7.3: Nancy Chodorow's Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Role of Mothering

In 1974, Juliet Mitchell suggested that Freudian psychoanalysis offered an important means for understanding the psychology of women, and that feminism should embrace Freud’s theoretical perspective. She did not suggest that Freud was necessarily right about the psychological development of women, but she did emphasize the importance of object relations theory and the interactions between mothers, their children, and families as a whole (Mitchell, 2000). Some 50 years earlier, Helene Deutsch had suggested that women do not seek to become mothers due to penis envy, but rather they want to replace passive femininity with an active role as a woman and mother (Deutsch was analyzed and trained by Sigmund Freud himself; Deutsch, 1944, 1945, 1973, Sayers, 1991). Deutsch (1973) wrote that she had great admiration for Marie Bonaparte as a person and a scholar (Deutsch knew Bonaparte personally), but Deutsch found little of interest in Bonaparte’s strict application of Freudian theory to the psychology of women. The person best known today for attempting to combine elements of Freud’s theory with an objective perspective on a psychology of women is Nancy Chodorow (1944-present), a sociologist and psychoanalyst who has focused on the special relationship between mothers and daughters.

In 1978, Chodorow published The Reproduction of Mothering. Twenty years later, she wrote a new preface for the second edition, in which she had the advantage of looking back at both the success of her book and the criticism that it drew from some. Chodorow acknowledged that many feminists felt obliged to choose between a biologically-based psychology of women and mothering (the essential Freudian perspective) versus a view in which the psychology of women and their feelings about mothering were determined by social structure and cultural mandate. Chodorow believed that social structure and culture were important, but she insisted nonetheless that the biological differences between males and females could not be dismissed. Indeed, they lead to an essential difference in the mother-daughter relationship as compared to the mother-son relationship (Chodorow, 1999a).
According to Chodorow, when a woman becomes a mother, the most important aspect of her relationship with any daughter is the recognition that they are alike. Thus, her daughter can also become a mother someday. This special connection is felt by the daughter and incorporated into her psyche, or ego. It is important to remember that much of this is happening at an unconscious level. It is not as if women choose to favor their daughters over their sons, and it is not as if women reject their sons. Chodorow argues that it just simply happens, because of the biological similarity between females. As a consequence of this special relationship, daughters are subtly shaped in ways that lead to what we often think of as feminine attributes: a sense of self-in-relation, feeling connected to others, being able to empathize, and being embedded in or dependent on relationships. For Chodorow, the internalization of the mother-daughter relationship, from the daughter’s point of view, is the development of a most important object relation. As adults, many women feel a desire to have children, which is often described as a maternal instinct or a biological drive (the feeling that their “biological clock” is ticking). As an alternative, Chodorow suggests that these feelings have instead been shaped by the unconscious fantasies and emotions associated with the woman’s internal relationship to her own mother (Chodorow, 1999a).

In contrast to the development of daughters, Chodorow suggests that sons are influenced by the essential feelings of difference conveyed by their mother. Consequently, and in contrast to women, men grow up asserting their independence, and they will be anxious about intimacy if it signals dependence on another. In addition, within the cultural framework of society, men develop a greater concern with being masculine than women are concerned with their femininity (Chodorow, 1999a).

The cultural differences between men and women, as well as the early childhood differences in their relationships with their parents, create problems for the typical family structure. Since men tend to avoid relationships, they are unlikely to fulfill the relational needs that women have. In addition, young girls most likely experience their relationship with their father within the context of their relationship with their mother, whereas young boys have a more direct two-person relationship with their mother (in terms of heterosexual relationships; Chodorow, 1999a). Therefore, in order for a woman to balance the relational triangle she experienced with her mother and father, and the subsequent intrapsychic object-relational structure she developed, she needs to have a child. In other words, by having children, women can “reimpose intrapsychic relational structure on the social world,” and they can relate to the father of their child in terms of a family structure they were familiar with in childhood. Furthermore, having a child recreates the intimacy a woman shared with her own mother.

One critique of The Reproduction of Mothering that Chodorow agreed with was her emphasis on a universal mother-daughter experience, within a heterosexual nuclear family. In her later writings, Chodorow emphasized individual subjectivity, still in relation to others, but also within a wider range of family structures and individual situations (Chodorow, 1989, 1994, 1999b). She felt that a balance
between the principles of psychoanalysis and an understanding of culture was the best overall approach:

A psychoanalysis that begins with the immediacy of unconscious fantasy and feeling found in the clinical encounter illuminates our understanding of individual subjectivity and potentially transforms all sociocultural thought…At the same time, feminist, anthropological, and other cultural theories require that psychoanalysts take seriously the ways in which cultural meanings intertwine with and help to constitute psychic life. (pg. 274; Chodorow, 1999b)