

ACTIVITY-PASSIVITY

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1. Core Definition (Psychoanalytic Context)

The concept of **Activity-Passivity** constitutes a fundamental polarity within classical psychoanalytic theory, primarily articulated by Sigmund Freud. This duality serves as a crucial classification system for understanding the diverse aims of human instincts or drives (Triebe). While Freud maintained that the source and energy of any drive are inherently and perpetually **active**--meaning desires are constant forces seeking discharge or expression--the specific manner in which that drive seeks satisfaction, known as its aim, can manifest along an active or a passive axis. This distinction is vital for mapping the complex development of sexual and aggressive instincts throughout the stages of human psychological development.

In this framework, activity is generally characterized by direct application of force, seeking mastery, or imposing change upon the object or the self. Conversely, passivity involves the drive aim achieving satisfaction through being acted upon, receiving stimulation, or becoming the object of another's active force. It is imperative to note that this psychoanalytic usage of active versus passive does not strictly align with vernacular definitions of initiative or lethargy, but rather describes a specific orientation of the drive aim toward its object and the means by which tension is reduced. The concept attempts to provide a structural explanation for the variation observed in human behavior, explaining why an underlying, uniform drive energy can result in behaviors that appear diametrically opposed.

The polarity of activity-passivity forms one leg of the three great polarities organizing psychic life according to Freud, the others being Ego-External World (the reality principle) and Pleasure-Unpleasure (the economic principle). In relation to the drives, this polarity allows for a dynamic interplay where initial, often active, instinctual aims can regress, transform, or be directed internally into passive aims, as seen vividly in the clinical phenomena of sadism transforming into masochism, or voyeurism shifting into exhibitionism. Understanding this fluidity of aims is central to interpreting neuroses and perversions within the classical model.

2. Origins in Freudian Theory

The concept of **Activity-Passivity** gained prominence within Freud's later theoretical formulations concerning the nature of drives, particularly following its detailed discussion in works such as his 1915 paper, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Here, Freud sought to move beyond simple topographical models of the mind and establish a robust metapsychological foundation for how psychic energy operates. He identified the ability of drives to undergo "vicissitudes" or

transformations, and the active-passive reversal was considered one of the primary mechanisms of this transformation.

Historically, the polarity was introduced early on to differentiate between the component instincts that contribute to sexuality. For example, in the context of the scopophilic drive (the drive to look), the active form is voyeurism (looking at an object), while the passive form is exhibitionism (being looked at by an object). Freud proposed that these reversals demonstrated not a change in the drive itself, but a change in the aim and the object, often facilitated by a turning of the drive back upon the subject's own person. This mechanism was used to explain the development of symptoms and character traits across a broad spectrum of clinical presentations.

Crucially, Freud integrated this concept deeply into his theory of gender development. He posited that the anatomical difference between the sexes provided the biological basis upon which the psychological distinction of activity and passivity was built. He theorized that the presence or absence of the penis (phallus) fundamentally structures the individual's psychological path, with activity being inherently linked to the masculine position and passivity to the feminine position. This biological determinism, which rooted the psychological polarity in physical characteristics, would become the primary target of subsequent critiques leveled against the theory.

3. Association with Gender and Sexual Development

One of the most defining, and consequently most controversial, applications of the **Activity-Passivity** principle in classical psychoanalysis lies in its association with gender identity and sexual roles. Freud mapped activity onto the traditional characteristics of masculinity--such as initiative, aggression, and outward projection--and passivity onto femininity--such as receptivity, dependence, and being the object of action. This linkage was not merely descriptive but prescriptive, forming the basis for what Freud considered the "normal" psychological trajectory for men and women.

In Freudian developmental schema, the achievement of "normal femininity" required the girl to abandon the active, phallic position (associated with the clitoris) and transition to the passive, receptive position (associated with the vagina) during the Oedipal phase. This transition was deemed essential for her future role in reproduction and partnership. Conversely, masculinity necessitated maintaining and reinforcing the active, assertive aims. This rigid association dictated that any deviation--such as active aims in women or passive aims dominating a man's sexual life--was often pathologized or categorized as a developmental arrest or deviation.

This strict gender-linked framework often led to misunderstandings, particularly regarding female sexuality. Critics argued that Freud equated passivity not just with a drive aim, but with inferiority, suggesting that the female psychological structure was necessarily weaker or less developed than the male's. Furthermore, the theory struggled to account for the existence of active aggression or

ambition in women, or passive receptivity as a desirable or neutral trait in men, except through the lens of psychopathology. The enduring legacy of this concept is thus intertwined with the history of psychology's often problematic engagement with gender and sex differences.

