

Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38508>

Jacques Marie Émile Lacan (April 13, 1901 - September 9, 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis and philosophy, and has been called "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud". Giving yearly seminars in Paris from 1953 to 1981, Lacan influenced France's intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the post-structuralist philosophers. His interdisciplinary work was as a "self-proclaimed Freudian....'It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian'"; and featured the unconscious, the castration complex, the ego, identification, and language as subjective perception. His ideas have had a significant impact on critical theory, literary theory, 20th-century French philosophy, sociology, feminist theory, film theory and clinical psychoanalysis.

Major concepts

Return to Freud

Lacan's "return to Freud" emphasizes a renewed attention to the original texts of Freud, and included a radical critique of Ego psychology, whereas "Lacan's quarrel with Object Relations psychoanalysis" was a more muted affair. Here he attempted "to restore to the notion of the Object Relation... the capital of experience that legitimately belongs to it", building upon what he termed "the hesitant, but controlled work of Melanie Klein... Through her we know the function of the imaginary primordial enclosure formed by the imago of the mother's body", as well as upon "the notion of the transitional object, introduced by D. W. Winnicott... a key-point for the explanation of the genesis of fetishism". Nevertheless, "Lacan systematically questioned those psychoanalytic developments from the 1930s to the 1970s, which were increasingly and almost exclusively focused on the child's early relations with the mother... the pre-Oedipal or Kleinian mother"; and Lacan's rereading of Freud -- "characteristically, Lacan insists that his return to Freud supplies the only valid model" -- formed a basic conceptual starting-point in that oppositional strategy.

Lacan thought that Freud's ideas of "slips of the tongue," jokes, and the interpretation of dreams all emphasized the agency of language in subjective constitution. In "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," he proposes that "the unconscious is structured like a language." The unconscious is not a primitive or archetypal part of the mind separate from the conscious, linguistic ego, he explained, but rather a formation as complex and structurally-sophisticated as consciousness itself. One consequence of the unconscious being structured like a language is that the self is denied any point of reference to which to be "restored" following trauma or a crisis of identity.

Andre Green objected that "when you read Freud, it is obvious that this proposition doesn't work for a minute. Freud very clearly opposes the unconscious (which he says is constituted by thing-presentations and nothing else) to the pre-conscious. What is related to language can only belong to the pre-conscious". Freud certainly contrasted "the presentation of the word and the

presentation of the thing... the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone" in his metapsychology. However "Dylan Evans, Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis... takes issue with those who, like Andre Green, question the linguistic aspect of the unconscious, emphasizing Lacan's distinction between das Ding and die Sache in Freud's account of thing-presentation".

Mirror stage

Lacan's first official contribution to psychoanalysis was the mirror stage, which he described as "formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience." By the early 1950s, he came to regard the mirror stage as more than a moment in the life of the infant; instead, it formed part of the permanent structure of subjectivity. In "the Imaginary order," his or her own image permanently catches and captivates the subject. Lacan explains that "the mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image".

As this concept developed further, the stress fell less on its historical value and more on its structural value. In his fourth Seminar, "La relation d'objet," Lacan states that "the mirror stage is far from a mere phenomenon which occurs in the development of the child. It illustrates the conflictual nature of the dual relationship."

The mirror stage describes the formation of the Ego via the process of objectification, the Ego being the result of a conflict between one's perceived visual appearance and one's emotional experience. This identification is what Lacan called alienation. At six months, the baby still lacks physical co-ordination. The child is able to recognize himself or herself in a mirror prior to the attainment of control over his or her bodily movements. The child sees his or her image as a whole and the synthesis of this image produces a sense of contrast with the lack of co-ordination of the body, which is perceived as a fragmented body. The child experiences this contrast initially as a rivalry with his or her own image, because the wholeness of the image threatens the child with fragmentation--thus the mirror stage gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image. To resolve this aggressive tension, the child identifies with the image: this primary identification with the counterpart forms the Ego. Lacan understands this moment of identification as a moment of jubilation, since it leads to an imaginary sense of mastery; yet when the child compares his or her own precarious sense of mastery with the omnipotence of the mother, a depressive reaction may accompany the jubilation.

Lacan calls the specular image "orthopaedic," since it leads the child to anticipate the overcoming of its "real specific prematurity of birth." The vision of the body as integrated and contained, in opposition to the child's actual experience of motor incapacity and the sense of his or her body as fragmented, induces a movement from "insufficiency to anticipation." In other words, the mirror

image initiates and then aids, like a crutch, the process of the formation of an integrated sense of self.

