

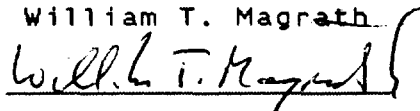
The Oedipus Complex: Myth or Reality

An Honors Thesis (Honrs 499)

by

James C. Eck

Thesis Advisor
William T. Magrath

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "William T. Magrath", written over a horizontal line.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

November 1991

Date of graduation: December 15, 1991

SpCo II
Thesis
LD
2/189
.24
1991
.E25

Purpose of Thesis

This thesis deals with the reasons Freud thought it was valid to use Classical mythology as a basis for his theory. Freud's Oedipus complex comes right out of the Sophoclean play Oedipus Rex, and his emphasis on the Oedipus complex is discussed and criticized. Finally, the fruitfulness of Freudian psychology is pointed out since it played a large role in shaping the psychology of today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the many faculty members in both the psychology and Classics departments that provided me with input during this thesis project. The important role my faculty advisor, Dr. William Magrath, has played in making suggestions and proofreading this thesis cannot be overestimated. Professor Magrath's knowledge concerning psychoanalysis, Classical Culture and quality writing have been most important. Finally, a thank you goes to Dr. Arno Wittig, Dean of the Honors College, whom approved my thesis topic, and offered counseling whenever I was in need. The quality of the Honors College (e.g., course variety and quality faculty) is a great reflection upon Ball State University in its quest to be a premier teaching institution.

Introduction

When a person develops a body of knowledge within a field of interest, he or she makes certain assumptions about the basic nature of things. In this thesis, the assumptions of the Freudian paradigm will be outlined, along with the reasons Freud thought it was valid to use Classical mythology as a basis for the theory of his Oedipus Complex, one of the bulwarks of psychoanalysis. Finally, changes in time and perspective will be pointed out in order to gain an understanding of why Freudian psychology (e.g., Oedipus Complex) is now questioned to a great extent by both the field of psychology and the field of classics.

First, Sigmund Freud was trained as a medical doctor at the University of Vienna. He specialized in neurology with an emphasis in unexpressed or unconscious emotion—a phenomenon he referred to as hysteria.

The Freudian paradigm for his theory of psychoanalysis is important in order to gain a perspective into what assumptions Freud believed in as a basis of his science. A paradigm consists of a fundamental set of assumptions about the basic nature of things which can be firmly accepted as being true but cannot be proven to be true. Psychoanalysis, along with behaviorism and cognition, is one of the most fruitful (quality and amount of research) fields within psychology. Psychoanalysis wants to study the mind (psyche) and the psyche apparatus. The psyche apparatus studies the structure and functioning of the mind (psyche). Freudianism believed that the universe is independent of the observer. This is the opposite of solipsism which states that "I

am the universe." Also, Freud believed in empiricism. This means that he believed a person could gain knowledge through his/her senses. His third assumption is rationalism. Rationalism states that cognitive processes (e.g., thought) are a valid means of gaining knowledge. The fourth assumption is determinism. This means that everything that occurs in life can be explained (does not allow for chance) by cause and effect. In addition, he believed in the nomothetic assumption. In other words, the goal of Freud's psychology, which was to him as scientific as the field of medicine, was to determine a general theory of psychology rather than a theory based on specific instances. Moreover, Freudian psychoanalysis was explanatory and associationistic. Psychoanalysis could explain completely any behavior in terms of drives of sex (Eros) and aggression (Thanatos). The shortcoming, however, was the fact that these explanations were only retroductive, which calls to question the validity of any body of scientific knowledge which cannot make accurate predictions. Furthermore, psychoanalysis also associated all activities and interests a person may have with these same primary drives, sex and aggression. For example, a girl jumping on a trampoline was said to be sexually significant. Finally, psychoanalysis believed in historical analysis. Freud believed that the best way to get insight about why people are the way they are was to analyze the past (e.g., Greek mythology). This is important since here lies the basis for Freud's interpretation of Sophocles's Oedipus Rex.

Before the analysis of the Oedipus complex begins, however, it is important to remember that science can only tell us what is

and can be, not what should be. Freud places his emphasis on irrational and unconscious motives (e.g., boy's sexual attraction to his mother). Freudian psychology usually emphasizes the rational and conscious components of human behavior since these are what separate us from the animals. Freud explained his theories and all other phenomena in terms of two basic instincts. These are the sexual or life instinct (Eros), and the aggressive or death and destructive instinct (Thanatos). Since these basic and primary instincts exist in every person, they are the motives which Freud believed made Oedipus (Electra for girls) the myth a reality which all people experience.

