

Oedipus Complex

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In psychoanalytic theory, the term Oedipus complex denotes the emotions and ideas that the mind keeps in the unconscious, via dynamic repression, that concentrate upon a boy's desire to sexually possess his mother, and kill his father. In the course of his psychosexual development, the complex is the boy's phallic stage formation of a discrete sexual identity; a girl's analogous experience is the Electra complex. The Oedipus complex occurs in the third -- phallic stage (ages 3-6) -- of five psychosexual development stages: (i) the Oral, (ii) the Anal, (iii) the Phallic, (iv) the Latent, and (v) the Genital -- in which the source libido pleasure is in a different erogenous zone of the infant's body.

In classical, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the child's identification with the same-sex parent is the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex and of the Electra complex; his and her key psychological experience to developing a mature sexual role and identity. Sigmund Freud further proposed that girls and boys resolved their complexes differently -- he via castration anxiety, she via penis envy; and that unsuccessful resolutions might lead to neurosis, paedophilia, and homosexuality. Hence, men and women who are fixated in the Oedipal and Electra stages of their psychosexual development might be considered "mother-fixated" and "father-fixated" as revealed when the mate (sexual partner) resembles the mother or the father.

Background

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The psychologist Sigmund Freud (at age 16) with his mother in 1872.

As a Freudian psychological metaphor describing son-father psychosexual competition for possession of mother, the Oedipus complex derives from the 5th-century BC Greek mythologic character Oedipus, who unwittingly kills his father, Laius, and marries his mother, Jocasta, (cf. *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, ca. 429 BC). As a psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) proposed that the Oedipus complex is a universal, psychological phenomenon innate (phylogenetic) to human beings, and the cause of much unconscious guilt; Freud thus described the man Oedipus:

" His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours -- because the Oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so. "

In classical psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex occurs during the phallic stage of psychosexual development (age 3-6 years) when also occurs the formation of the libido and the ego; yet it might manifest itself at an earlier age.

Oedipal theoretic evolution

The six-stage chronology of Sigmund Freud's theoretic evolution of the Oedipus complex is:

Stage 1. 1897-1909. After his father's death in 1896, and having seen the play *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, Freud begins using the term "Oedipus".

Stage 2. 1909-1914. Proposes that Oedipal desire is the "nuclear complex" of all neuroses; first usage of "Oedipus complex" in 1910.

Stage 3. 1914-1918. Considers paternal and maternal incest.

Stage 4. 1919-1926. Complete Oedipus complex; identification and bisexuality are conceptually evident in later works.

Stage 5. 1926-1931. Applies the Oedipal theory to religion and custom.

Stage 6. 1931-1938. Investigates the "feminine Oedipus attitude" and "negative Oedipus complex"; later the "Electra complex".

The Oedipus complex

In the phallic stage, a boy's decisive psychosexual experience is the Oedipus complex -- his son-father competition for possession of mother. It is in this third stage of psychosexual development (ages 3-6) that the child's genitalia are his or her primary erogenous zone; thus, when children become aware of their bodies, the bodies of other children, and the bodies of their parents, they gratify physical curiosity by undressing and exploring themselves, each other, and their genitals, so

learning the anatomic differences between "male" and "female" and the gender differences between "boy" and "girl".

Psychosexual infantilism -- Despite mother being the parent who primarily gratifies the child's desires, the child begins forming a discrete sexual identity -- "boy", "girl" -- that alters the dynamics of the parent and child relationship; the parents become objects of infantile libidinal energy. The boy directs his libido (sexual desire) upon his mother, and directs jealousy and emotional rivalry against his father -- because it is he who sleeps with mother. Moreover, to facilitate union with mother, the boy's id wants to kill father (as did Oedipus), but the pragmatic ego, based upon the reality principle, knows that the father is the stronger of the two males competing to possess the one female. Nonetheless, the boy remains ambivalent about his father's place in the family, which is manifested as fear of castration by the physically greater father; the fear is an irrational, subconscious manifestation of the infantile Id.

Psycho-logic defense -- In both sexes, defense mechanisms provide transitory resolutions of the conflict between the drives of the Id and the drives of the Ego. The first defense mechanism is repression, the blocking of memories, emotional impulses, and ideas from the conscious mind; yet its action does not resolve the Id-Ego conflict. The second defense mechanism is identification, by which the child incorporates, to his or her ego, the personality characteristics of the same-sex parent; in so adapting, the boy diminishes his castration anxiety, because his likeness to father protects him from father's wrath in their maternal rivalry; by so adapting, the girl facilitates identifying with mother, who understands that, in being females, neither of them possesses a penis, and thus are not antagonists.