In the mirror stage a "misunderstanding" (*méconnaissance*) constitutes the Ego--the "me" (*moi*) becomes alienated from itself through the introduction of an imaginary dimension to the subject. The mirror stage also has a significant symbolic dimension, due to the presence of the figure of the adult who carries the infant. Having jubilantly assumed the image as his or her own, the child turns his or her head towards this adult, who represents the big Other, as if to call on the adult to ratify this image.

Other/other

While Freud uses the term "other", referring to *der Andere* (the other person) and "*das Andere*" (otherness), under the influence of Alexandre Kojève, Lacan's use is closer to Hegel's.

Lacan often used an algebraic symbology for his concepts: the big Other is designated A (for French *Autre*) and the little other is designated a (italicized French *autre*). He asserts that an awareness of this distinction is fundamental to analytic practice: "the analyst must be imbued with the difference between A and a, so he can situate himself in the place of Other, and not the other." Dylan Evans explains that:

"1. The little other is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the Ego. He is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image. The little other is thus entirely inscribed in the imaginary order.

2. The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. Indeed, the big Other is the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. The Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject."

"The Other must first of all be considered a locus," Lacan writes, "the locus in which speech is constituted". We can speak of the Other as a subject in a secondary sense only when a subject occupies this position and thereby embodies the Other for another subject.

In arguing that speech originates not in the Ego nor in the subject but rather in the Other, Lacan stresses that speech and language are beyond the subject's conscious control. They come from another place, outside of consciousness--"the unconscious is the discourse of the Other." When conceiving the Other as a place, Lacan refers to Freud's concept of psychical locality, in which the unconscious is described as "the other scene".

"It is the mother who first occupies the position of the big Other for the child," Dylan Evans explains, "it is she who receives the child's primitive cries and retroactively sanctions them as a particular message". The castration complex is formed when the child discovers that this Other is not complete because there is a "Lack (manque)" in the Other. This means that there is always a signifier missing from the trove of signifiers constituted by the Other. Lacan illustrates this incomplete Other graphically by striking a bar through the symbol A; hence another name for the castrated, incomplete Other is the "barred Other."

Feminist thinkers have both utilised and criticised Lacan's concepts of castration and the Phallus. Some feminists have argued that Lacan's phallogocentric analysis provides a useful means of understanding gender biases and imposed roles, while other feminist critics, most notably Luce Irigaray, accuse Lacan of maintaining the sexist tradition in psychoanalysis. For Irigaray, the Phallus does not define a single axis of gender by its presence/absence; instead, gender has two positive poles. Like Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, in criticising Lacan's concept of castration, discusses the phallus in a chiasmus with the hymen, as both one and other. Other feminists, such as Judith Butler, Jane Gallop, and Elizabeth Grosz, have interpreted Lacan's work as opening up new possibilities for feminist theory.

The three orders

The Imaginary

The Imaginary is the field of images and imagination, and deception. The main illusions of this order are synthesis, autonomy, duality, and similarity. Lacan thought that the relationship created within the mirror stage between the Ego and the reflected image means that the Ego and the Imaginary order itself are places of radical alienation: "alienation is constitutive of the Imaginary order." This relationship is also narcissistic.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the Symbolic order structures the visual field of the Imaginary, which means that it involves a linguistic dimension. If the signifier is the foundation of the Symbolic, the signified and signification are part of the Imaginary order. Language has Symbolic and Imaginary connotations--in its Imaginary aspect, language is the "wall of language" that inverts and distorts the discourse of the Other. On the other hand, the Imaginary is rooted in the subject's relationship with his or her own body (the image of the body). In *Fetishism: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real*, Lacan argues that in the sexual plane the Imaginary appears as sexual display and courtship love.

Insofar as identification with the analyst is the objective of analysis, Lacan accused major psychoanalytic schools of reducing the practice of psychoanalysis to the Imaginary order. Instead, Lacan proposes the use of the Symbolic to dislodge the disabling fixations of the Imaginary--the

analyst transforms the images into words. "The use of the Symbolic," he argued, "is the only way for the analytic process to cross the plane of identification."

The Symbolic

In his Seminar IV, "La relation d'objet," Lacan argues that the concepts of "Law" and "Structure" are unthinkable without language--thus the Symbolic is a linguistic dimension. This order is not equivalent to language, however, since language involves the Imaginary and the Real as well. The dimension proper to language in the Symbolic is that of the signifier--that is, a dimension in which elements have no positive existence, but which are constituted by virtue of their mutual differences.