Part II

Much of Freudian psychology deals with sexual repression. This is evident in his theory of the Oedipus complex in which it states that the small child has to repress his sexual desires toward the parent of the opposite sex. These repressed desires Freud called the AFFECT. The affect are repressed emotions that are forever pressing toward conscious recognition and awareness, and certain emotions are always pressing toward overt satisfaction and fulfillment. Freud's emphasis on sexual repression is not surprising since he grew up in the sexually-repressed society of Austria. Freud postulated stages of psychosexual development on the basis of his own experience and by observing and analyzing other children. His Oedipal complex appears in the third stage which is commonly referred to as the phallic stage, the first and second being the oral and anal stages. The phallic stage occurs in a boys life between the ages of three and six. Moreover, the focus of sexual satisfaction in this stage is genital stimulation, and the child begins to feel sexual attraction to the parent of the opposite sex, and hostility (competition) toward the same-sex parent. This stage puts the child in conflict (tension and anxiety) and the conflict is resolved by repressing his feelings of attraction and identifying with the same-sex parent.

In addition, the Oedipus complex exists in small girls also, but is referred to as the Electra complex. Freud assumed that girls were inferior to boys in a number of ways including sexually, morally, and culturally (Crooks, 439). In other words, Crooks states that Freud believed that women are inferior or felt

inferior since they do not have a penis and they often lack the maturity to transfer their erotic sensitivity from the clitoris to the vagina. Furthermore, Freud believed girls were primarily passive (Mullahy, 49). A girl enters the Electra complex when she transfers her wish for a penis on to the father. Since the absence of a penis is the origin of fear itself (Slater, 150), the father is a haven or refuge for the passive girl. The mother is the rival, and the rival exists until later life when she substitutes the wish for a penis with the wish for a child. Only in marriage (birth of a child) can the woman be fulfilled, and if she should have a son, her happiness, according to Freud, is "great indeed."

The importance of the Oedipus complex to Freud cannot be overestimated. In order to be considered a psychoanalyst, you had to believe in the Oedipus/Electra complex. According to Freud, It has justly been said that the Oedipus complex is the nuclear complex of neuroses, and constitutes the essential part of their content. It represents the peak of infantile sexuality, which, through its after-effects, exercises a decisive influence on the sexuality of adults. Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim of neurosis. With the progress of psycho-analytic 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 psycho-analysis from its opponents (Eisner,

3).

The Oedipus complex of Freud comes directly out of Ancient Greek mythology. The Oedipus complex is Freud's interpretation of Sophocles's play Oedipus Rex. Freud believed psychoanalysis may help to explain myth:

Any estimate of psychoanalysis would be incomplete if it failed to make clear that, alone among the medical disciplines, it has the most extensive relations with the mental sciences, and that it is in a position to play a part of the same importance in the studies of religions and cultural history and in the sciences of mythology and literature as it is in psychiatry (Eisner, 15).

Moreover, Freud used mythology (e.g., Oedipus Rex) as one of the bases of his theory because of his own personal feelings:

I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures...but the Greek myth seized on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself (Eisner, 2).

In other words, Freud believes that since he has had "Oedipal" feelings, everyone has them. This is a clear case where Freud violated his nomothetic assumption since the feelings he may have

are not the feelings others may have. His feelings of love for his mother and jealousy for his father may have been purely idiographic (particular) instances.

He was also aware that there was a new interest in the study of mythology as a science. Although all at this time were amateurs, Freud believed mythology held some of the most important keys to knowledge.

I have long been haunted by the idea that our studies on content of the neuroses might be destined to solve the riddle of the formation of myths, and that the nucleus of mythology is nothing other than what we speak of as "the nuclear complex of neurosis"...But we are amateurs, and have every reason to be afraid of mistakes. We are lacking in academic training and familiarity with the material. Thus we are looking about for an inquirer whose development has been in the reverse direction, who possesses the specialized knowledge and is ready to apply to it the psychoanalytic armory that will gladly put at his command—a native inquirer, as one might say, who will be able to achieve something quite other than we who are intruders of another species (Eisner, 16).

