

# Oedipal Complex

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by Saul McLeod, published 2018

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The Oedipal complex is a term used by Sigmund Freud in his theory of psychosexual stages of development, and is the generic term for both Oedipus and Electra complexes.

The Oedipal complex occurs during the Phallic stage of development (ages 3-6) in which the source of libido (life force) is concentrated in the erogenous zones of the child's body (Freud, 1905).

During this stage, children experience unconscious feelings of desire for their opposite-sex parent and jealousy and envy toward their same-sex parent.

## The Oedipus Complex

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In the young boy, the Oedipus complex or more correctly, conflict, arises because the boy develops unconscious sexual (pleasurable) desires for his mother.

Envy and Jealousy is aimed at the father, the object of the mother's affection and attention. These feelings for the mother and rivalry toward the father lead to fantasies of getting rid of his father and taking his place with the mother.

The hostile feelings towards the father lead to castration anxiety, an irrational fear that the father will castrate (remove his penis) him as punishment.

To cope with this anxiety, the son identifies with the father. This means the son adopts / internalizes the attitudes, characteristics and values that his father holds (e.g. personality, gender role, masculine dad-type behaviors etc.).

The father becomes a role model rather than a rival. Through this identification with the aggressor, boys acquire their superego and the male sex role. The boy substitutes his desire for his mother with the desire for other women.

Freud (1909) offered the Little Hans case study as evidence of the Oedipus complex.

## The Electra Complex

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For girls, the Electra complex begins with the belief that she's already been castrated. She blames her mother for this and experiences penis envy. For girls to develop their superego and female sex role, they need to identify with the mother.

But the girl's motivation for giving up her father as a love-object in order to move back to her mother is much less obvious than the boy's for identifying with his father.

As a consequence, girls' identification with their mothers is less complete than boys' with their fathers. In turn, this makes the female superego weaker and their identity as separate, independent persons is less well developed.

## Critical Evaluation

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Freud believed that the Oedipus complex was 'the central phenomenon of the sexual period of early childhood'. But there's little evidence to support his claim regarding sex differences in morality (as a result of the female's weaker superego). For example, as measured by children's ability to resist temptation, girls, if anything, are stronger than boys (Hoffman, 1975).

According to Horney (1924) and Thompson (1943), rather than girls wanting a penis, what they really envy is males' superior social status. Freud assumed that the Oedipus complex is a universal phenomenon, but Malinowski's (1929) study of the Trobriand Islanders showed that where the father is the mother's lover but not the son's disciplinarian (i.e. an avuncular society), the father-son relationship was very good.

It seems that Freud over-emphasized the role of sexual jealousy. But this is still only one study, and more societies, both Western and avuncular, need to be examined.

Also, other psychodynamic theorists, such as Erikson (1950) believed that Freud exaggerated the influence of instincts, particularly the sexual instinct, in his account of personality development. Erikson tried to correct this by describing stages of psychosocial development, reflecting the influence of social, cultural and historical factors, but without denying the role of biology.

Another major criticism of Freud's Oedipal theory is that it was based almost entirely on the case of Little Hans (1909). In fact, Freud's Oedipal theory had already been proposed in 1905, and Little Hans was simply presented as a 'little Oedipus'.

Given that this was the only child patient that Freud reported on, and that any theory of development must involve the study of children, Little Hans is a crucially important case study. But it was extremely biased, with Hans's father (a supporter of Freud's theories) doing most of the psychoanalysis, and Freud simply seeing Hans as confirming his Oedipal theory.

Quite apart from criticism of the reliability and objectivity of the case study method in general, other psychodynamic theorists have offered alternative interpretations of Hans's horse phobia. These include Bowlby's (1973) re-interpretation in terms of attachment theory.

However, Bee (2000) believes that attachment research provides considerable support for the basic psychoanalytic hypothesis that the quality of the child's earliest relationships affects the whole course of later development. Both Bowlby (1973) and Erikson (1963) see early relationships as prototypes of later relationships. Belief in the impact of early experience is a lasting legacy of Freud's developmental theory.

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