How important is the notion of the ‘drive’ for psychoanalysis?
Compare and Discuss its role in Freud, Object Relations Theory and Lacan.

Introduction

The development of Psychoanalytic Drive Theory has undergone a continual remodelling during the hundred years since the birth of psychoanalysis. In this essay, I trace some of its evolution from the earliest stages of Sigmund Freud’s thinking in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* (1915a), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), etc. I then look at some of the key concepts of drive theory in Donald Winnicott’s inter-subjective psychodynamic Object Relations theory, and in Jacques Lacan’s poststructuralist psychoanalytic drive theory. (Freud, 1915; Winnicott, 1971; Lacan, 1977) Freud’s, Winnicott’s and Lacan’s drive theories will provide the materials for the main body of the essay and facilitate a comparative analysis and critique of their work towards the end. It will not be possible to avoid using the shared terms and concepts interchangeably at times, as often these traditions are seen as extensions and progressions of the same classical Freudian theory. However, there are clear differences between these three schools of psychoanalytic drive theory and the essay aims to demonstrate some of these.

Instinct

In psychology and the natural sciences, instinct is the inherent inclination of a living organism towards natural instinctive behaviour that is a ‘fixed’ pattern of response. A sequence of actions without variation, carried out in response to a stimulus. (Erwin, 2002) From the perspective of instinct, drives are understood as an organism’s automatic response to the biological ‘needs’ basic to life. These include hunger, thirst, the elimination of waste, avoidance of pain, the attainment of comfort and sex. The satisfaction of these survival needs is necessary to sustain life. Processing these biological needs is an involuntary, visceral, central nervous system that regulates blood flow, breathing, body temperature and maintains homeostasis – the chemical balance necessary for health and well-being. ‘If’ the drives, fire and action the instinctual biological processes essential to life, then obviously an understanding the drive is ‘vital’ to an understanding of physical, sexual and mental health and psychopathology.
Sigmund Freud’s Instinct and Drive Theory

All of Freud’s meta-psychological models of the psychical apparatus are energetic and psychodynamic. Broadly speaking, a differentiation can be made between Eros, the sexual life instinct/drive, and Thanatos, the aggressive/destructive death instinct/drive. (Freud, 1920, 1923) In psychology eros is equivalent to ‘life energy’ while in Freudian psychoanalysis it refers specifically to sexual energy. (Freud, 1905) Eros should not be confused with Freud’s concept of ‘libido’ which he referred to as the ‘life drive’ or the will to live. In early psychoanalytic writings, erotic instincts - drives towards sex and creative pursuits - are opposed by survival instincts, but in post 1920 Freudian theory, Eros is opposed by Thanatos himself, the aggressive and destructive death drive.

Freud’s concept of the death drive (Todestrieb) is the drive towards death, self-destruction and the return to the inorganic state. It was described by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), where he wrote of the opposition between the sexual life instincts and the ego’s aggressive death instincts. Freud also made subdivisions of the drives into ‘component’ or ‘partial’ drives, but these are not covered in this essay. (Freud, 1905) However, in any examination of the drives, the distinction is always made between an instinct and a drive. In the editor’s note to his translation of Sigmund Freud’s essay Instincts and their Vicissitudes (1915), James Strachey wrote that he chose to use the English word ‘instinct’ to stand for the German word ‘trieb’ rather than using the word drive. The connotations of the word ‘instinct’ put an emphasis on a ‘fixed pattern of response’, but such an interpretation does not do justice to the movement of the word ‘drive’,

“What Freud wished to call attention to by speaking of Trieb instead of Instinkt, I believe, is that human sexual behaviour is characterized by the fact that it is anything but stereotyped, as witness the sexual behaviour of children, the sexual fantasies and symptoms of neurotic patients, and the variety of sexual perversions.” (Brenner, 2008, p.708)

According to Freud’s theory in Repression (1915b), the sexual life ‘drive’ seeks satisfaction, but it encounters obstacles and is subjected to the censorship of the laws of society. This reigning in of the sexual drive occurs in the course of education and socialisation, so that any kind of excessive life energy cannot be displayed. The developing ego has to learn how to deal with and control the sexual impulses transmitted through the body and transferred to others in society. In
the language of Wilfred Bion (1962) one could say that an energetic (force ♂) is taken up by the psychic apparatus (container ♀) and processed.