The Symbolic is also the field of radical alterity--that is, the Other; the unconscious is the discourse of this Other. It is the realm of the Law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex. The Symbolic is the domain of culture as opposed to the Imaginary order of nature. As important elements in the Symbolic, the concepts of death and lack (manque) connive to make of the pleasure principle the regulator of the distance from the Thing ("das Ding an sich") and the death drive that goes "beyond the pleasure principle by means of repetition"--"the death drive is only a mask of the Symbolic order."

By working in the Symbolic order, the analyst is able to produce changes in the subjective position of the analysand. These changes will produce imaginary effects because the Imaginary is structured by the Symbolic.

The Real

Lacan's concept of the Real dates back to 1936 and his doctoral thesis on psychosis. It was a term that was popular at the time, particularly with Émile Meyerson, who referred to it as "an ontological absolute, a true being-in-itself". Lacan returned to the theme of the Real in 1953 and continued to develop it until his death. The Real, for Lacan, is not synonymous with reality. Not only opposed to the Imaginary, the Real is also exterior to the Symbolic. Unlike the latter, which is constituted in terms of oppositions (i.e. presence/absence), "there is no absence in the Real." Whereas the Symbolic opposition "presence/absence" implies the possibility that something may be missing from the Symbolic, "the Real is always in its place." If the Symbolic is a set of differentiated elements (signifiers), the Real in itself is undifferentiated--it bears no fissure. The Symbolic introduces "a cut in the real" in the process of signification: "it is the world of words that creates the world of things--things originally confused in the "here and now" of the all in the process of coming into being." The Real is that which is outside language and that resists symbolization absolutely. In Seminar XI Lacan defines the Real as "the impossible" because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic, and impossible to attain. It is this resistance to symbolization that lends the Real its traumatic quality. Finally, the Real is the object of anxiety,

insofar as it lacks any possible mediation and is "the essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence."

Desire

Lacan's conception of desire is central to his theories and follows Freud's concept of Wunsch. The aim of psychoanalysis is to lead the analysand and to uncover the truth about his or her desire, but this is possible only if that desire is articulated. Lacan wrote that "it is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire appears in the full sense of the term." This naming of desire "is not a question of recognizing something which would be entirely given. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world." Psychoanalysis teaches the patient "to bring desire into existence." The truth about desire is somehow present in discourse, although discourse is never able to articulate the entire truth about desire--whenever discourse attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover or surplus.

In "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan distinguishes desire from need and demand. Need is a biological instinct that is articulated in demand, yet demand has a double function: on the one hand, it articulates need, and on the other, acts as a demand for love. Even after the need articulated in demand is satisfied, the demand for love remains unsatisfied. This remainder is desire. For Lacan, "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second." Lacan adds that "desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need." Hence desire can never be satisfied, or as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "desire's raison d'être is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire."

It is also important to distinguish between desire and the drives. The drives are the partial manifestations of a single force called desire. Lacan's concept of the "objet petit a" is the object of desire, although this object is not that towards which desire tends, but rather the cause of desire. Desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack (manque).

Drives

Lacan maintains Freud's distinction between drive (Trieb) and instinct (Instinkt). Drives differ from biological needs because they can never be satisfied and do not aim at an object but rather circle perpetually around it. The true source of jouissance is the repetition of the movement of this closed circuit. Lacan posits the drives as both cultural and symbolic constructs--to him, "the drive is not a given, something archaic, primordial." He incorporates the four elements of the drives as defined by Freud (the pressure, the end, the object and the source) to his theory of the drive's circuit: the drive originates in the erogenous zone, circles round the object, and returns to the erogenous

zone. The three grammatical voices structure this circuit:

the active voice (to see)

the reflexive voice (to see oneself)

the passive voice (to be seen)

The active and reflexive voices are autoerotic--they lack a subject. It is only when the drive completes its circuit with the passive voice that a new subject appears. Despite being the "passive" voice, the drive is essentially active: "to make oneself be seen" rather than "to be seen." The circuit of the drive is the only way for the subject to transgress the pleasure principle.

Lacan identifies four partial drives: the oral drive (the erogenous zones are the lips, the partial object the breast), the anal drive (the anus and the faeces), the scopic drive (the eyes and the gaze) and the invocatory drive (the ears and the voice). The first two relate to demand and the last two to desire. If the drives are closely related to desire, they are the partial aspects in which desire is realized--desire is one and undivided, whereas the drives are its partial manifestations.

