

# LACK IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC TRADITION

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## Abstract

*The article discusses the concept of lack in the psycho-dynamic tradition as an intrapsychic and interpsychic dynamic force that drives a constantly active desire, participates in identity formation, and produces the feeling of alienation. The article combines the perspectives of the representatives of the classical and contemporary, post-structuralist approaches in psychoanalysis and conceptualizes the notion of lack within different psychoanalytic models.*

*The function of lack is discussed in the context of the individual's perception of reality within intrapsychic and interpsychic dimensions based on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Adam Phillips. In the intrapsychic realm, the primary function of lack relates to fundamental needs and aims to maintain desire in permanently active state. Desire, on its part, arises after transitioning from the imaginary to the symbolic register as a result of separation from the mother, which leads to alienation from oneself. In the interpsychic realm the sense of lack extends beyond the psyche into cultural and social dimensions and becomes the source of agency that drives the individual towards personal growth, self-reflection, and creative self-expression.*

*The alienation resulting from lack bares both negative and creative potential for the psyche. The present article describes how sublimation, the overcoming of fantasy, and the symbolization of "inner foreignness" facilitate coping with the internal conflict and frustration caused by lack. In the concluding section, the article discusses potential ways of overcoming the sense of lack.*

**Key words:** *lack, desire, alienation, psychoanalysis, agency*

## 1. Introduction

According to the psychodynamic approach, lack is the foundation of the psyche's existence. In dictionaries<sup>3</sup>, "lack" (*manqué* in French) is directly related to the concept of deficiency, inadequacy, or insufficiency. However, in psychoanalysis lack rarely has a negative connotation and is considered a constructive force that disrupts mental balance, leading to the accumulation of excess energy and the maintenance of constantly unfulfilled desire in an active state.

The concept of lack is not operationally defined in the classical psychoanalytic works, but it is fundamental to the definition of other concepts such as satisfaction, frustration,

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<sup>3</sup> "Lack," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lack>.  
"Lack," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lack>. (Bolognini, 2004)

denial, part-object, and castration complex. Specifically, in Laplanche and Pontalis "The Language of Psychoanalysis" (1973), the term "lack" appears 36 times, most of which relate to castration anxiety (e.g., the lack of a penis, the lack of satisfaction) or the loss of a significant object (e.g., the loss of a love object, the lack of a real object). Some cases also relate to the impossibility of satisfying desires (e.g., the lack of satisfaction of sexual instincts or instinctual impulses). It is clear that in the psychodynamic tradition, lack is not synonymous with deficiency. Lack is an active force instigating behavior, the foundation of many classical and contemporary psychoanalytic theories. For Freud, the experience of lack is related to castration anxiety (Freud, 1923), while for Jacques Lacan, this concept is an integral part of the "symbolic order," as lack is the basis for the search for completeness and wholeness, and is the precursor to the constant search for the unattainable object of desire (*objet petit a*) (Lacan, 1978). This is confirmed by the Oxford Encyclopedia of Critical Theory, where the term "manque" (lack) is defined as "the desire's motivating cause in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory," which is synonymous with castration, and appears in Lacan's works as "a rupture in the chain of signifiers that prevents access to the signified" (Buchanan, 2018).

Consequently, in the psychoanalytic discourse, lack is considered a vector which is the driving force for behavior as well as the force maintaining desire in an active state. In classical psychoanalysis, this force is limited to the satisfaction of basic needs. For example, when discussing the Freudian castration complex (Freud, 1905), Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) note that after separation from the object (mother) the child loses the sense of omnipotence and realizes that his/her desires will not be always fulfilled. It is the point where "lack" is experienced for the first time (whether it be a lack of penis in girls or the fear of losing a phallus, as a symbol of power, in boys). Similarly to Freud, for Lacan lack is related to desire and is defined as the "metonymy of lack" (Nobus, 2017, p. 161), which means that desire is structured in the same way as language and exists only in intrapsychic reality. For contemporary theorists of psychoanalysis, lack is the motivating force of agency, which goes beyond the subject's immediate needs, transcends to the intersubjective reality and, instead of searching the ways for the satisfaction of basic needs, addresses existential issues like inner alienation, the sense of detachment from oneself (Kristeva, 1991) and the frustration experienced as a result of inability to use alternative ways of living (Phillips, 2012).

The concept of lack will be analyzed below as an intrapsychic driving force for desire within the classical psychoanalytic tradition, and, on the other hand, as a basis for identity formation, personal growth, and self-determination within the contemporary post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approach. Specifically, Lacan's symbolic castration (1978), Julia Kristeva's concept of the "foreigner within" (1991), and Adam Phillips's idea of the "unlived life" as a source of everyday frustration (2012) will be used to analyze lack as an intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamic force that never allows us to fulfill our desires. This, in turn, makes the individual an active agent who, based on free will, can direct this destructive force towards personal growth and creative expression.