4. Conceptualization of Desire and Drive

The polarity of activity-passivity is essential for understanding the dynamic nature of the psychoanalytic drive (Trieb). According to Freud, the fundamental driving force, or instinctual source of energy, is always constant and pressing. It is always seeking discharge and, in that sense, is inherently **active**. However, the manifestation of this activity is variable, depending on the aim. A key psychoanalytic insight is that a shift in the aim from active to passive does not imply a loss of desire or psychic energy; rather, it represents a transformation in the mechanism of satisfaction.

Consider the example of the aggressive drive. In its active form, it may manifest as sadism, where satisfaction is derived from imposing pain or control upon an external object. In its passive form, the aggressive drive turns back onto the self, manifesting as masochism, where satisfaction is derived from receiving pain or suffering control. Freud theorized that masochism is fundamentally sadism directed inward, demonstrating that the underlying active desire for force remains, but the aim has been internalized and reversed. This intricate reversal mechanism highlights the deep psychological connection between pleasure and pain, mastery and submission.

This conceptualization implies that psychic life is organized by these internal reversals. When an external object is unavailable, or when societal norms forbid the expression of an active aim, the drive can find release through its passive counterpart, allowing the subject to satisfy the instinctual tension in an acceptable or manageable way. This fluidity between active and passive aims provides the explanatory power for understanding complex emotional states, such as the oscillation between taking pleasure in dominating others and taking pleasure in being dominated by them, suggesting a unified instinctual source behind these seemingly opposite behaviors.

5. Historical Reception and Early Critiques

Almost immediately upon its thorough articulation, the Freudian theory of **Activity-Passivity**, particularly its gendered application, faced significant challenge and critique. The source material notes that the concept "was heavily belittled the early years, mostly by female experts," a reference to the pioneering work of psychoanalysts such as Karen Horney and Melanie Klein, who recognized the limitations and biases inherent in the model.

Karen Horney, in particular, mounted powerful objections to the idea that female psychology was fundamentally defined by biological inferiority or inherent passivity. She argued that what Freud identified as passive traits in women--such as dependency, modesty, or emotionality--were not

innate biological destinies but rather cultural and social adaptations necessary for women to navigate a patriarchal society. Horney asserted that the feeling of inadequacy was a cultural product, not a necessary psycho-biological outcome of anatomical difference, thus separating the concepts of activity and passivity from their absolute linkage to gender.

Furthermore, theorists noted that the concept often failed to adequately account for the wide variability in individual behavior. If activity was strictly masculine and passivity strictly feminine, then the existence of active, aggressive women or gentle, receptive men became theoretical anomalies requiring elaborate, often strained, explanations of developmental failure or neurosis. These early critiques paved the way for revisionist psychoanalytic schools that sought to de-emphasize biological determinism and integrate social, cultural, and environmental factors into the formation of gender identity and personality structure.

6. Modern Disciplinary Consensus

The contemporary consensus among most practitioners and scientists regarding Freud's original formulation of **Activity-Passivity** is largely one of rejection, particularly when applied to gender. As the source content states, "Modern-day therapists tend to agree that Freud's theory of activity-passivity is gender-biased and far off base." The primary reasons for this widespread dismissal relate to the theory's foundational reliance on essentialism and its incompatibility with contemporary understandings of gender, sexuality, and psychological development.

Modern psychology, relying heavily on empirical evidence and cognitive neuroscience, rejects rigid, biologically determined polarities as primary organizers of behavior. Current theories of personality, such as the Five Factor Model, utilize dimensional approaches, viewing traits like agency or assertiveness as spectra that are distributed independently of biological sex. Developmental psychology now emphasizes the critical role of social learning, cultural scripts, and fluid identity formation, rendering the prescriptive link between anatomy and psychological aim (activity/passivity) obsolete.

While the terms "active" and "passive" may still be used descriptively in clinical settings to denote differing styles of interaction or coping mechanisms, they have been detached from their classical psychoanalytic baggage concerning innate instinctual aims and gender destiny. The legacy of the concept today serves mainly as a historical artifact within the study of classical psychoanalytic literature, illustrating the limitations of early 20th-century psychological models that struggled to reconcile human diversity with fixed biological postulates.

Further Reading

[Psychoanalytic Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Sigmund Freud \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Karen Horney: Psychoanalytic Feminism (APA Division 39)

Activity-Passivity Definition (Psychology Dictionary)

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