The term drive (trieb) first appeared in Freud’s essay *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), where he identified three components of the drive, its: source (quelle); aim (ziel); object (objekt). But drive like constructs can be found in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) and also in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), when Breuer and Freud reported on their work with hysterical neurotic patients. The landmark of Freudian drive theory however, was his *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* (1915a) essay, where the concept of ‘pressure’ (drang) was added as a fourth hypothetical component of the drive. Freud (1915) defined the drive, “If now we apply ourselves to considering mental life from a biological point of view, an ‘instinct’ appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychic representation of the stimuli originating for within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body.” (Freud, 1915a, p.121)

For Freud, the ‘source’ of the drive is a biological stimulus, but the ‘drive’ itself is a ‘psychic representation’. “The theory of the drives is, so to say, our mythology. Drives are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness.” (Freud, 1933, p. 95) The Freudian drive is therefore a demarcatory borderline concept between soma and psyche. (Vermorel, 1990) Most contemporary psychoanalysts agree that it is necessary to make a distinction between biological and psychological functions. (Perelberg, 2005; Sandler, 2005) According to contemporary psychoanalytic theory then, instinctual drives are psychological constructs stemming from biological processes. The problem in psychoanalytic Drive Theory seems to be that the life drive (soma) and death drive (psyche) are not always distinguished, “this incorrect equating of instinct and trieb has created serious misunderstandings.” (Fenichel, 1946, p.12)
Nosology and Clinical Application of Drive Theory

In nosological and clinical psychoanalytic terms, the dynamics of the drive or transference, can be used to categorise psychopathological conditions and structures. For example, Lacanian nosology identifies three clinical structures: neurosis, psychosis and perversion. (Nobus, 2000) The normal structure, in the sense of that found in the statistical majority of the population, is neurosis. Neurotic patients go into therapy because they sense that their sexual life energy (libido) is stifled and withering, or because they have sexual or relationship problems. This is because their desire is dying. A great deal of sexual life energy is tied up in symptoms and a great deal of it is invested in keeping things the way they are.

For example, neurosis is characterised by extensive control over the drives. Freud found that in neurotic patients, psychosexual energy and traumatic memories tend to be repressed and kept out of consciousness, because they clash with the moral standards of society or cause too much anxiety. (Freud, 1915) The excess nervous energy attached to anxiety producing experiences, is ‘repressed’ and prevented from being expressed or discharged. Instead, the sexual energy/libido is dammed up and adds to nervous system excitation causing all sorts of problems. In order to divest itself of some of this ‘excess’ or ‘surplus’ nervous energy, the affect/emotion - and it is important to remember we are talking about feelings and emotions when we use the word energy, something conveniently forgotten or avoided in the realm of science - is either projected and transferred outwards and displaced onto an external person or object, denied, avoided or repressed and converted into some sort of somatic symptom, or a combination of external displacement (transference) and internal conversion. One way or another, the excess energy finds expression and is discharged.

“One of the most important results of psychoanalytic research is the discovery that neurotic anxiety arises out of libido, that it is the product of a transformation of it, and that it is thus related to it in the same kind of way as vinegar is to wine.” (Freud, 1905, p.224)
Donald Winnicott’s Object Relations Theory

With the publication of The Ego and the Id (1923), Freud introduced his Structural Model of the human psyche and a new psychoanalytic era began. Psychoanalysts shifted their interest from the ‘contents’ of the unconscious (Lacan), to the ‘processes’ by which those contents were either kept out of consciousness (Ego Psychology) or transferred to others in society (Object Relations/Winnicott). (Perelberg, 2005; Sandler, 2005)

Important work originating from post 1923 Freudian theory is the Object Relations school of psychoanalysis, considered a modern psychodynamic approach. (Elliott, 1994; Gomez, 1997) The development of Object Relations theory began in the 1940s and 50s with the work of British psychoanalysts Ronald Fairbairn, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, etc. Their theories described processes of developing a healthy psyche in ‘relation’ to others in society and the ‘inter-subjective’ approach to psychoanalysis began to emerge. (Gillespie, 2010)

