse of children. The chapters in Section III appear disparate or, at best, are not fully cohesive as a single section, making it the least cohesive section. Even so, the section’s works are flawlessly documented, just as they are in the other chapters. However, it might be helpful for readers if the section were divided into two parts: Female Sexuality and Sexual Abuse, and then Health and Personality Disorders, should a new edition of this bibliography be published. Our advice to readers is to search each chapter separately rather than viewing it as a whole section because doing so may help break up what would otherwise be a potentially overwhelming section of breadth over depth. However, it concludes with two slightly different sections: Section IV on Clinical Concepts and Section V, which contains reading lists. The majority of the bibliography is found in the three sections before it. These two sections begin with a reflective look at the clinical settings in which they will undoubtedly interact with and spend a lot of time with patients. Although only a small section of just thirty-seven pages (in two chapters), the addition in this kind of text (which was first published almost three decades ago) is incredibly energizing. The content is still essential to understanding researcher and therapist positionality within a clinical setting. The reader can learn how many researchers have addressed and still address how their own self can influence their therapeutic relationship with patients by reading the brief summaries of the papers listed in the first of these chapters, Gender Issues in Transference and Countertransference (Chapter 25). This is crucial for therapists of either sex working with patients who have experienced psychological or sexual trauma at the hands of someone of the same sex as the therapist (i.e., a male therapist treating a female patient who has been sexually abused; see Sydney Smith’s 1984 paper on therapists who abuse abused patients). The next chapter, The Pregnant Analyst: Clinical Issues (Chapter 26), while having certain limitations due to the fact that it is a relatively new area of study, as noted by the editors, provides vital insight into how clients may respond differently to their therapist now that she is expecting. As noted in the summary of Alexandra Kaplan’s (1986) paper, these two chapters offer readers a collection of fascinating insights and illustrations of earlier introspections and reflections into therapeutic positionality, which is crucial for “the teaching of female psychology early in training, particularly for male therapists” (p. 580). It’s crucial for readers to understand that even though these issues have been amply documented throughout history, they are far from resolved, and they still need to consider their own privileges and positions [13,14]. A book that has already been read more than once throughout a career almost doesn’t need Section V. It contains two chapters on reading lists for psychoanalytic psychology and female psychology, which, if nothing else, provide an exhaustive and manageable roadmap for the creation of a degree program in this area.

3. CONCLUSION

Having mentioned the bibliography in this new edition [12], there is one persistent criticism that the re-issue lacks any additional works from after 1991. It might be argued that there would be thousands of new additions to consider, or alternatively that it is not surprising that so little has been published in this area given the apparent decline of psychoanalysis and the relative rarity of "Female Psychology" in Women’s Psychological Studies compared to its Feminine and Feminist Psychology counterparts. At this point, it is appropriate to ask what exactly is meant by "Female Psychology" and how much one strand of the Psychology of Women differs from the others before drawing a conclusion. Definitions have recently
been defined, which for the first time provide both a unique meaning for "Female Psychology" and offers ideas for the divide between the strands [13,14], in an effort to provide some clarity on the subject. It is simple to see how psychoanalytic roots have influenced the nuances of feminist psychology if we use these definitions: "Feminist Psychology" deals with the interaction between women and familial or social hierarchies; "Feminine Psychology" covers the psychosocial and psychosexual challenges that arise when adopting a feminine gender identity; and "Female Psychology" takes a life course approach to examine women's lived experience of mental health and social wellbeing. Thus, Schuker and Levinson [12] offer a thorough yet approachable text that any therapist, scholar, pupil, or interested layperson could turn to in order to find a condensed yet thorough appraisal of a wide range of literature written about women and their psychological health over the last century.

REFERENCES