

Facing Challenges Presented in Resolution of the Oedipus Complex in Modern Society

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Abstract

This article considers a concept of Freudian libido-driven theories and revisits the seeming conundrum of the resolution of the Oedipus Conflict, as proposed by Sigmund Freud in the last century, for a child raised in a non-nuclear family with the absence of being parented by both a single mother and single father. Some attention is given to more modern-day thinking, which includes both espousal of the theoretical concept and challenges to the very existence of nuclear families and resultant benefits to the progeny's development. The article concludes that questions remain unanswered and suggests there is further longitudinal research needed, which might begin to provide empirical evidence for the efficacy of Freud's original thinking.

Key words: Oedipus Complex, Crisis, Parenting, Resolution, Freud

Introduction

19th and 20th Century thinking espoused Freudian concepts, theories and proposals about the driving forces for the developmental progress of human beings, mainly seemingly libido-driven rather than libido-seeking (Fairbairn, 1944). Indeed, although Freud was writing in the previous century, his ideas remain at the heart of many contemporary psychologies in this present day; this article accepts the tenet that Freudian thinking is still relevant and informs post-Freudian theorists and practitioners alike.

Freud ascribed the term 'myth of Oedipus' after Sophocles' play, to the psycho-pathological process he had discovered of elements of a child:parent relationships (Anzieu, 1956). These included the much-debated oedipal crises identified as the Oedipus Complex and its resolution as being vital to a male's individual successful progression to adulthood and manhood. The female also was considered to be challenged, sometimes noted colloquially as the 'Electra Complex' identified by Carl Jung, although at the time this had severe critics and was less well adopted. Indeed, Freudian thinking maintained the centrality of penis-envy and that the girl's belief that castration is the basis for her to reject her mother in favour of her father. However, Lax (2007) proposes the seeds are sown in the earlier theories of Freud in which '...the affections of the little girl are fixed on her father, who has probably done all he could to win her love and [thus assumed] an attitude of hatred and rivalry toward her mother...'. So, there is the conundrum, how can a child resolve the oedipal crisis, if the father-figure is absent during its development?

Oedipus Complex⁴⁸

Freud's proposition was born from self-analysis

'...I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood... If that is so, we can understand the riveting power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the objections... the Greek legend seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognises because he feels its existence within himself ...' (Freud, 1985, p. 265).

In understanding the 'OC', the reader can be introduced to the Lacanian psyche order (Real, Imaginary and Symbolic) (Lacan, 1953) and deduce the parallels of the paternal or superego function in Freudian theory, responsible for law and regulating instinctual desire of an individual's 'OC', proposing intervention in the 'Imaginary' relationship between ego and mother, to introduce a necessary distance between them.

The theoretical proposition cited in developmental study (Pap  , 2015), further underscores the preeminence of crisis resolution for the development of a child. Research (for example Burgner, 1985) shows the deleterious effect on the child's development of an absent father, quoting a relevant formulation by Laplanche & Pontalis:

'...We are led to assign an essential role in the constitution of a given 'OC' to the other poles of this relationship, the unconscious desires of both parents, seduction and the relations between the parents, as well as to the subject and his instincts.... It is the different type of relationship between these three points of a triangle which... are destined to be internalised and to survive in the structure of the personality...' (Laplanche & Pontalis (1973: 286).

Simon (1991) suggests that controversies about the centrality of the 'OC' can only be resolved with an adjustment of current political

thinking and a more thoughtful consideration of the application of the 'OC' to female sexuality. The psychoanalytic epistemological question perhaps can be understood in terms of a need to prove or disprove the proposition that the 'OC' is essential to development. So generally it is the process that is suggested as being important, that authors and scholars can continue to debate the complexities introduced, producing evidence for formulations to inform clinicians.

In the absence or minimal presence of a male father figure, the child will seek intense and persistent attachments to a fantasied father, which seems to indicate that children in the oedipal phase are compelled to create in fantasy what does not exist in fact (Neubauer, 1965).

In order for a favourable resolution of the 'OC', Meyer (1985) suggests the important presence and availability of at least two adults representing both sexes who can feel positive toward their own and the other's gender as well as being able to tolerate ambivalence in their children, in that they do not over-react to their children's ambivalent feelings, by having worked through their own conflicts about competition, rivalry, and envy.

There are those who promote the view that the 'OC' is questionable and no longer applicable to the norms of modern Western society, whilst others argue the development of the theoretical aspect of Freud's ideas on the role of the father allows us to more fully comprehend the 'OC' (Perelberg, 2017). Understanding the 'OC' as symbolic rather than as a process of exclusion might help the reader to differentiate between

⁴⁸ Referred to as 'OC' throughout this paper

the actual killing of the father and the superego, which provides the internal drive to deter such action.

