

**PSYRGGU 2020**  
**Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context**  
**OEDIPUS COMPLEX- DIFFERENT VIEWS**

A. Kagan (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Russian State University for the Humanities, 125993, Miuskaya Ploshad, 6, Moscow, Russia; alex@wupj.org.il

*Abstract*

Sigmund Freud called the Oedipus complex the nuclear complex of each neurosis. According to Freud, parents play the main role in mental being of those children who later become psychoneurotic; characterized by love for one half and hatred of the other half of a couple. Both parents are an integral part of the mental determinations formed in that time, which is a crucial factor in later symptoms of consequent neurosis. Melanie Klein “reduced to naught” the classic understanding of the Oedipus complex that commences with the phallic stage of development. While Klein rejected this approach, she confirmed that the conflict can occur in a child's psyche at the earliest stages of life. A different approach to the interpretation of the Oedipus complex can be found in the works of Hans Loewald (1906-1993), an American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. The story of the Oedipus complex is not about sex or murder at all; it is about adolescent emancipation on the road to individuality and independence. A detailed study of this story enables us understand that, in addition to Freud's interpretation, H. Loewald's take is also relevant. Oedipus had bad, unrestrained, shameless parents, a cruel and reckless father, and an irresponsible mother. Oedipus endured a lifetime of mental trauma.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

**Keywords:** Oedipus complex, neurosis, primal scene, jealousy.



## 1. Introduction

Sigmund Freud called the Oedipus complex the nuclear complex of each neurosis. Those with undecided Oedipus conflict (to support a parent of the same sex) suffer from gender-role identification violation. Homosexuality, for example, is explained by the identification of a boy with his mother, not with his father. This can be the result of too much affection by the boy for his mother and fear of his father. Gender-role identification violation can also be due to improper parental behavior, with bad relations with the father preventing the boy from looking to him as an example. Masochistic tendencies can be explained by a horrible sense of guilt over incestuous unconscious fantasies. The child subconsciously feels that he or she should not love his/her mother and considers himself/herself guilty before the father; failure to resolve this situation leads to a feeling of worthlessness and masochism in attempted self-punishment for this guilt (Young, 2002).

The mother seen in the image of a prostitute. The primal scene, jealousy of the father, and the introduction of masturbation consolidate these fixations. In the child's fantasy, sexual intercourse represents the cruel attitude of the father towards the mother, therefore the mother needs to be saved (Freud, 2002).

When a child hears that he owes his life to his parents, that his mother gave him life, the desire for tenderness is combined with a passionate need to become an adult who is independent and can thus compensate his parents for their gift. He forgives his father, fantasizes about saving his father from a deadly threat, and in this way repays him (Freud, 2002).

## 2. Problem Statement

Oedipus was Freud's favorite protagonist. His students did not randomly present him with a medallion bearing the inscription: "Both the solver of the riddles and the mighty king". As a student, he used to stroll through the Hall of Fame at the University of Vienna, examining the busts of the great professors, identifying himself with Oedipus (Young, 2002, p. 31).

Freud told his colleague Fliess in 1897: "I also felt love with my mother and was jealous of my father" (as cited in Young, 2002, p. 27). The fascinating power of *Oedipus Rex* is its extreme unambiguity. It says he has revealed the same situation within his family in which the generation were all intertwined and entangled. Freud's father was 20 years his mother's senior and already a grandfather - by his son from his first marriage. This is more proof that everything begins with the family, including the Freudian explanation of the Oedipus complex.

Perhaps the unresolved oedipal conflict can result in hatred, a lack of love, the desire of child to kill, to destroy one of the parents. How justified is this hatred? In order to address this question, we should refer to different interpretations of Oedipus complex.

## 3. Research Questions

1. What according to Freud is the classical Oedipus model?
2. How can the "King Oedipus" story clarify the issue of child hate for parent?
3. What are the differences in Oedipus complex in terms of approaches and views?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

1. Describe Freud's classical approach to the Oedipus complex.
2. To provide an actual "King Oedipus" story analysis.
3. Describe the various approaches of leading psycho-analytics to the Oedipus complex
4. Compare different approaches and views regarding the Oedipus complex

## 5. Research Methods

In this current study, the following methods were used:

- The Literature review
- interpretative phenomenological analysis;
- interdisciplinary and comparative analysis

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Freud's approach

Freud expanded on the Oedipus complex theory in the early twentieth century. As a base, he used his own clinical research, evaluation, and *Oedipus Rex* - a tragedy by Sophocles. In this classic of ancient Greek literature, Oedipus kills his own father, and marries his mother – with horrifying consequences.