## **2. The function of lack**

In the classical and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, lack first emerges at the most basic level of the psyche and pertains to the universal human need for desire fulfillment (Freud, 1905; Lacan, 1978; Maslow, 1943). However, in the post-structuralist psychoanalytic tradition, lack transcends basic needs and is associated with higher-level, complex personal and social processes that require agency and ultimately lead to self-actualization (Kristeva, 1991; Phillips, 2012).

### **2.1. Lack, as a precondition for the existence of unsatisfied desire**

According to Lacan, lack is a necessary condition for the existence of the subject. For him, a human being is never complete and always strives for something unattainable. Lacan distinguishes between “the lack of having” (French: *manque à avoir*), which is material and gives rise to need rather than desire, and “the lack of being” (French: *manque à être*), which is the structural basis of the psyche and ensures that desire remains constantly active and constantly strives for an unattainable object (Lacan, 1998). The reason for this unfulfilled desire is that after entering the symbolic world of signs, it becomes impossible to restore the feeling of omnipotence; the loss of unity with the mother and confrontation with ‘the Other’, with the linguistic and social laws, creates a symbolic phallus, which is a symbol of forever lost power. Just for this reason, ‘the phallus’ in Lacan’s works can be considered the signifier of the concept of lack. As for symbolic castration, which is essentially related to the adoption of the Name-of-the-Father, and, consequently, entrance in the symbolic order (Lacan, 2019) is another symbol of lack, since it can never be reflected in consciousness through linguistic symbols.

In this context of eternal lack, Lacan’s concept of “the little object” (French: *objet petit a*), which reflects the object lost in the imaginary dimension – the illusion of unity with the mother – becomes quite important. This object can never be actualized and tangible, due to which desire is always directed towards new objects and fantasies. Thus, lack, as a structural force, constantly pushes the individual towards confrontation with ‘the Real’ and the search for symbolic meanings, which in turn keeps desire constantly active and never allows it to be fully satisfied.

It is also worth noting that the awareness of lack creates the threat of alienation and *aphanisis* (Lacan, 1978). Lacan uses the term “*aphanisis*” to describe the moment when the subject’s desire is covered or threatened by the demands of ‘the Other’. Alienation, on the other hand, reflects the process by which the subject gives up a part of itself and “sacrifices” it to the world of meanings.

### **2.2. Lack, as a basis of self-determination**

Differently from Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalysis, where lack only serves the maintenance of basic needs in active state, contemporary post-structuralist approaches substantially expand the meaning of the concept. Specifically, lack no longer bares the negative connotation associated with unfulfilled desire and is perceived as a means of personal growth and creative self-expression. Illustrative examples of this approach are the

theoretical models of Julia Kristeva (1991) and Adam Phillips (2012), where lack is directly connected to Maslow's idea of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

In Kristeva's works lack is activated at the interpersonal and cultural levels and is manifested as "the foreigner within," defined as a fragmented part of the Self that resists full integration with it. This, in turn, keeps the individual in a constant state of action and stimulates self-reflection and creative self-expression (Kristeva, 1991). Accordingly, Kristeva considers identity as "the subject in process" (*le sujet en procès*), which is never static and is in the state of permanent development due to the sense of lack. It is just the sense of lack that drives the subject to discover symbolic means of expression within oneself, which are essential for cultural integration, self-reflection and creative self-expression.

In Adam Phillips' theory (2012), the function of lack is related to the processes that take place even at a higher-level of mental activity. According to the theory, the experience of loss arises after the realization of missed opportunities and provokes the feeling of frustration. This may either result in stagnation, i.e. hopelessness that desires will ever be fulfilled or personal development and even post-traumatic growth, which illustrates quite well the connection of lack with the realization of the potential for subjective agency and free will.

In Phillips' model, lack is an intersubjective and psychological experience that arises from an "unlived life". In his book "Missing out" (Phillips, 2012), Phillips defines the "unlived life" as missed opportunities, alternative choices, or unfulfilled desires that exist in the form of internal conflict between the reality and fantasy, the present and potentially possible. This kind of conflict generates frustration. The above means that for Phillips, the sense of lack is more of an existential feeling. Being in harmony with the sense of lack is only possible when an individual attempt to understand the boundaries of their current life, alternatives, and personal freedom through introspection.

Differently from Phillips, who considers lack future-oriented, since the individual constantly analyzes alternative paths of their life and undergoes creative transformations, Kristeva considers lack a continuous process unfolding in the present, that changes and solidifies lack through the emergence of new objects of desire. This kind of permanently active function of desire is well described by Kristeva's concepts of "foreignness" and "the subject in process," which serve as metaphors for desire that is always seeking a stable ground. In Lacan's theory lack is oriented towards the past because it arises from the loss that has already occurred in the past (such as separation from mother and entering the world of language), which leads the individual to the restoration of the lost object in a symbolic form. Accordingly, his view fundamentally differs from Kristeva's and Phillips' perspective because for Lacan, the object of desire is always unattainable and already lost.