Other concepts

Name of the Father

Foreclosure (psychoanalysis)

Lack (manque)

Objet petit a

The graph of desire

Matheme

Sinthome

The Four discourses

"Les Non-dupes errent": Lacan on error and knowledge

Building on Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Lacan long argued that "every unsuccessful act is a successful, not to say 'well-turned', discourse", highlighting as well "sudden transformations of errors into truths, which seemed to be due to nothing more than perseverance". In a late seminar, he generalised more fully the psychoanalytic discovery of "truth -- arising from misunderstanding", so as to maintain that "the subject is naturally erring... discourse structures alone give him his moorings and reference points, signs identify and orient him; if he neglects, forgets, or loses them, he is condemned to err anew".

Because of "the alienation to which speaking beings are subjected due to their being in language", to survive "one must let oneself be taken in by signs and become the dupe of a discourse... fictions organized in to a discourse". For Lacan, with "masculine knowledge irredeemably an erring", the

individual "must thus allow himself to be fooled by these signs to have a chance of getting his bearings amidst them; he must place and maintain himself in the wake of a discourse... become the dupe of a discourse... les Non-dupes errent".

Lacan comes close here to one of the points where "very occasionally he sounds like Thomas Kuhn (whom he never mentions)", with Lacan's "discourse" resembling Kuhn's "paradigm" seen as "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" - something reinforced perhaps by Kuhn's approval of "Francis Bacon's acute methodological dictum: 'Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion'".

Clinical contributions

Variable-length session

The "variable-length psychoanalytic session" was one of Lacan's crucial clinical innovations, and a key element in his conflicts with the IPA, to whom his "innovation of reducing the fifty-minute analytic hour to a Delphic seven or eight minutes (or sometimes even to a single oracular parole murmured in the waiting-room)" was unacceptable. Lacan's variable-length sessions lasted anywhere from a few minutes (or even, if deemed appropriate by the analyst, a few seconds) to several hours. This practice replaced the classical Freudian "fifty minute hour".

With respect to what he called "the cutting up of the 'timing'", Lacan asked the question, Why make an intervention impossible at this point, which is consequently privileged in this way? By allowing the analyst's intervention on timing, the variable-length session removed the patient's--or, technically, "the analysand's"--former certainty as to the length of time that they would be on the couch. When Lacan adopted the practice, "the psychoanalytic establishment were scandalized" -- and, given that "between 1979 and 1980 he saw an average of ten patients an hour", it is perhaps not hard to see why: "psychoanalysis reduced to zero", if no less lucrative.

At the time of his original innovation, Lacan described the issue as concerning "the systematic use of shorter sessions in certain analyses, and in particular in training analyses"; and in practice it was certainly a shortening of the session around the so-called "critical moment" which took place, so that critics wrote that 'everyone is well aware what is meant by the deceptive phrase "variable length"... sessions systematically reduced to just a few minutes'. Irrespective of the theoretical merits of breaking up patients' expectations, it was clear that "the Lacanian analyst never wants to 'shake up' the routine by keeping them for more rather than less time".

Whatever the justification, the practical effects were startling. It does not take a cynic to point out that Lacan was able to take on many more analysands than anyone using classical Freudian techniques... as the technique was adopted by his pupils and followers an almost exponential rate of growth became possible".

Accepting the importance of "the critical moment when insight arises", object relations theory would nonetheless quietly suggest that "if the analyst does not provide the patient with space in which nothing needs to happen there is no space in which something can happen". Julia Kristeva, in a very different language, would concur that "Lacan, alert to the scandal of the timeless intrinsic to the analytic experience, was mistaken in wanting to ritualize it as a technique of scansion (short sessions)".

Writings and writing style

Jacques-Alain Miller is the sole editor of Lacan's seminars, which contain the majority of his life's work. "There has been considerable controversy over the accuracy or otherwise of the transcription and editing", as well as over "Miller's refusal to allow any critical or annotated edition to be published". Despite Lacan's status as a major figure in the history of psychoanalysis, some of his seminars remain unpublished. Since 1984, Miller has been regularly conducting a series of lectures, "L'orientation lacanienne." Miller's teachings have been published in the US by the journal Lacanian Ink.

Lacan claimed that his *Écrits* were not to be understood rationally, but would rather produce an effect in the reader similar to the sense of enlightenment one might experience while reading mystical texts. Lacan's writing is notoriously difficult, due in part to the repeated Hegelian/Kojévian allusions, wide theoretical divergences from other psychoanalytic and philosophical theory, and an obscure prose style. For some, "the impenetrability of Lacan's prose... too often regarded as profundity precisely because it cannot be understood". Arguably at least, "the imitation of his style by other 'Lacanian' commentators" has resulted in "an obscurantist antisystematic tradition in Lacanian literature".

The broader psychotherapeutic literature has little or nothing to say about the effectiveness of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though a major influence on psychoanalysis in France and parts of Latin America, Lacan's influence on clinical psychology in the English-speaking world is negligible, where his ideas are best-known in the arts and humanities.