Although Freud may have admitted to being an amateur in classical mythology, This didn't keep him from continuing to hypothesize and interpret mythology as a basis for his theory, a theory that made up one of the three largest forces of psychology (learning, psychoanalysis, and cognition). Freud adamantly believed that "myths (e.g., Oedipus Rex) are the coded record of the struggle of

the human race in its psychic evolution...the symbols of myth appear in dreams as the race memories of the inherited psyche...they function to relieve psychic tension."

Moreover, psychoanalysts have also assumed the existence of a remote period of time when "heedless sexual and primitive egoistic motives" controlled the conscious action and thought of mankind (Mullahy, 27). At this time people were not able nor did they need myths. However, as man progressed, these primitive motives were gradually renounced, at least consciously, in a person's action and thought. These motives then became repressed but not extinct. Hence substitution (e.g., fantasy) arose. These new repressed motives finally allowed men to successfully repress these motives at least to some degree which was socially acceptable.

Finally, it is clear that Freud placed a large emphasis on mythology as a means to gain knowledge. His views on the significance of myth can be summed up as follows:

The child's psychological conflicts, his ambivalent feelings toward the parents and other members of the family, his many and complex relations and experiences in the family furnish the principal motive of myth and form the essence of the mythical tradition. The development of myths portrays the social relations of the individual in the family [son/daughter to mother and father], and the relation of the family to the tribe [son/daughter to society] (Mullahy, 26).

Although Freud made his mark in psychology, his theory is

heavily flawed. His interpretation of classical mythology has been almost unanimously refuted by classics experts, and his theory has also been refuted by most of psychology. Psychology refutes Freud's work because of his shared exemplars. He believes in introspection, case studies, free association, etc. These are weak exemplars in science since they have a sample size of one and cannot be empirically tested. Also, Freud could explain any phenomenon in terms of sex and aggression. Science has limits on what it can know, and Freudian psychology placed no such limits. Finally, Freudian psychology only made explanations after the fact, and made no predictions. Therefore a scientist calls into question what value a body of knowledge has if it can make no accurate (reliable) predictions. In addition, classics experts have found many fallacies in Freud's logic and attitude. The final part of this paper will point out further reasons for this considerable disagreement about the accuracy and value of Freudian Psychology.

Part III

One criticism against Freud's belief that the Oedipus complex was common to each person is biological in nature. The Oedipus complex is an evolutionary paradox because of its incestuous overtones. Incest leads to offspring which are often genetically flawed, and this compromises the future of the species (Badcock, 78). This compromise in the future which results from Oedipal relationships leads many to conclude that Freud's ideas on the Oedipus complex were wrong or very defective:

Freudian theory claims that there are a fundamental sexual conflicts in the human family. It is alleged that girls wish they had penises and boys are afraid fathers might castrate them because of their sexual interest in their mothers. On the surface, these kinds of conflicts make no obvious evolutionary sense. Selection against close inbreeding is usually powerful in nature, and it seems surprising that so dire a consequence as castration would need to be threatened in order to avoid mother-son incest. It seems more likely that Freud came upon sexual overtones in parent-offspring conflict and, lacking an evolutionary view of the relationship, misinterpreted the overtones for the real thing (Trivers, 146).

This is another example of how many believe Freud's Oedipus complex applied to him but nobody else (idiographic). Freud, however, was well aware of this biologically based criticism. He recognized and remembered his infatuation with his mother and

jealousy of his father. Since the Oedipal relationship was so strong in his family, he felt it was a general event in early childhood. Moreover, the Oedipal relationship was an idea of "general value that might explain the gripping power of Oedipus Rex and perhaps Hamlet" (Gay, 27).

There are limits to what can be learned and explained. Freud placed no such limits within his theory, and this is the source of another criticism. The only way he could develop a theory without limits was to devote most of his theory to the unconscious (e.g., feelings of love for the mother and jealousy for the father). Clearly Freud realized that he had to emphasize the unconscious since it cannot be empirically tested. Although Freud could explain any number of behaviors, this was only due to his countless number of theories. Among Freud's postulations and explanations are:

The unconscious feeling of guilt, the stages of sexual development, the causal link between internally generated-"endopsychic"-myths and religious belief, the "family romance" in which so many children develop grandiose fantasies about their parents, the revelatory nature of slips and bungled actions, the power of repressed aggressive feelings, and (always on his mind) the intricate mechanisms of dream production. He even found a psychological explanation for addiction: it was displaced masturbation-an idea of peculiar relevance to him, with his irrepressible need for cigars (Gay, 154).