Dénouement -- Unresolved son-father competition for the psycho-sexual possession mother might result in a phallic stage fixation conducive to a boy becoming an aggressive, over-ambitious, vain man. Therefore, the satisfactory parental handling and resolution of the Oedipus complex are most important in developing the male infantile super-ego, because, by identifying with a parent, the boy internalizes Morality, thereby, he chooses to comply with societal rules, rather than reflexively complying in fear of punishment.

Oedipal case study

In Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy (1909), the case study of the equinophobic boy "Little Hans", Freud showed that the relation between Hans's fears -- of horses and of his father -- derived from external factors, the birth of a sister, and internal factors, the desire of the infantile id to replace father as companion to mother, and guilt for enjoying the masturbation normal to a boy of his age. Moreover, his admitting to wanting to procreate with mother was considered proof of the boy's sexual attraction to the opposite-sex parent; he was a heterosexual male. Yet, the boy Hans was unable to relate fearing horses to fearing his father. As the treating psychoanalyst, Freud

noted that "Hans had to be told many things that he could not say himself" and that "he had to be presented with thoughts, which he had, so far, shown no signs of possessing".

Feminine Oedipus attitude

Initially, Dr. Freud equally applied the Oedipus complex to the psychosexual development of boys and girls, but later modified the female aspects of the theory as feminine Oedipus attitude and negative Oedipus complex; yet, it was his student-collaborator Carl Jung, who, in 1913, proposed the Electra complex to describe a girl's daughter-mother competition for psychosexual possession of father.

In the phallic stage, a girl's Electra complex is her decisive psychodynamic experience in forming a discrete sexual identity (ego). Whereas a boy develops castration anxiety, a girl develops penis envy rooted in anatomic fact: without a penis, she cannot sexually possess mother, as the infantile id demands. Resultantly, the girl redirects her desire for sexual union upon father, thus progressing to heterosexual femininity, which culminates in bearing a child, who replaces the absent penis. Furthermore, after the phallic stage, the girl's psychosexual development includes transferring her primary erogenous zone from the infantile clitoris to the adult vagina.

Freud thus considered a girl's negative Oedipus complex to be more emotionally intense than that of a boy, resulting, potentially, in a woman of submissive, insecure personality; thus might an unresolved Electra complex, daughter-mother competition for psychosexual possession of father, lead to a phallic-stage fixation conducive to a girl becoming a woman who continually strives to dominate men (viz. penis envy), either as an unusually seductive woman (high self-esteem) or as an unusually submissive woman (low self-esteem). Therefore, the satisfactory parental handling and resolution of the Electra complex are most important in developing the female infantile super-ego, because, by identifying with a parent, the girl internalizes Morality, thereby, she chooses to comply with societal rules, rather than reflexively complying in fear of punishment.

Freudian theoretic revision

When Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) proposed that the Oedipus complex was psychologically universal, he provoked the evolution of Freudian psychology and the psychoanalytic treatment method, by collaborator and competitor alike; some examples are:

Carl Jung -- In countering Freud's proposal that the psychosexual development of boys and girls is equal, that each initially experiences sexual desire (libido) for mother, and aggression towards father, student-collaborator Carl Jung counter-proposed that girls experienced desire for father and aggression towards mother via the Electra complex -- derived from the 5th-century BC Greek mythologic character Electra, who plotted matricidal revenge with Orestes, her brother, against

Clytemnestra, their mother, and Aegisthus, their stepfather, for their murder of Agamemnon, her father, (cf. *Electra*, by Sophocles). Moreover, because it is native to Freudian psychology, orthodox Jungian psychology uses the term "Oedipus complex" only to denote a boy's psychosexual development.



Oedipus complex: Otto Rank behind Sigmund Freud, and other psychoanalysts (1922).

Otto Rank -- In classical Freudian psychology the super-ego, "the heir to the Oedipus complex", is formed as the infant boy internalizes the familial rules of his father. In contrast, in the early 1920s, using the term pre-Oedipal, Otto Rank proposed that a boy's powerful mother was the source of the super-ego, in the course of normal psychosexual development. Rank's theoretic conflict with Freud excluded him from the Freudian inner circle; nonetheless, he later developed the psychodynamic Object relations theory in 1925.

