

# Little Hans (Freud, 1909)

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By Saul McLeod, published 2008

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Little Hans was a 5-year-old boy with a phobia of horses. Like all clinical case studies, the primary aim was to treat the phobia.

However, Freud's therapeutic input in this case was minimal, and a secondary aim was to explore what factors might have led to the phobia in the first place, and what factors led to its remission.

By 1909 Freud's ideas about the Oedipus complex were well-established and Freud interpreted this case in line with his theory.

Freud didn't actually work directly with little Hans, but instead worked through correspondence with Hans' father, who was familiar with Freud's theories, and wrote to him when he first suspected that Hans had become a case that Freud might be interested in.

Freud suggested possible lines of questioning which the father could try with Hans, and the father tried them and reported to Freud what had taken place.

The first reports of Hans are when he was 3 years old when he developed an active interest in his 'widdler' (penis), and also those of other people. For example on one occasion he asked 'Mummy, have you got a widdler too?'

Throughout this time, the main theme of his fantasies and dreams was widdlers and widdling. When he was about three and a half years old his mother told him not to touch his widdler or else she would call the doctor to come and cut it off.

When Hans was almost 5, Hans' father wrote to Freud explaining his concerns about Hans. He described the main problem as follows: 'He is afraid a horse will bite him in the street, and this fear seems somehow connected with his having been frightened by a large penis'.

The father went on to provide Freud with extensive details of conversations with Hans. Together, Freud and the father tried to understand what the boy was experiencing and undertook to resolve his phobia of horses.

Freud wrote a summary of his treatment of Little Hans, in 1909, in a paper entitled " *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy.*"

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## Little Hans' Phobia

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Since the family lived opposite a busy coaching inn, that meant that Hans was unhappy about leaving the house because he saw many horses as soon as he went out of the door.

When he was first asked about his fear Hans said that he was frightened that the horses would fall down and make a noise with their feet. He was most frightened of horses which were drawing heavily laden carts, and, in fact, had seen a horse collapse and die in the street one time when he was out with his nurse.

It was pulling a horse-drawn bus carrying many passengers and when the horse collapsed Hans had been frightened by the sound of its hooves clattering against the cobbles of the road. He also suffered attacks of more generalized anxiety. Hans' anxieties and phobia continued and he was afraid to go out of the house because of his phobia of horses.

When Hans was taken to see Freud, he was asked about the horses he had a phobia of. Hans noted that he didn't like horses with black bits around the mouth. Freud believed that the horse was a symbol for his father, and the black bits were a moustache. After the interview, the father recorded an exchange with Hans where the boy said 'Daddy don't trot away from me!

Over the next few weeks Hans' phobia gradually began to improve. Hans said that he was especially afraid of white horses with black around the mouth who were wearing blinkers. Hans' father interpreted this as a reference to his moustache and spectacles.

After many letters were exchanged, Freud concluded that the boy was afraid that his father would castrate him for desiring his mother. Freud interpreted that the horses in the phobia were symbolic of the father, and that Hans feared that the horse (father) would bite (castrate) him as punishment for the incestuous desires towards his mother.

The end of Hans' phobia of horses was accompanied by two significant fantasies which he told to his father. In the first, Hans had several imaginary children. When asked who their mother was, Hans replied '*Why, mummy, and you're their Granddaddy*'.

In the second fantasy, which occurred the next day, Hans imagined that a plumber had come and first removed his bottom and widdler and then gave him another one of each, but larger.

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## Freud's Interpretation of Hans' Phobia

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Freud saw Hans' phobia as an expression of the Oedipus complex. Horses, particularly horses with black harnesses, symbolized his father. Horses were particularly suitable father-symbols because of their large penises.

The fear began as an Oedipal conflict was developing regarding Hans being allowed in his parents' bed. Hans told his father of a dream/fantasy which his father summarized as follows:

'In the night there was a big giraffe in the room and a crumpled one: and the big one called out because I took the crumpled one away from it. Then it stopped calling out: and I sat down on top of the crumpled one'.

Freud and the father interpreted the dream/fantasy as being a reworking of the morning exchanges in the parental bed. Hans enjoyed getting into his parents bed in a morning but his father often objected (the big giraffe calling out because he had taken the crumpled giraffe - mother - away). Both Freud and the father believed that the long neck of the giraffe was a symbol for the large adult penis. However Hans rejected this idea.

Freud saw the Oedipus complex resolved as Hans fantasized himself with a big penis like his father's and married to his mother with his father present in the role of grandfather. Hans did recover from his phobia after his father (at Freud's suggestion) assured him that he had no intention of cutting off his penis.

Freud was attempting to demonstrate that the boys (Little Hans) fear of horses was related to his **Oedipus complex**. Freud thought that, during the phallic stage (approximately between 3 and 6 years old), a boy develops an intense sexual love for his mothers.

Because of this, he sees his father as a rival, and wants to get rid of him. The father, however, is far bigger and more powerful than the young boy, and so the child develops a fear that, seeing him as a rival, his father will castrate him.

Because it is impossible to live with the continual castration-threat anxiety provided by this conflict, the young boy develops a mechanism for coping with it, using a defense mechanism known as '**identification with the aggressor**'.

He stresses all the ways that he is similar to his father, adopting his father's attitudes, mannerisms and actions, feeling that if his father sees him as similar, he will not feel hostile towards him.

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## Critical Evaluation

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The case study of Little Hans does appear to provide support for Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. However, there are difficulties with this type of evidence.

Hans' father, who provided Freud with most of his data, was already familiar with the Oedipus complex and interpreted the case in the light of this. It is therefore possible that he supplied Hans with clues that led to his fantasies of marriage to his mother and his new large widdler.

Of course even if Hans did have a fully fledged Oedipus complex, this shows that the Oedipus complex exists but not how common it is. Remember that Freud believed it to be universal. The problems with case studies are they lack population validity. Because they are often based on one person it is not possible to generalize the results to the wider population.

At age 19 the not so Little Hans appeared at Freud's consulting room having read his case history. Hans confirmed that he had suffered no troubles during adolescence and that he was fit and well. He could not remember the discussions with his father, and described how when he read his case history it 'came to him as something unknown'

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## Support for Freud (Brown, 1965)

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Brown (1965) examines the case in detail and provides the following support for Freud's interpretation.

1. In one instance, Hans said to his father –“*Daddy don't trot away from me*” as he got up from the table.
2. Hans particularly feared horses with black around the mouth. Hans's father had a moustache.
3. Hans feared horses with blinkers on. Freud noted that the father wore spectacles which he took to resemble blinkers to the child.
4. The father's skin resembled white horses rather than dark ones. In fact, Hans said, "Daddy, you are so lovely. You are so white".
5. The father and child had often played at 'horses' together. During the game the father would take the role of horse, the son that of the rider.

### References

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Brown, R. (1965). *Social Psychology*. Collier Macmillan.

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