“It is this way of working that makes the author theorize categorically that libido is object-seeking.” (Winnicott, 1953, p.330)

English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s version of Object Relations theory moved away from a materialistic view of instincts/drives and applied Freudian theories to his child analysis with children and their mothers. (Kirshner, 2011) He rejected Freud’s theories of the life and death drives and the development of the individual ego and instead developed his own theories involving ideas such as the merger of the subjective and objective worlds into a whole. At the same time, he argued that Freud’s meta-psychological drive theory was a speculative superstructure that corresponds to biological processes. (Winnicott, 1963) His theory differs from Freud’s in both his practical and theoretical dependence on a relational, rather than a mechanistic, approach to psychoanalysis.

For Winnicott, the term libido no longer denotes a psychosexual energy analogous to instinctual forces, but is instead an allusion to the fantasies about inter-subjective relationships. He focuses on concepts of transition and ambiguity as his arena is the borderline between inner and outer, self and other, the subjective and the objective. (Winnicott, 1971) What he was trying to do is emphasize the sociability of the individual that emerges from a ‘matrix of communality’. Gomez, 1997 argues that Winnicott’s brand of Object Relations theory does not reject Drive Theory or instinctual gratification. Instead she says, Winnicott sees psychic life as a challenge to
the individual’s capacity to contain and make sense of their libidinal excitement. His concepts of ‘containment and holding’ similar to Wilfred Bion’s concepts of ‘container and contained’, had a profound influence on the development of psychoanalysis over the last half century. Winnicott understood that excess nervous psychosexual energy can easily overwhelm an individual’s sense of coherence, stability and integration and that parents, society and psychoanalysts needed to play a containing and supportive role in the healthy development of the child. At the same time, he acknowledged that libido was at the core of realness and characterised the ‘true self’. Winnicott’s psychosocial view is that the ‘environment’ i.e. the family and society, is as crucial as instinctual energy in psychosexual, emotional and social development. But he did not entirely abandon instinct or drive theory and his theories are built on Freudian foundations.

Jacques Lacan’s Drive Theory

According to British sociologist Anthony Elliott, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory has profoundly influenced contemporary psychoanalysis. (Elliott, 1994) Lacan was sceptical of attempts such as Winnicott’s to ‘link’ psychoanalysis with the social realm, as unconscious wishes are always expressed through the ‘relay’ of other people, a view summarized by his maxim, ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’. In other words, what this means essentially is that human passion is itself structured by the desire of others. For Lacan therefore, desire is an intrinsically social phenomenon, expressed in language. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988)

All of Lacan’s theories are built with quasi-mathematical diagrams, models, schemata and knots, such as his ‘graph of desire’, that represents the structure, dynamics, truth and reality of unconscious drives and their contact with the biological, psychical and social. (Eidelsztein, 2009) Lacan maintained Freud's distinction between drive (trieb) and instinct (instinkt), but his drive theory differs from the Freudian theory of instinctual needs, because ‘drives’ can never be satisfied and do not aim at an object, but circle perpetually around it. Lacan’s poststructuralist subject is conceived as an empty ‘no self’ filled with nothingness. (Lacan, 1998) The subject not only continuously moves towards an object to satisfy its unmet needs and contain its anxiety, it does so precisely because it ‘lacks’ an object that could satisfy it. The Lacanian drive is therefore conceived of as a repetitive ‘circuit’ which is pursed simply for the enjoyment of pursuing it. Lacan puts the emphasis on the drives perpetual striving to become. In contrast, the Freudian
ego that must be developed and defended. While the Winnicottian true self must be contained, held and nurtured to emerge through a ‘good enough’ relation to others in society.

In *The Freudian Unconscious and Ours*, chapter two of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977), Lacan discusses what he called, “the fundamental Freudian concepts – namely the unconscious, repetition, the transference and the drive”. (p.12) He says on researching drive theories, he reread Freud’s essay *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) in order to emphasize his four components of the drive – the source, aim, object and pressure. Lacan incorporated Freud’s four drive components into his own theory to describe the drive’s ‘circuit’ - what Freud referred to as ‘vicissitudes’. According to both Freudian and Lacanian drive theory, a drive circuit originates in an erogenous zone – oral, anal, phallic, genital – moves out towards and circles round an object and then returns to the erogenous zone. But in contrast to both Freud and Winnicott, the ‘aim’ of Lacan’s drive is not an ‘object’, but ‘repetition’ and the ‘source’ of the drive is not a stimulated zone of the body. For Lacan, the true source of pleasure or ‘jouissance’ is the ‘repetitive’ movement of the closed circuit of the drive and desire is always desire for desire, rather than for an object one thinks one desires.