### **2.3. Lack and identity formation**

In addition to maintaining desire in an permanently active state and self-expression, another important function of lack is the facilitation of identity formation. Since the subject never perceives himself/herself as complete, they constantly attempt to fill lack through intra- and intersubjective means.

In Lacan's works, identity formation is based on the perpetual sense of lack that arises from entering the symbolic order, when, after separation from the mother, an individual first

perceives themselves as a separate subject (Lacan, 1978). While Lacan considers lack as a permanent givenness and does not discuss the ways of its resolution, Kristeva and Phillips interpret this phenomenon within the humanistic tradition, free it from a negative connotation and assume that lack has a potential of becoming a productive force in identity formation, since the individual constantly tries to restore their subjectivity and the stability of the sense of Self through the search for symbolic objects and meanings. The “inner foreigner” continually pushes the subject toward discovering new, unpossessed parts of themselves (Kristeva, 1991). Moreover, identity is always dynamic and never reaches an ultimate or perfect form because lack implies constant activity and helps the subject in self-analysis, discovering alternative possibilities, and redefining their identity (Phillips, 2012).

## **2.4. Lack in intrapsychic and interpsychic reality**

The phenomenon of lack can be understood from two interrelated perspectives: the intrapsychic and interpsychic dimensions. The intrapsychic reality refers to the individual's internal mental space, whereas the interpsychic reality involves “the reciprocal influences of two minds” (Bolognini, 2004). Accordingly, it exceeds the subject's psyche and also encompasses the social and cultural context.

Lack functions differently in the intrapsychic and interpsychic dimensions and has a different influence on the subject's psyche and behavior. Within the intrapsychic reality, which pertains to the internal interactions of the individual's mental processes (Bolognini, 2004), lack could be considered the foundation of the psychic structure ensuring the maintenance of desire in an active state. Specifically, in the models presented by Freud and Lacan (e.g., Freud, 1923; Lacan, 1978), lack can be considered a major element of the mental structure that underpins desire, fantasies, and unconscious processes, and determines the dynamic nature of mental life. The result is an internal conflict, alienation, and a sense of incompleteness, which compels the subject towards a deeper analysis and integration of their inner world.

Interpsychic reality encompasses the mental processes that occur between individuals within the context of relationships and social interactions (Bolognini, 2004). In this case, the social and cultural meanings, symbols, norms, and other interpersonal experiences serve as material for the individual's psyche. Through the internalization of these elements, the subject integrates them into their own mental reality. Consequently, lack surpasses the individual's psyche and functions as a motivating force for social and cultural interactions.

Kristeva (1991) describes this process as the subject's constant effort to integrate into the social environment in order to overcome alienation. According to this author, “foreignness” is not only the subject's unique, internal feeling. It also results from the integration into one's psyche of the contents that emerge during interaction with other people. Since the subject perceives themselves through the eyes of others, they incorporate the contents present in the environment into their own psyche, which, in turn, leads to alienation. Therefore, lack is not only search for a lost object, but is also a product of social interaction.

Phillips (2012) refers to the interpsychic dimension when discussing the experience of “unlived life” in everyday relationships, missed opportunities the individual would never be aware of if they had not entered the interaction with other people. Consequently, we can

assume that for Phillips lack is the foundation of intersubjectivity, which urges the subject to resolve internal conflicts (in this case, frustration) through active engagement with the environment, rather than passive and intrapsychic ways of conflict resolution. Therefore, the subject constantly seeks new social experiences to creatively reformulate their own narrative.

### **3. The consequence of lack**

The lack arising from an incessantly unfulfilled desire naturally leads to alienation from others, sometimes from social norms, and most acutely, from oneself. In the psycho-dynamic tradition, self-alienation is considered a product of lack.

In general, the term “alienation” is closely related to the concept of psychological conflict, when the unconscious desires of the Id oppose the rational Ego and the demands of the Superego (Freud, 1923). This tension is so persistent and acute that over time, the Ego is fragmented, and its parts are repressed into the unconscious. In other words, alienation occurs when the individual becomes aware of the discrepancy between their current state and their ideal reality. However, alienation is not only the result of an unfulfilled desire actively operating within the intrapsychic realm; it also arises when the individual, in the process of social interaction, discovers that something is missing that prevents him/her from becoming complete, and, because of this, she/he can never return to the original “oneness” with the mother. In the case like this, the subject is forced to repress those desires that do not fit within the boundaries of the symbolic universe, which, in turn, leads to alienation because of the fragmentation of identity. The individual’s authentic “Self” never fully corresponds to the contents in the environment, as a result of which she/he starts to perceive oneself as a “foreigner” within the symbolic world (Kristeva, 1991).

