

Jessica Bylund

Undergraduate Research Day

Did Oedipus Suffer from the Oedipal Complex?

A Psychological Analysis of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*

Grant may be buried in Grant's Tomb and Easter Island may have been discovered on Easter, but Oedipus did not suffer from the Oedipal Complex; the events that transpire in the play are a result of Oedipus' failure to know himself and recognize his birth parents. *Oedipus the King*, written by Sophocles, tells the story of the new king of Thebes who fulfilled the prophecy of killing his father and having sexual relations with his mother while trying to avoid it (Sophocles). Sigmund Freud developed the Oedipal Complex as part of his Psychosexual Stages of Personality Development in response to these events, concluding that all young boys wish to sleep with their mother during the phallic stage (Freud, *Outline* 71). However, Oedipus does not suffer from this complex because he does not form an attachment with his mother during the oral stage of personality development.

Oedipus the King tells the story of the new king of Thebes who was destined to kill his father and have sexual relations with his mother. Apollo's Oracle at Delphi tells King Laius of Thebes that his son will kill him and his wife will bear her son's children. With permission from Queen Jocasta, Laius pierces his son's ankles and leaves the baby to die on the mountainside. The baby, Oedipus, is saved by a shepherd and given to the childless King Polybus and Queen Meropê of Corinth. During his adolescence, Oedipus overhears a drunken guest at a banquet saying that he is adopted. He goes to the Oracle at Delphi for answers and is told that he will kill his father and have sexual relations with his mother. In order to save his adopted parents, he flees

Corinth and ends up at a three way crossroad. It is here that he kills King Laius. Shortly after the murder, he saves the people of Thebes by defeating the Sphinx that has been terrorizing the city. As a reward, he is given the throne and Queen Jocasta as a wife (Sophocles).

The play starts fifteen years after the Sphinx has died when the people of Thebes are dying of a plague. Apollo's Oracle of Delphi says that the city will be saved when Thebes is rid of Laius' murderer. While searching for the murderer, Oedipus finds that he murdered King Laius, his father, and fathered four children with his mother. Jocasta kills herself when the truth comes out. Oedipus pierces his eyes out after finding his mother dead and banishes himself from Thebes for the murder (Sophocles). Freud based his theory of the Oedipal Complex off of this play, but Oedipus did not suffer from the Oedipal Complex.

Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Personality Development consists of five stages and each stage is defined by an erogenous zone. The Phallic Stage occurs between the ages of three to five years old (Friedman & Schustack 69). During this stage, the genitals are the primary erogenous zone and within this stage, the child realizes that differences exist between males and females and, most importantly, he becomes aware of his own sexuality (Freud, Outline 70).

The Oedipal Complex is the main focal point of the Phallic Stage. The complex is derived from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* after Freud came to the conclusion that "it may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence towards our fathers" (Freud, Basic Writings 308). The Oedipal Complex is the phenomenon in which boys are condemned to follow their unconscious sexual drives to sleep with their mother and feel hatred toward their father. These boys try to become their mother's lover, and the father, who stands in the way of this sexual relationship, becomes a rival and must be gotten rid of (Freud, Outline 71).

Oedipus does not suffer from the complex because he has not formed a healthy attachment with Queen Jocasta in the oral stage.

A child's first erotic object is the mother's breast that nourishes it; love has its origin in attachment to the satisfied need for nourishment.... This first object is later completed into the person of the child's mother, who not only nourishes it but also looks after it and thus arouses in it a number of other physical sensations, pleasurable and unpleasurable.

By her care of the child's body she becomes its first seducer. (Freud, *Outline* 70)

In the oral stage, the primary erogenous zone is the mouth and pleasure is derived from sucking and feeding. During this period, the infant spends most of his time with the mother feeding and therefore forms an attachment with the mother that leads to the Oedipal Complex (Freud, *Outline* 70).

However, Oedipus was abandoned by his parents three days postpartum. He was in the oral stage at that time. According to Freud, a boy creates the bond of love with his mother during this stage through feeding and that is what leads to the Oedipal Complex in the Phallic Stage (Freud, *Outline* 70). Because of the lack of attachment with Queen Jocasta during the oral stage, she was not his first seducer, so Laius' murder and Oedipus' sexual relations with Jocasta are not a result of Oedipus suffering from the Oedipal Complex. If he had suffered from the complex, he would have ended up marrying Queen Meropê because she was the one with whom he formed the attachment and bond with during the oral stage.

Freud believed Oedipus' sin was both killing his father and having sexual relations with his mother and that is what he derived his theory from, but Oedipus' sin was the fact that he did know who he was. He did not know that it was his father at the crossroads. That is the root of his

actions: the essence of the play. Oedipus failed to know himself and because of this, he could not achieve self-actualization, which explains all of his actions during the play.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that in order to achieve self-actualization a person needs to fulfill the basic needs of physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem respectively. When a person fulfills a level, they move up to the next level. Once they have fulfilled all of the basic needs, they achieve self-actualization which is defined as the fulfillment of one's talents and possibilities. Each person has an inborn motivation to achieve self-actualization, but Maslow believed that only one out of every hundred people achieved this level of self-growth (Maslow).

Oedipus cannot fulfill the love and belonging need because he does not know his true parents. While he had Queen Jocasta as his wife, he did not know of his birth parents. His true parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta, left him for dead in order to save Laius' life. Then, at a banquet as an adolescent, he was told by a drunken guest he was adopted. He ran away in order to save Polybus from being murdered. He did not learn of his true parents until he became King of Thebes. Therefore, he never was able to move past the love and belonging need, leading to loneliness. Oedipus attempts to mask this feeling by having intercourse with Queen Jocasta and overcompensating for his low self-esteem by seeking fame and glory through being King of Thebes.

Evidently, Oedipus does not suffer from the Oedipal Complex as everyone has come to believe. Freud's widely accepted theory does not have solid scientific evidence to back it up. Some critics believe that Freud developed the Oedipal Complex as a replacement for the seduction theory as well as a defense mechanism in order to protect himself. According to Freud's seduction theory, all hysterics were sexually abused. Through self-psychoanalysis,

Freud concluded that he and a few of his sisters were hysterics and that his father was the sexual abuser, but “as a means of psychologically defending himself against such a conclusion, the Oedipal complex *gradually* evolved as an acceptable defense (rationalization) that Freud could intellectually believe” (Kupfersmid 537).

Many people have questioned the soundness of Freud’s theories because of the unorthodox methods of studies he used. One of his most popular theories, the Oedipal Complex, is based on a fictional character that did not suffer from the complex. Sigmund Freud is considered to be the father of modern psychology. What does this mean for the field of psychology? The father of modern psychology did not use his own theory right which begs the question of if any of his theories are scientific and valid. Carl Jung, his student, broke off from him and took his own theory in a different direction because he did not agree with Freud. Does this mean the field of psychology is pseudoscience or was it just Freud’s theories that were pseudoscience?

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