A notable exception is the works of Dr. Annie G. Rogers (*A Shining Affliction*; *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma*), which credit Lacanian theory for many therapeutic insights in successfully treating sexually abused young women.

Criticism

Alan D. Sokal and Jean Bricmont in their book *Fashionable Nonsense* have criticised Lacan's use of terms from mathematical fields such as topology, accusing him of "superficial erudition" and of abusing scientific concepts that he does not understand. Other critics have dismissed Lacan's work

wholesale. François Roustang called it an "incoherent system of pseudo-scientific gibberish," and quoted linguist Noam Chomsky's opinion that Lacan was an "amusing and perfectly self-conscious charlatan". Dylan Evans, formerly a Lacanian analyst, eventually dismissed Lacanianism as lacking a sound scientific basis and for harming rather than helping patients, and has criticized Lacan's followers for treating his writings as "holy writ." Richard Webster has decried what he sees as Lacan's obscurity, arrogance, and the resultant Cult of Lacan". Richard Dawkins, in a review of *Fashionable Nonsense*, said regarding Lacan: We do not need the mathematical expertise of Sokal and Bricmont to assure us that the author of this stuff is a fake. Perhaps he is genuine when he speaks of non-scientific subjects? But a philosopher who is caught equating the erectile organ to the square root of minus one has, for my money, blown his credentials when it comes to things that I don't know anything about."

Lacan's colleague Daniel Lagache considered that "embodied the analyst's bad conscience. But... a good conscience in a psychoanalyst is no less dangerous". Others have been more forceful, describing him as "The Shrink from Hell... attractive psychopath", and detailing a long list of collateral damage to "patients, colleagues, mistresses, wives, children, publishers, editors and opponents... lunatic legacy". Certainly many of "the conflicts around Lacan's school and his person" have been linked to the "form of charismatic authority which, in his personal and institutional presence, he so dramatically provoked". Lacan himself defended his approach on the grounds that "psychosis is an attempt at rigor... I am psychotic for the simple reason that I have always tried to be rigorous".

One of the ironies of the linguistic criticism of Lacan in the 1970s and '80s is that cybernetics and artificial life models in the 21st century have reprised his theories, particularly the linguistic basis of the conscious-unconscious interface. Eco hinted at these connections when Artificial Intelligence was in its infancy in the 1980s, and theorists like Johnston have proposed that Lacanian models are an excellent fit with very recent Artificial Life models.

Malcolm Bowie has suggested that Lacan "had the fatal weakness of all those who are fanatically against all forms of totalization (the complete picture) in the so-called human sciences: a love of system". Similarly, Jacqueline Rose has argued that "Lacan was implicated in the phallocentrism he described, just as his utterance constantly rejoins the mastery which he sought to undermine". Feminists would then raise the question: "is Lacan, in claiming the law of the father, merely himself in the grip of the Oedipus complex?"

While it is widely recognised that "Lacan was... an intellectual magpie", this was not simply a matter of borrowing from others. Instead, "Lacan was so zealous in invoking other men's work and claiming to base his own arguments on them, when in reality he was departing from their teachings, leaving behind mere skeletons". Even with Freud, it is seldom clearly signposted when Lacan is expounding Freud, when he is reinterpreting Freud, or when he is proposing a completely

new theory in Freudian guise. The result was "a complete pattern of dissenting assent to the ideas of Freud... Lacan's argument is conducted on Freud's behalf and, at the same time, against him", so as to leave Lacan himself the "master" of his (and everyone's) thought. Castoriadis... maintained that Lacan had gradually come to prevent anyone else from thinking because of the way he tried to make all thought dependent on himself".

More personal criticism of his intellectual style is that it depended on a kind of teasing lure -- "fundamental truths to be revealed... but always at some further point". In such a (feminist) perspective, "Lacan's sadistic capriciousness reveals the prick behind the Phallus... a narcissistic tease who persuades by means of attraction and resistance, not by orderly systematic discourse". To intimates like Dolto, "Lacan was like a narcissistic and wayward child... All he thought about was himself and his work". Yet if Lacan was a narcissist, if his writings are essentially "the confessions of a self-justifying megalomaniac", fuelled by "Lacan's craving for recognition -- his almost demonic hunger" -- if they reveal "a narcissistic enjoyment of mystification as a form of omnipotent power... phantasies of narcissistic omnipotence", yet Lacan was clearly one of "what Maccoby calls 'productive narcissists'... get others to buy into their vision and help to make it a reality... the narcissists who change our world".