According to Freud, parents play the main role in mental being of those children who later become psychoneurotic; characterized by love for one half and hatred of the other half of a couple. Both parents are an integral part of the of mental determinations formed in that time, which is a crucial factor in later symptoms of consequent neuroses (Freud, 2017; Young 2002).

Freud interprets the tragedy by Sophocles' Oedipus, noting that between the ages of 3 to 6, a child feels affection towards one of his/her parents and aspires to completely possess that particular parent. Simultaneously, the child develops negative feelings towards the other parent. Boys feel love for their mothers and hate their fathers. These feelings reflect the unconscious "sexuality" towards the desired parent, and a hidden aggression towards the same sex parent (Young, 2002).

Meanwhile, Freud's views on the female Oedipus complex are more intricate and lack logical structure. Similar to boys, the first target of affection for girls is their mother. However, once a girl enters the phallic stage, she becomes aware that she possesses no penis (which can be symbolic of a lack of power), unlike her father or brother. Once the girl has made this analytical discovery, she begins to wish she had a penis. According to Freud, a girl develops penis envy, which is, in a certain sense, a psychological analogy to a boy's fear of castration. The girl looks to her mother to obtain it, but when this does not happen, she is disappointed, blames the mother for this shortcoming, then turns to her father in search of a penis, but remains unsatisfied until she gets a symbolic penis in the form of a child. The girls' version of the Oedipus complex is called the Electra complex. In this case, the prototype is another Greek mythological character, Electra, who convinced her brother Orestes to murder their mother and her lover, in this way avenging the death of their father. The girl begins to demonstrate unequivocal hostility towards her mother, reproaching her for giving birth to her [Electra] without a penis, or holding her mother responsible for taking her penis away as punishment for some offence. Freud believed that in some cases, a girl may underestimate her own

femininity by considering her appearance "defective". It is no surprise that Freud was harshly criticized by supporters of the feminist movement for these views (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1992).

Some critics believe that Freud's explanation for the resolution of the Electra complex is inconclusive. One objection is that mothers do possess the same authority in the family as fathers, and therefore cannot be conceived of as threatening figures. Another criticism claims that since a girl does not initially have a penis, she cannot develop an intense fear of losing it the way a boy can. Indeed, boys fear mutilation as retribution for their incestuous desires.

To the latter objection, Freud responded that girls develop a less compulsive, rigid sense of morality. Irrespective of the interpretation, Freud argued that the girl eventually gets rid of the Electra complex by suppressing the attraction towards her father and identifying herself with her mother (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1992).

In other words, a girl gains symbolic access to her father by becoming more like her mother, thus increasing her chances of marrying a man like her father. Later, some women dream of their firstborn being a boy, a phenomenon that orthodox Freudians interpret as an expression of penis substitution (Young, 2002).

Essentially, these myths symbolize the unconscious desire of every child to possess a parent of the opposite sex and simultaneously eliminate a parent of the same sex. Obviously, an ordinary child does not kill his father and does not have sexual intercourse with his mother - even though such desires unconsciously exist within the child (Young, 2002).

In addition, the description of oedipal conflict psychodynamics can be found in S. Freud's work *A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men*. This article deals with the way some men choose the objects of their love. Freud highlights several basic mechanisms of masculine behavior:

1. The choice of the third-party victim - according to Freud, a man with an unresolved oedipal conflict will never choose a free woman (unmarried) as his object of love, but will instead choose the one whom another man claims his as a spouse, lover, or groom.

2. For the men who "failed to cope" with oedipal conflict, a chaste and unsuspecting woman will never be exciting enough to be elevated to the level of the object of love, as they are attracted only to those who somehow enjoy a bad reputation, whose loyalty and reliability is questioned. In the oedipal triangle, the mother has always been occupied with her father, so the man feels comfortable in this new triangle.

3. Despite the fact that women tend to be preoccupied men treat them as the most valuable objects of their affection, imposing on themselves a loyalty pact. This is something that happens with other women as well.

4. An additional condition for a man's choice, is the desire to save his beloved, meaning he never abandons her.

These facets of masculinity reveal an unresolved oedipal conflict that manifests itself in a strong fixation on love for the mother.

All these mechanisms of male choice can be explained through several circumstances:

- a) The mother's belonging to the father; b) the role of a subordinate child in the triangle; and, of course, c) idealization of the mother: she is the best, the most desired, and the only woman that exists (Freud, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, some consequences of unresolved oedipal conflict remain - namely certain perversions, sexual preferences, or mechanisms of choice among men, as well as the focus of love among men – as characterized by a strong fixation and love for their mothers.