In order for Freudian psychology to be a science, limits have to

be defined. It is often agreed that the best theories spell out exactly what kind of findings make up these limits (e.g., what kind of behaviors cannot be explained by psychoanalysis). If Freud had pointed out such limits, many scholars might not have been so quick to question the validity, reliability and realism of Freudian psychology.

Freud is also criticized for his negative outlook on society and for his proposed instinct of Thanatos. Society is bad because it forces people (especially small children) to repress their desires. In other words, the role of society is to repress, inhibit, and forbid. Also, Thanatos is a questionable concept, since there is once again no empirical proof. Thanatos is vented by the child in the form of jealousy toward the parent of the opposite sex. According to Mullahy:

No competent contemporary biologist we know of has ever claimed that living matter has an inherent tendency to die, in Freud's sense. The theory is purely speculative, put forth in order to "explain" the enormous amount of aggressiveness and destructiveness which he (Freud) actually observed. This theory has an unfortunate consequence in that it gives an ostensible rationale for the pessimistic, ultimately hopeless outlook of Freud's theories when taken literally (Mullahy, 323).

This criticism is one of the strongest, since psychology is rooted in empirical testing. Empirical testing is a bulwark of psychology since it is a necessity for the replication of findings (e.g., reliability). Furthermore, reliability is necessary but

not sufficient for validity. Therefore, a theory without reliability (replication) has no validity (theory is not related to what it purports to be related to).

Furthermore, from a Classicist point of view, he is criticized because if Freud found in the Oedipus myth an example of his own feelings toward his mother and father, then how can he describe this phenomenon as nomothetic. Two instances of Oedipal relations, one fiction (as admitted by Freud) the other non-fiction (Oedipus myth), are inadequate for acting as a basis for Freud's theory (e.g., Oedipus complex).

Finally, Freud placed a great emphasis on the Oedipus complex because he believed it was a curse we all are born with. He also believed that psychoanalysis could free us from the ties of this curse and allow mankind to live more personal as opposed to impersonal repressed lives. Freud is often criticized for the emphasis he placed on this one myth since he believed this phenomenon is fated and universal for everyone. According to Freud, in the Interpretations of Dreams (1900):

If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified. There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus, while we can dismiss as merely arbitrary such dispositions as

are laid down in (Grillparzer's) Die Ahnfrau or other modern tragedies of destiny. And a factor of this kind is in fact involved in the story of King 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.

Freud stood strongly behind his Oedipal theory as a basis not only for his psychology, but as a basis for life itself. After all, how well these Oedipal relationships were resolved played, in Freud's opinion, a large role in determining later symptoms of psychological maladjustment (e.g., neurosis).

In conclusion, it is well to remember that Sigmund Freud had a great impact on psychology. In the words of Mullahy, 324: to slight the importance of Freud or his genuinely great contributions because of certain limitations would be an egregious mistake. His works have been very fruitful, and played a primary role in psychoanalysis. Criticisms of his theory (e.g., logic, pessimism, lack of empiricism, idiography, lack of limits, etc.) have been very important in the advancement of psychology as a science. Due to these criticisms, today we have a psychology that is very much a science based on empirical testing, reliability, validity, and significance. It is important to note that although psychoanalysis is a largely questioned practice, it opened the doors to a more predictive, objective, and standardized science.

Whether or not Oedipal relationships exist within the family, in my opinion, will always be speculative. The only thing we can know for sure is that the success of psychology today is directly related to the trials and tribulations of Freudian theory.

Reference

- Badcock, C.R. Oedipus in Evolution: A New Theory of Sex. Basil Blackwell Ltd., Cambridge, 1990.
- Crooks, R.L. & J. Stein. Psychology: Science, Behavior and Life. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1988.
- Eisner, R. The Road to Daulis: Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Classical Mythology. Syracuse Univ. Press, New York, 1987.
- Freud, S. Interpretations of Dreams: A Phylogenetic Fantasy. Cambridge Univ. Press, Mass., 1987
- Gay, P. Freud: A Life of Our Time. W.W. Norton and Comp., New York, 1988.
- Mullahy, P. Oedipus, Myth and Complex: A Review of Psychoanalytic Theory. Hermitage House, Inc., New York, 1952.
- Slater, P.E. The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family. Beacon Press, Boston, 1968.
- Trivers, R. Social Evolution. Melo Park, California, 1986.