Section three of his seminar eleven, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977), is devoted to The Transference and the Drive. Lacan reminds us that, “the transference is usually represented as an affect” (emotion/libido) and usually “a rather vague distinction is made between a positive and a negative transference.” (ibid, p.123) In classical Freudian terms we could say that the positive transference is eros and the negative transference is thanatos. Two of the basic concepts which Lacan presents his notion of the drive are that of ‘montage’ and ‘deconstruction’. This is the key difference between Lacan’s and Freud’s drive theories, as for Lacan the drive is not only a biological entity or psychical phenomenon, “the drive is a montage” (Lacan, 1977, p. 169), more about urgency and awakening than about an instinctual fixed pattern of response, which the drive’s repetitive ‘circuit’ represents. Lacan’s ‘real’ drive is represented by the encounter, accidents, luck, miracles and unconscious formations that he says give us evidence that we are not only repeating the same old emotional, deeply held patterns. What wakes us up into reality is the real drive.

Lacan’s paper *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (1953), published in Écrits: A Selection (1977), presents his best known formula “the unconscious is structured as a language.” Whereas psychoanalytic Ego Psychologists and Object Relations analysts focussed on and developed the conscious ego’s relational psychodynamics, Lacan’s
version of psychoanalysis was a return to the unconscious, with the addition of linguistics. The Lacanian unconscious is not the archaic and primordial realm of instinctual drives, it is the domain of cultural and symbolic constructs. Within Freudian psychoanalysis, the predominant perception of the unconscious was that it is the realm of primitive irrational drives, something opposed to the rational and relational conscious self. In nineteenth century Europe, the Freudian concept of the unconscious caused a scandal, not because of the claim that the rational self is subordinated to the much vaster domain of blind irrational instincts, but because it demonstrated how the unconscious itself obeys its own grammar and logic. In his seminal monograph *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud demonstrated how the unconscious thinks and speaks through symptoms, dreams, imagination, fantasy, jokes, art and the gaps and errors in everyday language. For Lacan, the unconscious is not a reservoir of wild unruly drives that have to be conquered by the ego, but the site where truth speaks. Freud’s motto “where id was, there ego shall be” with Lacan became “I dare to approach the truth”. For Lacan, the conscious ego should not conquer and control unconscious drives, but await a truth it has to learn to live with.

For Lacan, death represents the nothingness that lies beyond the ego and language, the undifferentiated desire that constitutes incomprehensible ecstasy. All desire is desire for death, which Lacan equates with something beyond the ego that we can only catch a glimpse of in language. Language restores the subject to their function in society, which is to know mortality and acknowledge subordination to the structures of authority that constitute a culture. In society, Lacan says, the culture is master and the alternative to enslavement is death. To accept death is to accept castration, which means accepting the gap that divides animal from human, subject from object and the individual from society.
Comparative Analysis of Psychoanalytic Drive Theories

Classical Freudian Drive Theory viewed the individual as motivated principally by internal life and death instincts and the drives were understood as their ‘psychical representation’, a psychosomatic dynamic concept ‘between’ soma and psyche, subject and object, self and other. But the importance of the ‘other’ person, object, social or cultural structure was not the focus of early pre 1920 Freudian teachings. Nancy Chodorow (1999) argues in favour of the importance of the internal psychical world of fantasy and emotion, but not at the expense of social and cultural complexity. She suggests that all inter-subjective social and cultural experiences are transformed through people’s intra-psychic lens. Similar to the Lacanian emphasis, she says people are historically and socially located, but psychodynamically and relationally create a sense of meaning and selfhood.