Perhaps the unresolved oedipal conflict can result in hatred, a lack of love, the desire to kill a child, to destroy one of the parents. How justified is this hatred? In order to address this question, we should refer to the actual story of King Oedipus.

## **6.2. The actual story of King Oedipus**

Let us begin with the meaning of the name Oedipus – “swollen feet”. Why are Oedipus’ feet mutilated? Who made him this way?

Oedipus (Oidipous) was the son of the Theban royal couple, Laius and Jocasta. According to the most common version of the story, the Oracle predicted the birth of a son to Laius who would subsequently kill his father, then marry his own mother, bringing disgrace upon the entire Labdacids household. When Laius’ son was born, his parents had his feet pierced, then bound them together (causing them to swell: Oidipous - with swollen feet). Next, they sent Oedipus to Kytheron, where he was found by a shepherd who first provided shelter for the boy, and then brought him to Sycion or Corinth, to King Polybus. The king raised the foundling as his own son. Rebuked at a feast because of his doubtful origins, Oedipus turned to the Oracle for clarification. The Oracle advised him to beware of patricide and incest. Oedipus, who considered Polybus to be his father, left Sycion. On his journey he met Laius. The two had an argument, and Oedipus wound up killing Laius and his entourage. During this period, the monster or Sphinx was wreaking devastation on Thebes. The Sphinx was presenting a riddle to every traveler, and devouring anyone who couldn’t solve it. Oedipus was successful in solving the riddle (Riddle: what creature walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? The answer: human). As a result, the Sphinx jumped off a cliff and died. In gratitude for saving the country from a prolonged calamity, the Thebans made Oedipus their king bequeathed him Jocasta, Laius's widow, his own mother, to be his wife. Soon the double crime ignorantly committed by Oedipus was revealed, and Oedipus poked out his eyes in despair. Jocasta then took her own life (Brockhaus & Efron, 1892).

The fatal prediction gives this story a completely different meaning. After learning from the Oracle that his own son would kill him and marry his mother, Laius tried to get rid of his son immediately following the boy’s birth. When Oedipus leaves so as not to harm his supposed parents, he encounters Laius who is not happy to see him at all! Does the father greet his son with open arms? No. Instead, they end up having an altercation about who should be the first to pass through the crossroads. So where does the blame lie with Oedipus? Where does the fault lie with our children? He is feared by his own father as the son who will be better, more beautiful, and smarter than him. In other words, the son “will kill him”, resulting in the father mutilating his own boy. The father subsequently mocks his son when he tries to avoid his fate. Instead of giving his son a second chance, the father engages in a fight, as he is unable to overcome the constant competition and envy of his own child (Young, 2002).

### **6.3. Melanie Klein's approach**

Klein (1962), in her important work *Envy and Gratitude* sheds light on oedipal psychodynamics. Jealousy, according to Klein, is an intense affect based on the feeling that another person has something desirable. A jealous impulse is aimed at taking away or spoiling it. Klein argues that the first object of envy in a baby is the mother's breastfeeding. The baby feels that the mother possesses everything he needs, there is an unlimited flow of milk and love, and perhaps he unwittingly asks himself: Why does she have that I don't?! Jealousy can easily disrupt the relationship with the mother, to the extent that at a certain stage, the baby is ready to give up milk (Klein, 1962).

When this baby grows into an adult, he/she is not ready to receive from others what the child does not have or does not know how to produce. Such a person is subconsciously angry at everything and everyone. This condition leads to problems, anxiety, mental and physical pain and other symptoms.

A jealous person according to Klein becomes sick at the sight of pleasure, and only feels good when others suffer. We are made to create, to make our inner and outer worlds better. But jealousy does not allow us to receive help, learn, or create. A student is unable to gain knowledge by feeling that his teacher is smarter than he is. Similarly, an envious patient does not welcome the acclaimed work of an analyst because its merits are spoiled and devalued by the patient's envious critics. Meanwhile, older people are sometimes unable to make peace with the fact that youth will never come back and continue to compete with their children - envying their success (Klein, 1962).

In due course, Klein "reduced to naught" the classic understanding of the Oedipus complex that commences with the phallic stage of development. While Klein rejected this approach, she confirmed that the conflict can occur in a child's psyche at the earliest stages of life. Klein believed that emotional and sexual development "from early infancy" includes genital sensations and tendencies that comprise the first stages of the negative (desire for a parent of the same sex and aggression directed towards a parent of the opposite sex) and positive Oedipus complex. Klein considered the oral stage to be the beginning of the Super-Ego. The earliest feelings of guilt in subjects of both sexes come from oral sadistic desires to eat their mothers, and above all their breasts. That's why guilt arises in infancy. This guilt disappears with the overcoming of oedipal conflict, but it is this guilt that becomes one of the factors that from birth shapes its outcome (Segal, 1999; Young, 2002).

