

Book Excerpt:

Freud Scientifically Reappraised: Testing the Theories and Therapy

by Seymour Fisher and Roger Greenberg (1996). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Fisher and Greenberg evaluate psychoanalytic theories in the light of modern empirical research to determine if they can be scientifically supported. "The reports concerning the male homosexual's view of his father are overwhelmingly supportive of Freud's hypothesis," they say. However findings on mothers of homosexuals were less consistent. We quote directly:

Male Homosexuality

"At the psychodynamic level, Freud assumed that male homosexuals were individuals who could not cope with the Oedipal intricacies. He (Freud, 1910, 1923, 1924) proposed that their difficulties stemmed from the formation of an overly strong 'erotic attachment' to mother, which was 'favored by too much love from the mother herself' and reinforced by the 'retirement or absence of the father during the childhood period.' This meant they had to cope with intensified 'feminine influence.'"

"Presumably the boy's Oedipal conflict with father would be heightened by this state of affairs; and, in turn, this would magnify his castration anxiety. Such anxiety would then interfere with taking any woman as a love object. The individual would unconsciously equate sexual intimacy with any woman as equivalent to his father-forbidden relationship with his mother; and consequently find that his heterosexual contacts generated guilt and anxiety of such intensity as to be intolerable."

"Freud theorized further that when the male who is to become homosexual finds he cannot safely love mother, he takes refuge in a special defense mode. He 'identifies himself with her' and directs his love toward others as he assumes she would. That is, he takes on her role instead of relating to her as a love object. However, he also targets himself as a model of whom mother would prefer, and therefore seeks males who resemble himself. In his homosexual mode, the sex object he prefers is himself, but within a 'mother loves me' context. The sex object he seeks, says Freud, must possess a penis whose presence will soothe the castration anxieties. In these terms, one might say that the homosexual wants a 'girl with a penis' as his love object."

Pre-1977 Findings

"Two major hypotheses that we originally extracted from

Freud's formulations concerning homosexuality were that male homosexuals have had a particularly hostile-negative relationship with father, and an unusually close and intimate one with mother."

"We found 22 studies in the literature that were roughly supportive of either or both of these two hypotheses, and six that were not. After reviewing them, we (Fisher & Greenberg, 1985) concluded:

"What kind of a summary statement can be made concerning the material just reviewed? First, the reports concerning the male homosexual's view of his father are overwhelmingly supportive of Freud's hypothesis. With only a few exceptions, the male homosexual declares that father has been a negative influence in his life. He refers to him with such adjectives as cold, unfriendly, punishing, brutal, distant, detached. There is not a single even moderately well controlled study that we have been able to locate in which male homosexuals refer to father positively or affectionately. On the contrary, they consistently regard him as an antagonist. He easily fills the unusually intense, competitive Oedipal role Freud ascribed to him. (p. 242)"

"The consistent picture of father-distance and father-negativity associated with homosexuality in both males and females keeps pressing for explanation."

"However, the data were somewhat less supportive of the hypothesis about mother. About half of the published studies concerned with homosexual sons' views of their mothers supported the idea that a mother is unusually 'close' or intimate. The other half either depicted her as not different from mothers of heterosexual men, or applied terms not relevant to the intimacy dimension. We tentatively concluded that the data gave a small supportive edge to Freud's hypothesis concerning mothers of homosexuals."

Post-1977 Findings

"...In 1989, Fisher identified 58 empirical studies in the total literature concerned with parents of homosexuals. We have not located any additional relevant findings that have appeared since 1989. Fisher analyzed the 58 studies and reported that a large majority supported the notion that homosexual sons perceive their fathers as negative, distant, unfriendly figures. However, Fisher stated that only a minority of studies supported the concept that homosexual men perceive their mothers as unusually close and seductive."