Melanie Klein -- Whereas Freud proposed that father (the paternal phallus) was central to infantile and adult psychosexual development, Melanie Klein concentrated upon the early maternal relationship, proposing that Oedipal manifestations are perceptible in the first year of life, the oral

stage. Her proposal was part of the Controversial discussions (1942-44) at the British Psychoanalytical Association. The Kleinian psychologists proposed that "underlying the Oedipus complex, as Freud described it . . . there is an earlier layer of more primitive relationships with the Oedipal couple". Moreover, Klein's work lessened the central role of the Oedipus complex, with the concept of the depressive position.



Oedipus complex: Wilfred Bion (1916).

Wilfred Bion -- "For the post-Kleinian Bion, the myth of Oedipus concerns investigatory curiosity -- the quest for knowledge -- rather than sexual difference; the other main character in the Oedipal drama becomes Tiresias (the false hypothesis erected against anxiety about a new theory)".

Resultantly, "Bion regarded the central crime of Oedipus as his insistence on knowing the truth at all costs".

Oedipus complex: Jaques Lacan.

Jacques Lacan -- From the postmodern perspective, Jacques Lacan argued against removing the Oedipus complex from the center of psychosexual developmental experience. He considered "the Oedipus complex -- in so far as we continue to recognize it as covering the whole field of our experience with its signification . . . superimposes the kingdom of culture" upon the person, marking his or her introduction to symbolic order. Thus "a child learns what power independent of itself is as it goes through the Oedipus complex . . . encountering the existence of a symbolic system independent of itself". Moreover, Lacan's proposal that "the ternary relation of the Oedipus complex" liberates the "prisoner of the dual relationship" of the son-mother relationship proved useful to later psychoanalysts; thus, for Bollas, the "achievement" of the Oedipus complex is that the "child comes to understand something about the oddity of possessing one's own mind . . . discovers the multiplicity of points of view". Likewise, for Ronald Britton, "if the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child's mind . . . this provides us with a capacity for seeing us in interaction with others, and . . . for reflecting on ourselves, whilst being ourselves". As such, in *The Dove that Returns, the Dove that Vanishes* (2000), Michael Parsons proposed that such a perspective permits viewing "the Oedipus complex as a life-long developmental challenge . . . new kinds of Oedipal configurations that belong to later life".

In 1920, Sigmund Freud wrote that "with the progress of psychoanalytic studies the importance of the Oedipus complex has become, more and more, clearly evident; its recognition has become the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psychoanalysis from its opponents"; thereby it remained a theoretic cornerstone of psychoanalysis until about 1930, when psychoanalysts began investigating the pre-Oedipal son-mother relationship within the theory of psychosexual development. Janet Malcolm reports that by the late 20th century, to the object relations psychology "avant-garde, the events of the Oedipal period are pallid and inconsequential, in comparison with the cliff-hanging psychodramas of infancy. . . . For Kohut, as for Winnicott and Balint, the Oedipus complex is an irrelevance in the treatment of severe pathology". Nonetheless, Ego psychology continued to maintain that "the Oedipal period -- roughly three-and-a-half to six years -- is like Lorenz standing in front of the chick, it is the most formative, significant, moulding experience of human life . . . If you take a person's adult life -- his love, his work, his hobbies, his ambitions -- they all point back to the Oedipus complex".

Criticism

Contemporary psychoanalysts accept the universality of the Oedipus complex to different degrees; Hans Keller proposed it is so "at least in Western societies"; and others consider that ethnologists already have established its temporal and geographic universality. Nonetheless, few

psychoanalysts disagree that the "child then entered an Oedipal phase . . . involved an acute awareness of a complicated triangle involving mother, father, and child" and that "both positive and negative Oedipal themes are typically observable in development". Despite evidence of parent-child conflict, the evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson note that it is not for sexual possession of the opposite sex-parent; thus, in *Homicide* (1988), they proposed that the Oedipus complex yields few testable predictions, because they found no evidence of the Oedipus complex in people.

Moreover, in *No More Silly Love Songs: A Realist's Guide to Romance* (2010), Anouchka Grose said that "a large number of people, these days believe that Freud's Oedipus complex is defunct . . . 'disproven', or simply found unnecessary, sometime in the last century". Moreover, from the post-modern perspective, Grose said that "the Oedipus complex isn't really like that. It's more a way of explaining how human beings are socialised . . . learning to deal with disappointment". The elementary understanding being that "You have to stop trying to be everything for your primary career, and get on with being something for the rest of the world". Nonetheless, the open question remains whether or not such a post-Lacanian interpretation "stretches the Oedipus complex to a point where it almost doesn't look like Freud's any more".