### **6.4. Hans Loewald's approach**

A different approach to the interpretation of the Oedipus complex can be found in the works of Hans Loewald (1906-1993), an American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. The story of the Oedipus complex is not about sex or murder at all; it's about adolescent emancipation on the road to individuality and independence (Ogden, 2006). The teenage years are assessed by Loewald (1979) as the focus of the Oedipal complex, a much later stage than the original Oedipal complex as proposed by Freud. This is what lies at the heart of the central life conflict between parents and children (the Oedipal Triangle) - the novelty of the original thought (the child's position) and the pressure/influence exerted on him/her (the parent's role).

"Murder" of a parent is the destruction of parental authority and rights (copyright) over their children, on the way to their own independence. In other words, an oedipal conflict is a generational struggle for authority, independence, and responsibility. Towards the end, according to Loewald (1979), parents

should be "killed" fancifully, for the sake of children's independence and autonomy, and they should not give up. In other words, parents should not give in, remaining formidable opponents. Only that way will the child's victory be that much sweeter (Loewald, 1979; Ogden, 2006).

As soon as children win their parents over, two goals will be achieved. First, is the pleasure of obtaining a victory that results in the beginning of love/identification. Second, they begin to develop Super Ego after destroying their favorite objects.

### **6.5. Donald Winnicott's approach**

This idea of Loewald coincides with the idea of Winnicott (2017) concerning the use of the object. After "the subject builds his relationship to the object," he "destroys the object" (because it becomes external). The ability of the object "to withstand destruction from the subject" is also an important aspect, a new element of the theory of object relations. Ambivalent affects - love and destruction - become two parts of a whole, giving rise to a productive unconscious imagination. The subject can now use an object that survived.

It is important to note that the subject destroys the object not only because the object is beyond its absolute control. The very preservation of the object moves it beyond the almighty power of the child. In this way, the life and autonomy of the object develop. For its part, the object (if it survives) - in accordance with its own qualities - contributes to the development of the subject (Winnicott, 2017).

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, returning to Oedipus, we can assume that the story primarily describes parental fears of their own children. These fears manifest as they "pierce" the feet of their children, wishing to destroy them so as to defend themselves.

A detailed study of this story enables us understand that, in addition to Freud's interpretation, Loewald's take is also relevant. Oedipus had bad, unrestrained, shameless parents, a cruel and reckless father, and an irresponsible mother. Oedipus endured a lifetime of mental trauma (Young, 2002). Despite all of this, Oedipus unravels the mystery of the cycle of human life and receives a reward - his mother. He continues to seek and ultimately finds out the terrible truth. Finally, he loses his mother to suicide, and deprives himself of eyesight in an attempt to gain inner vision and learn by self-reflection.

Freud told his colleague Fliess in 1897: "I also felt love with my mother and was jealous of my father" (Young, 2002, p. 27). The fascinating power of *Oedipus Rex* is its extreme unambiguity. It says he has revealed the same situation within his family in which the generation were all intertwined and entangled. Freud's father was 20 years his mother's senior and already a grandfather - by his son from his first marriage.

This is more proof that everything begins with the family, including the Freudian explanation of the Oedipus complex.

## **References**

Brockhaus, F. A., & Efron, I. A. (1892). *Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Typolithography.

- Hjelle, L.A., & Ziegler, D.J. (1992). *Personality Theories: Basic Assumptions, Research and Applications*. McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Freud, S. (2002). A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men. In *Sexuality and love* (pp. 129-136). Am Oved Publishers Ltd. [In Hebrew].
- Freud, S. (2017). *The interpretation of dreams*. Eksmo- Press. [In Russian]
- Klein, M. (1962). *Envy and Gratitude: A Study of Unconscious Sources*. Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Loewald, H. W. (1979). The waning of the Oedipus complex. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 27(4), 751-775. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306517902700401>
- Ogden, T. (2006). Reading Loewald: Oedipus reconceived. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 87(3), 651-666. <https://doi.org/10.1516/FGCY-3YNP-FC2H-334F>
- Segal, H. (1999). *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. Karnac Books.
- Young, R. (2002). *The Oedipus Complex*. Prospekt. [In Russian].
- Winnicott, D. (2017). *Game and Reality*. Institute for General Humanitarian Researches. [In Russian]