Winnicott’s contribution to psychoanalysis lies more in the field of practical application than in theory. Guntrip (1975) argues that Winnicott was first and foremost a clinician, a people-person, not a paper-person, unlike other psychoanalysts who were more revolutionary in theory than practice. Whereas in classical Freudian psychoanalysis practice, psychoanalysts retained an unemotional, dispassionate, non-relational ‘position’ of authority, the so called ‘blank screen’ for analysands to project and transfer their positive and negative energies onto. The essence of Winnicott’s clinical practice was the here-and-now relationship, contained within a therapeutic holding environment. In contrast to Winnicott’s developmental approach, the thrust of Lacan’s poststructural psychoanalytic theory and method emphasized language and placed the analyst in a ‘non-relational’ authority position as the supposed subject of knowledge. Whereas Winnicott developed a model of the emergence of a ‘true self’ in the context of a ‘good enough’ holding emotional relationship, Lacan constructed a theory of the ‘subject’ derived from the social and cultural symbolic order of linguistics. Their contrasting approaches can be viewed as representing a schism in psychoanalysis, in both theory and clinical practice.

Goldman’s (1993) and Guntrip’s (1975) view is that Winnicott maintained a dual relationship in relation to Freud’s theory, disagreeing with him in private, while upholding him in public. They argue that Winnicott disagreed with Freud and Melanie Klein on the primacy of instinctual conflict (Thanatos) and suggested that the concept of the death instinct was superfluous, rather than wrong. (Winnicott, 1953) He sought to balance emphasis on unconscious phantasy arising from internal conflict, with greater inclusion of the environment and its effects. In his optimistic fashion, he made a plea for Klein’s theory of the ‘depressive position’ to be renamed ‘the stage
of concern’. (Winnicott, 1971) His unwillingness to enter into sharp criticism of Freud or Klein demonstrated an aversion to the overthrow of forebears and his affectionate regard for them. Together with Darwin, they were the foremost influences in his thinking. Winnicott’s attitude brings to mind a child’s admiration and fear of opposing his father’s wishes.

According to André Green (2005), Winnicott introduced a positive and emotional emphasis of the life instinct into psychoanalysis, while Lacan sustained Freud's Romantic tragic/ironic vision. Appignanesi (2006) has also argued that Winnicott disliked Freud’s concept of the aggressive and destructive death drive and what he saw as an excessively negative emphasis on conflict and mechanisms of defence. While Minsky (1996) has described Winnicott's work as a flight from the sexual erotic. Winnicott’s retreat from psychoanalytic concepts such as the death drive (Freud), envy and jealousy (Klein) and emptiness, lack and desire (Lacan), concepts that attempt to understand and explain the realities of life, was attributed to “his identification with an ideal mother” that led to his ‘idealisation’ of family life. (Lomas, 1987, p. 88) Winnicott’s stated professional aim as a child psychoanalyst was to give young mothers support in childrearing. Yet in practice, idealisation of the ‘good enough’ mother might have become a perfectionist yardstick for mothers to measure up to. A further criticism of Winnicott’s Object Relations theory is linked to what has been described as his ‘cult of childhood’. (Phillips, 1988, 1994) For Lacan, despite respecting his psychoanalytic peer and competitor, Winnicott was implicated in the “contradiction between the pre-Oedipal intrigue, to which the analytic relation can be reduced and the fact that Freud was satisfied with having situated it in the position of the Oedipus complex... leading to a propedeutics of general infantilization.” (Lacan, Ecrits, p.120) These criticisms may be why Winnicott's work has been described as a flight from the erotic.

Classically trained French psychoanalyst André Green straddled the competing theories of classical and independent psychoanalysis. (Kohon, 1999) He moved from Freudian to Lacanian analysis then, like feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (1999), he criticized Lacan’s linguistic concept of the signifier and his neglect of the emotional life. Yet despite his reservations, Green (2005) says that Lacan was one of most original psychoanalytic thinkers since Sigmund Freud, even though his quasi-mathematical psychoanalytic theories are admittedly highly technical, mystical and obscure. On the other hand, Evans (2005) another former Lacanian analyst, has dismissed Lacan’s teachings as ‘lacking’ a scientific basis and for harming rather than helping patients. While Lacan's colleague Daniel Lagache said that, “Lacan embodied the analyst's bad conscience. But a good conscience in a psychoanalyst is no less dangerous.” (Zaretsky, 2005, p.409)
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