Oedipus Complex Resolution

The resolution of the 'OC' is a process which necessarily involves the regular, if not constant, presence of the biological father or male figure taking this role through the child's journey to adulthood. Freud proposed five stages of development through which a child must progress satisfactorily by resolving the tensions of the libido within each stage. In Freudian times, the 'OC' was generally considered to occur during the first five years and of course, in the absence of resolution, regression to the unresolved stage might occur. Such regression is an unconscious defence and will be instrumental in the way the individual deals with challenges to be faced during adult life. Present analytic thinking would suggest this complex is less critical to human development (Poland, 2019)

Evrard et al (2016) suggests that Freud may have been more audacious than rigorous in his studies of [for example] telepathy as the epistemological uncertainty of words exchanged in the uncontrolled setting of the psychoanalytic cure. Today, the debate continues between those who underpin their convictions by psychological literature (e.g. Mayer, 2007) and those who deny any relevance to such an 'unnatural' alliance (Bruno, 2007).

Today's societal norms include the raising of children in different constellations of nuclear familyhood, including single parenting, same gender parenting and group parenting. Further, Western society has entered a time when gender may be attributed partially or

wholly to an individual and can be considered by some, to be on a dynamic continuum.

Thus, the question arises, 'How can a child resolve it's 'OC' if the nuclear family in which it exists does not contain a single female (mother) and a single male (father)?' Of course, there is an ancillary question involving the parent's own oedipal crises, as Freud identified the child's oedipal conflict [is]

'...the outcome of the unresolved oedipal complexes of the parental figures which inevitably assert themselves in the child's socialisation in the same way as if they would stem from an 'archaic heritage'...' (Freud, 1939: 99).

Other research (Pap  , 2015) identifies repeating patterns of behaviour, concluding transgenerational patterns do exist but repetition is effected in the individual's own way, widely recognised by attachment theorists, which is influenced by both experience (nurture) and intrinsically (nature). There are a number of previous studies which reflect on the main article question, including Burgner (1985:311), who found that within the affected child's psyche

'there remains a relatively intractable degree of narcissistic interference and an impairment in its capacity to make an internal separation from the remaining primary object, the mother'.

Here Burgner was specifically interested in reporting on patterns of oedipal development, superego structuralisation and sexual identification as a clinician during the analytic treatment process.

Selected more modern literature indeed challenges original interpretations of Freud's concepts and interestingly includes oedipal issues as symbolisms for blindness requiring surgery or 'castration' (Bonomi (1993), a key element of the 'OC' and further concept of Freudian theories.

Hervé (2019) claims the great flaw of Freud's view of the OC is intimately linked to the unconscious trauma he endured during his own circumcision, suggesting perhaps that subjectivity has clouded his findings.

Freud's final remarks on the 'OC' experienced by the male child are that the complex is resolved successfully through the castration anxiety and through the boy's identification with the father figure. While in the female child, it is quite the opposite as the complex persists in her for an indefinite period of time. Female rivalry and other forms of competition with the male gender during adulthood are attributed to the unresolved envy for the penis, during the girl's childhood (Razak *et al*, 2013).

Conclusion

Freud proposed concepts and theories almost 100 years ago about development of human personality and the intrinsic nature with which an individual is born. The need for resolution of the OC is indeed a key concept in Freud's libido-driven theories. His ideas are taught and debated in Higher Education Institutes, particularly in the West. Indeed, Freud's proposals have passed beyond the borders of psychology and psychopathology into other disciplines of knowledge. Professionals and researchers in many disciplines, including the specialisms of sociology, anthropology, politics, literature, education and archaeology have all employed his ideas in trying to understand man's behaviour, from the Freudian perspective.

Why should this be so? The argument seems tenuous, that a probable reason perhaps has connections with religious belief, differentiating between the sacred and secular. The belief that knowledge is value-free, seems to negate this

proposal and supports the view that scholars constantly interpret Freud's original hypotheses in light of their own thinking and circumstance.

Over the past 50 and more years there has been a sexual revolution in the West, largely attributed to the idea of polymorphous sexuality advocated by Freud. Generations experimenting with hallucinogenic and addictive drugs have propelled each subsequent group to challenge the very mores and beliefs of previous generations. With challenge comes change and acceptance of diverse ways of being, acceptance of homosexuality and non-nuclear familyhood as a (preferable) way to raise progeny. Sexual perversion, so prevalent in human history, can no longer be so described. We have entered a time when all sexual groupings and minorities have equal rights of expression. Thus, Freud's concepts have to be recalibrated, to consider the lens through which humanity is constructed in the modern day.

Indeed, during this modern age of multimedia and immediate telecommunicator communication, much of Freud's ideas on human nature and sexuality have been adopted by non-Western communities. Despite improved and developed education, the world suffers an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Badri,1996; Vajdi *et al*, 2020)

The author believes that the claim made by some that Freud's ideas have been rejected wholly by the modern Western society, is false. It is the contention of the author that 'Freud is not dead', indeed Freud 'lives' beyond the pages of history and psychology. The evidential proof is the plethora of interest in Freud's thinking even today, with ongoing debate of the

relevance of libido-driven theories and the ability to apply these to changing circumstance.

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