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"Fisher emphasized that this entire literature is based on a strategy of asking adult homosexual subjects (and the adult heterosexual controls) to remember how their parents treated them during childhood. The questionnaires made such inquiries as, 'Was your mother overly close to you?' 'Was she intrusive?' 'Was your father cold?' 'Was he weak?' 'Was he distant?' Fisher was skeptical that Freud would have accepted the idea that the homosexual male's original childhood experiences with his parents would have been "recorded" with any accuracy at a conscious level; and even if they had, how available would the original perceptions be to the individual answering questionnaire many years later? Fisher remarked:

"From this perspective, there would be so much chance noise in the recall of adults about parent closeness-distance issues, that it would apparently require a miracle for any possibly existing relationships between being homosexual and the styles of one's parents to show up. This would seem to be especially true within the context of the importance that psychoanalytic paradigms place on unconscious feelings. One would *a priori* assume that a fair test of Freud's formulations requires some means of measuring the homosexual male's unconscious views of each of his parents. (p. 167)"

"However, Fisher then noted: 'It is therefore astounding how many of the studies utilizing straight-forward questioning of homosexual men (either by questionnaire or interview) have shown significant trends'...(pp. 167-168) for such men to depict their fathers in negative terms. Others (e.g., Ruse, 1981) have also commented on the apparent solidity of the findings in the literature concerned with this matter."

"As already mentioned, the apparent pre-1997 trend for the mothers of male homosexuals to be described as close and seductive did not hold up in the larger set of post-1977 data."

"Fisher further qualified the findings concerning the negative images of father by pointing out that many of the studies in this area suffered from potentially serious defects, which he specified as follows:

1. Some of the studies were based on highly selective samples (e.g., homosexuals in treatment or institutionalized for some reason).
2. The definitions of "homosexual" were in some instances so vague that one cannot distinguish whether subjects were possibly bisexual or had simply experimented on a limited basis with homosexual acts.
3. Bias was introduced into responses because some subjects were in psychoanalytic therapy and therefore had already been indoctrinated with Freud's theory of homosexuality.
4. Few attempts were made to differentiate subjects with reference to mediating variables such as degree of integration into the homosexual community, age

at which consistent homosexual behavior began, or degree of masculinity-femininity."

"Fisher concluded that despite such defects, the overall trend of the findings was significant. In addition, he pointed out that these were individual studies (e.g., Pledger, 1977) of unusually high quality in which a number of the confounding variables just mentioned were well controlled, and the results still supported the 'negative father' hypotheses."

Cross-Cultural Evidence

"Cross-cultural studies specifically concerned with homosexuality have added some support for this hypotheses. Carroll (1978a) analyzed coded data available from anthropological observations of 186 societies (Standard Cross-Cultural Sample) described by Murdock and White (1969) and found significant affirmation for the psychoanalytically derived hypothesis that the frequency of homosexuality in a culture would be inversely related to the closeness of contact between fathers and sons. This matches the previously described findings that homosexual men tend to perceive their fathers as negative, distant figures."

"...The post-1977 material we have reviewed concerning male homosexuality has narrowed the apparent support for Freud's formulation in this area. Previously, we regarded the empirical data to be congruent with Freud's theory that male homosexuality derives from too much closeness to mother and a distant negative relationship with father. As noted, the increased pool of data available reinforces the concept of the negative father, but fails to support the idea of the overly close, seductive mother. The concept of the negative father is strengthened not only by additional studies based on questionnaire responses and subliminal inputs, but also cross-cultural quantitative indexes."

"So, we are left with only one of the major elements in Freud's original formula concerning the parental vectors that are involved in moving a male child toward homosexuality. This reduction in confirmed points on the graph makes it all too easy to conjure up alternative theories of homosexuality that could incorporate the 'negative father' data. For example, investigators could speculate that the negative father simply does not provide his son with the opportunity to identify with a model of how to be a male with heterosexual aims. There would be no need to appeal to the Oedipal image of a son competing with his father for mother's love."

Lesbians: Pre-1977 Findings

"We had difficulty in 1977 in generating testable hypotheses from Freud's formulations about the female homosexual. One hypothesis that seemed justified was that she had had an unusually frustrating or disturbing relationship with her father. This would seem logical if Freud were correct in assuming her retreat from active heterosexuality and her defensive identification with father were rooted in frustrating interactions with him."

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"We did not consider it possible to derive a clear hypothesis concerning how the female homosexual would regard her mother."

"The pre-1977 data (Fisher & Greenberg, 1985) based on questionnaire responses collected in six studies did, as hypothesized, support the view that the 'female homosexual thinks of her father as an unfriendly, unpleasant person who had little to offer by way of a relationship' (p. 251)."

