
Beyond the Oedipus Complex: Mothers and Daughters

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About the Author

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Abstract

Women are often critical of their mothers and identify with their most negative characteristics. Simultaneously, it has also been noted that strong bonds are often established between mothers and daughters. When traditional Oedipal theory is applied to women, it does not take into account sufficiently either the prevalence of daughters' critical perceptions of their mothers or the strong connections also established between many mothers and daughters. The self-in-relation conceptualization of female development will be used as a context to reconcile these seemingly contradictory observations and to examine women's development within dynamic inter-relationships in the family and the difficulties encountered in the process.

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At a recent panel a number of leading psychoanalysts re-examined the Oedipus complex (Modell, 1985). They included representatives from more orthodox Freudian theory, object relations theory, and Kohut's self-psychology. One of the panelists began his discussion of the Oedipus complex by saying that "to challenge its centrality in the function of the neuroses, becomes an act of rebellion equivalent to parricide or its variant, fratricide" (p. 202). That statement captures the essence of what I want to talk about today. That is, the male Oedipus complex, with its dynamics of competitiveness, retaliation, terror of castration, and identification with the aggressor, may be much more germane to the experience of men than the female Oedipus complex is to the experience of women.

Serious questions about the female Oedipus complex have been raised for a long time, but the theory is still dominant in clinical circles. Moreover, the current renewed interest in psychoanalysis has led some modern feminists to accept many of its basic premises. I will examine the theory in the light of recent theoretical research and clinical evidence, and then suggest alternative formulations based on clinical experience with women.

It is probably not too surprising that it has been primarily (but not only) women who have been able to raise serious questions about feminine development in Freudian theory. It is also of interest that these women have not been adequately acknowledged by the psychoanalytic community. In an interesting paper, Fliegel (1973) traces an historical reconstruction of ideas of feminine psychosexual development. She notes that some of the important early contributions by Horney were largely ignored by Freud and other analysts. While Ernest Jones joined Horney in some of her observations, subsequent literature has tended to credit the ideas developed by Horney to Jones and sometimes did not credit either of them.

Even more relevant, however, is the absence of acknowledgement in contemporary discussions of early female development in psychoanalytic theory of the significant contributions of Chodorow, Gilligan, and Miller. Chodorow (1978), in particular, examines in considerable detail the extent to which gender difference significantly affects the asymmetrical developmental paths of males and females in the "pre-Oedipal" stage and in the resolution of Oedipal conflicts; Gilligan's 1982 work on moral development empirically addresses and challenges the earlier psychoanalytic notion that the super-egos of females are less developed than those of males. Miller (1976), of course, has offered us a path toward a new psychology of women, but also has brought together some of the classic papers which critically examine female development in psychoanalytic theory, in a separate volume (1973). Yet it is a rare paper in the current psychoanalytic literature on female development that mentions any of these in its list of references.

There has been some decline of psychoanalytic interest in the Oedipus conflict in some quarters. For example, the Kohutians have moved it from the center of classical theory to more peripheral positions, but many other psychoanalysts have long given more attention to "pre-Oedipal" development. Recently, there has been an emphasis on the infant-mother dyad around issues of separation and individuation. Still, I believe it would be safe to say that psychoanalysts and other clinicians remain wedded to the centrality of the Oedipus complex for maturation and sexual development. Schafer (1974) notes that the use of the terms "pre-Oedipal" and "pregenital" to name early phases betrays a bias which "anchors the roots of personality to Oedipal issues." More telling, however, is that when voices have been raised seriously questioning the central components of the female Oedipus complex and other aspects of psychosexual development, one still sees "the need to salvage Freud's formulations even at the expense of their internal logic" (Fliegel 1982, p. 24).

But my purpose here is not to demonstrate that since I am a woman, I have less castration anxiety than do men and thus can brave the authorities by challenging something as central to the theory as the Oedipus complex. This would be foolhardy, I have learned, as the following vignette illustrates. While having lunch with colleagues recently, I brought up this sensitive subject, mainly to check out my sense about the current standing of the female Oedipus complex. A heated discussion followed, and I left after lunch. One of these colleagues is reputed to have

said afterwards to the other, "Well, if they don't get it on the couch, they certainly won't get it over lunch," so I do know the dangers of exposing myself to such unsolicited analyses.

What I hope to accomplish tonight is to demonstrate how the inflexible application to female development of a concept derived from male development, without sufficient attention to the quality and nature of women's experience, leads to a significant misunderstanding of women. While this would be bad enough, it also blinds us from seeing the unique nature of female development in the areas of sexuality, affect, and cognition.

Formulation of the Oedipus complex

As a step toward this goal, I would like first to examine the formulations for the male and, next, the female Oedipus complex. In particular I will be reviewing the theoretical analyses of the female Oedipus complex and the empirical data available in order to illustrate how weak are its underpinnings. I will then offer some alternative ideas to help us think about those features that do seem relevant at some level to female experience. Finally, the implications of these observations for psychotherapy with women will be considered.

The male Oedipus complex

The original formulation of the Oedipus complex described a crucial stage of development for boys (Freud, 1924). Around three to four years of age, a little boy's attachment to his mother becomes genitally centered, and he soon sees his father as a rival for his mother's love. In the service of his wish to replace his father, he has fantasies of taking his father's penis, wishing him dead, and murdering him. He also fears retaliation in the form of castration by his father, a notion so terrifying that he gives up his loving attachment to his mother, represses his sexual feelings toward her, and identifies with the aggressor, his father, with the hope that in this way he will ultimately possess the mother exclusively. The parental, that is, father-aggressor, prohibition against his sexual wishes toward his mother is incorporated internally to form his super-ego. The boy then moves forward in his development as a male through identification with his father — which also means moving away from his mother and into latency with further repression of his sexual wishes.

This model does stress the competitive and aggressive qualities of male-to-male relationships. It also seems consistent with clinical observations of men's tendencies to distance from their mothers, as