Furthermore, one of the main reasons for alienation is that the individual disappears behind signifiers. Since, at the beginning of speech, words already have pre-assigned meanings given by others, the subject is deprived of the possibility of being fully aware of oneself. And this is what causes their internal split. Within the symbolic order, a person always has a sense of lack, unconscious knowledge that their authentic self has been lost forever (Lacan, 1978).

Therefore, alienation caused by lack is the result of the combined action of intrapsychic and interpsychic realities. The individual’s psyche separates them from the imaginary reality. However, alienation is not only personal; the loss of a symbolic bond between mother and child is the crisis connected to language and meaning because, after entering the symbolic world, the subject loses the ability to express what their loss is. However, the consequence of lack is not only self-alienation or an attempt to passively adjust oneself to the symbolic environment. The feeling of lack constantly keeps the psyche in a state of conflict, i.e., the subject experiences frustration due to the differences between the real and ideal ways of life, but this kind of frustration motivates the search for new objects and meanings. This facilitates utilization of creative potential and personal growth, which are necessary prerequisites for overcoming the feeling of alienation and self-expression.

Therefore, lack is a multifunctional psychic force that produces ambivalent mental outcomes: on the one hand, it has a negative impact on a person’s emotional state and

self-awareness, but on the other hand, it creates conditions that are necessary for personal growth and self-actualization.

#### **4. Overcoming lack**

According to both classical and post-Freudian psychoanalytic models, lack is an indispensable part of human psyche permanently accompanying human desires, due to which it cannot be completely eliminated. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the psyche is adaptive by its nature and always strives to eliminate conflicts and restore disrupted balance.

On the one hand, sublimation is the most adaptive mechanism that can be used for the reduction of lack (Freud, 1905). Excessive energy, which constantly accumulates in the psyche under the influence of unfulfilled desire, can be always redirected into cultural, creative, or intellectual activities. However, it is not necessary for this energy to be directed outward. According to Lacan's model, the tension accompanying lack can also be reduced intrapsychically. For this purpose, the individual should "traverse the fantasy," i.e., realize that the object of desire will always remain unattainable (Lacan, 1998). This can reduce the tension caused by lack and bring one's expectations in line with the reality.

On the other hand, overcoming the feeling of lack requires deliberate action on the part of the subject to consciously accept alienation, which, according to Kristeva, can be achieved through melancholy. Although melancholy cannot be considered an adaptive mechanism, since it implies the rejection of certain aspects of one's self, Kristeva believes that it is necessary to symbolize the feeling of "foreignness" through writing, art, or reflection, so that the individual understands the reasons for melancholy and, at least, partially connects with the lack through the language.

In any case, lack becomes a productive force that helps the subject realize that it is possible to constructively utilize the alienation arising from lack. This can be seen as a possibility of partial return to the "unlived life" resulting in frustration, which, according to Phillips, can be dealt with illusion. It should be noted that extreme frustration can lead a person to destructive behavior. On the other hand, according to Phillips, "acting madness" rarely becomes part of daily life. In general, the experience of lack helps individuals learn to live with frustration and find meaning in the existence of lack instead of trying to fix it (Phillips, 2012, pp. 169-201).

Thus, the psychoanalytic tradition does not offer individuals the ways to eliminate lack, but actively encourages the search for alternative ways to overcome it, which, ultimately, becomes a prerequisite for personal and social development.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Judging by the above-discussed psychoanalytic works, lack cannot be considered solely a synonym for deficiency or insufficiency within the psychoanalytic discourse. Both classical (Freud, 1917; Lacan, 1978) and contemporary (Kristeva, 1991; Phillips, 2012) psychoanalysts demonstrate that this phenomenon first takes place at the intrapsychic level, where the

subject constantly searches for a lost object, and extends to the interpsychic realm, creating the possibility for the transformation of the alienation, arising from lack, into a constructive force to serve, through agency, as a source of self-reflection and creative self-expression.

Whether we consider lack a linguistic unit, a psychological state shaped by cultural norms, or a phenomenon accompanying everyday frustration, it is undisputable that the concept of lack has a significant impact on the individual's psyche within the psychoanalytic tradition. At the same time, the validation of frustration caused by lack and the examination of the “foreign” parts of the Self, is potentially beneficial in clinical practice for those individuals who experience distress due to internal alienation or chronic dissatisfaction. However, in order for these theoretical models to acquire practical significance, future research is needed to determine how the experience of lack can become a strategic part of psychotherapeutic intervention, aimed not only at the reduction of symptoms, but also at fostering personal growth and self-actualization.

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