"Nothing of significance was found that would in any way clarify the nature of the homosexual girl's relationship with her mother."

Lesbians: Post-1977

"Since 1977, Fisher (1989) has pulled together a total of 18 studies that have used questionnaire or interview techniques to assess quantitatively whether homosexual and heterosexual women differ in their views of their parents. We have not found any additional pertinent studies published since 1989. Fisher indicated that no significant trends emerged with respect to differences in attitudes toward mother."

"However, 11 of the 18 studies pictured the homosexual woman as feeling that father was negative or distant or frustrating; 6 studies did not; and 1 study presented data too vague to be meaningful. One of the best studies (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981) that also included one of the largest diverse samples supported the 'negative father' concept. The authors concluded: 'Broadly speaking, then, the path made indicates that women who felt their fathers were detached or hostile toward them were somewhat likely to become homosexual' (pp. 129-130). Although Bell et al. deemphasized the overall importance of this 'father' factor in the development of female homosexuality, significant effects were apparent in their data."

Problems with Father for Both Gays and Lesbians

"Generally, the findings tend to be in agreement with Freud's idea of a 'negative father.' It is noteworthy that the same result emerged for males. Both female and male homosexuals apparently felt highly estranged from their fathers. As already mentioned, while the 'negative father' findings fit with one aspect of Freud's theory of homosexuality, there are various other aspects that have either not been tested, or have failed to be confirmed. The idea of the overly close and seductive mother who magnified Oedipal tensions for her son and thereby moves him toward homosexuality has not held up empirically. Also, we do not have any serious empirical data concerning other levels of the theory having to do, for example, with such variables as the homosexual female's presumed intensive disillusionment with her mother, or her supposed defensive identification with her father."

"The fact that both male and female homosexuals entertain a negative father image could easily fit other paradigms besides Freud's. Thus, Fisher (1989) suggested that since a considerable literature (e.g., Biller, 1976) indicates father

typically carries a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for enforcing, and encouraging, conventional sex typing in the family, it is possible that a distant negative father would be relatively ineffectual in his efforts to influence sex typing, and thereby encourage deviant sex-role attitudes such as might be associated with becoming homosexual. This account would not correspond to Freud's Oedipal construction of the homosexual 'choice.'"

No Conclusive Data for Biological Origins

"Before closing this discussion, it should be acknowledged that there are increasing declarations in the literature that homosexuality derives to a significant degree from genetic or so-called biological factors (e.g., Allen & Gorski, 1992; Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Gartrell, 1982; Hoult, 1984; LeVay, 1993). However, the data underlying such assertions have not yet received consistent cross-validation, and the entire matter remains in a state of uncertainty (Byne & Parsons, 1993; Friedman & Downey, 1993). It would be premature to conclude in any large sense that a biological etiology for homosexuality has been dependably demonstrated."

"...Having said the foregoing about Oedipal findings, we must admit that we are still uneasy about where we have come out with reference to Freud's theory of homosexuality. We have rather conservatively concluded, given the absence of evidence that homosexuality in males is associated with overcloseness to mother, that we cannot consider the evidence of unusual father distance and hostility in this context as sufficient support for Freud's position."

"However, there are some worrisome incongruent details. It is striking that father's distance has been demonstrated to be true in the case of both male and female homosexuals. We are particularly impressed that cross-cultural data (e.g., Broude, 1981) have shown that the degree of homosexuality practiced in various cultures is positively correlated with indexes of father's degree of distance or negativity during the socialization process. Also, we cannot but be impressed that Silverman et al. (1978) were able, by means of subliminal Oedipal inputs, to intensify homoerotic feelings in homosexual men. Such a result would appear to depend on a finely tuned theoretical sequence. Presumably, the Oedipal stimuli increase Oedipal fantasies that are unacceptable, and therefore mobilize compensatory (defensive) homosexual feelings. If the Silverman et al. study is methodologically sound (as it appears to be), the pinpointed result implies considerable power in the theory from which it was derived."

"However, in balancing such findings against the total sweep of other data and also the lacunae (especially with reference to homosexuality in women) where essential data are lacking, we concluded that it was sensible to adopt a skeptical stance—but uncertainty persists."

"The consistent picture of father-distance and father-negativity associated with homosexuality in both males and females keeps pressing for explanation." ■