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Freudian theories of homosexual development: A basic overview

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Abstract. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Jean-Martin Charot, and Havelock Ellis were a few antecedents to Sigmund Freud in identifying, defining, and theorizing the development of homosexuality. However, the majority subscribed to the thought that homosexuality was congenital, albeit unnatural. Havelock Ellis offered some psychological considerations to the condition of homosexuality and was said to have paved the way for more significant developmental explanations that began with Freud. According to Caprio (1954) the congenital theories prior to Freud became “obsolete” (p. 3). Because of the contributions of Freud, psychoanalysts that followed him such as Sandor Rado, Edmund Bergler, Irving Bieber, Lionel Ovesey, and Charles Socarides, to name a few, took on views that homosexuality was developmental in nature. During the phallic phase of development Freud made a pivotal discovery about the oedipal complex. This and other theories of psychosexual development are overviewed. It is important to get an understanding of the basic construct of theory given the rise of deconstruction and reconstruction undertakings.

Keywords. Freudian theory, Oedipus Complex, Castration Complex, Electra Complex, Penis Envy, Penis-Baby Equation, Phallic phase, homosexuality

Oedipus Complex

According to Freud, the oedipal triangle (child, mother, and father) is crucial to development (the phallic phase). In theory, the boy becomes attracted to his mother and jealous of his father (Freud 1887-1902/1954; Freud 1924). In a normal course of development the boy repudiates his impulses towards the mother and identifies with the father (gives up the mother to the father and will have an ego strong enough to seek his own love object later in development) (Figure 1).

If the boy does not dissolve his impulses towards the mother and identify with the father (gives up the mother to the father) he will develop a weakened ego, not strong enough to seek a love object in females, therefore manifesting homosexuality. In fact, his unresolved attraction for his mother is internalized as incestuous and he will repudiate women as love objects, therefore seeking homosexuality. An adult’s sexual life derives from that of the child he was¹. “Fixations of the libido to conditions in earlier phases...is a developmental inhibition...is homosexuality when it is manifest” (Freud, 1949/1940, p. 27)

¹ An assertion by Freud in his 1905, *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*.

The disruption between the father and son is often explained in Freud's theory that male homosexuality drives from too much closeness to his mother and a distant negative relationship with his father (Bieber et al., 1962; Fisher & Greenberg, 1985; 1996).

[For a basic explanation of The Oedipus complex for the boy and for the girl see Nagera (1990)]

Case Study: Little Hans (Freud, 1964/1909), summarized in Simply Psychology (n.d.):

[Little Hans was] a five-year-old boy who had a phobia of horses. As a result of this, Little Hans refused to go out in the street in case he came across a horse. He expressed a fear that a horse would come into the house and bite him and that this was his punishment for wishing that the horse would lay down and die. Freud analysed the experiences that the boy had had, as told to him by the boy's father, and concluded that the fear of horses was an ego defence mechanism. The boy had displaced fear that he felt of his father. He had an unconscious wish that his father would go away (or die) because he regarded his father as a competitor for his mother's love. Freud suggests that Little Hans' feelings towards his mother were "the foreshadowing of his budding sexual wishes." Freud was claiming, therefore, that the boy was experiencing the Oedipus Complex and had displaced feelings of animosity towards his father on to a horse. Freud advised Little Hans' father to reassure him, and that did the trick. (p. 3)

A former patient of Freud is regarded as having latent homosexuality and referred to as Rat Man (Sédat 2005).

Case Study: Rat Man (Freud, 1964/1909) as summarized in Simply Psychology (n.d):

He had many fears, for example that something bad was going to happen to a young lady of whom he was very fond, and he had odd compulsions, for example he felt he wanted to cut his throat with a razor. He was tormented with fears that his father would die, even though his father was already dead and had been for some years. His chief fear though concerned a story that someone had told him. The story was about a punishment that was given to criminals in the Orient: a pot is turned upside down on the buttocks of the criminal and rats in the pot then bore their way into the criminal's anus. He was terrified that this might happen to him and became obsessed about rats, hence "Rat Man." (p. 4)

Consider these associations (Sédat, 2005):

- The patient obsessed about his father's death even after the father died.
- He had guilt about urges for his father's mistress.
- He spoke of a cruel captain (also showed up as transference whereas he called Freud "Captain").
- He detailed torture where rats entered prisoners' anus (a homosexual element). He feared this would happen to him.
- He referred to his nursemaid by a man's name.

Empirical support. Several aspects of the oedipal theory, primarily as applied to males, has been partially affirmed. "There is a line of experimental observation that fits the oedipal note that the male develops rivalry with the father and fantasies of sexual closeness with the mother" (studies analyzed and reported in Fisher & Greenberg, 1985, p. 394). The evidence of the relationship with the father is strong: "...there is not a single even moderately well

controlled study...located in which male homosexuals refer to father positively or affectionately” (p. 242).

Then, several years later Fisher & Greenberg (1996) found “increased pool of data supports the idea of the overly close, seductive mother. The concept of the negative father is strengthened not only by additional studies based on questionnaire response and subliminal inputs, but also cross-cultural quantitative indexes” (p. 139).

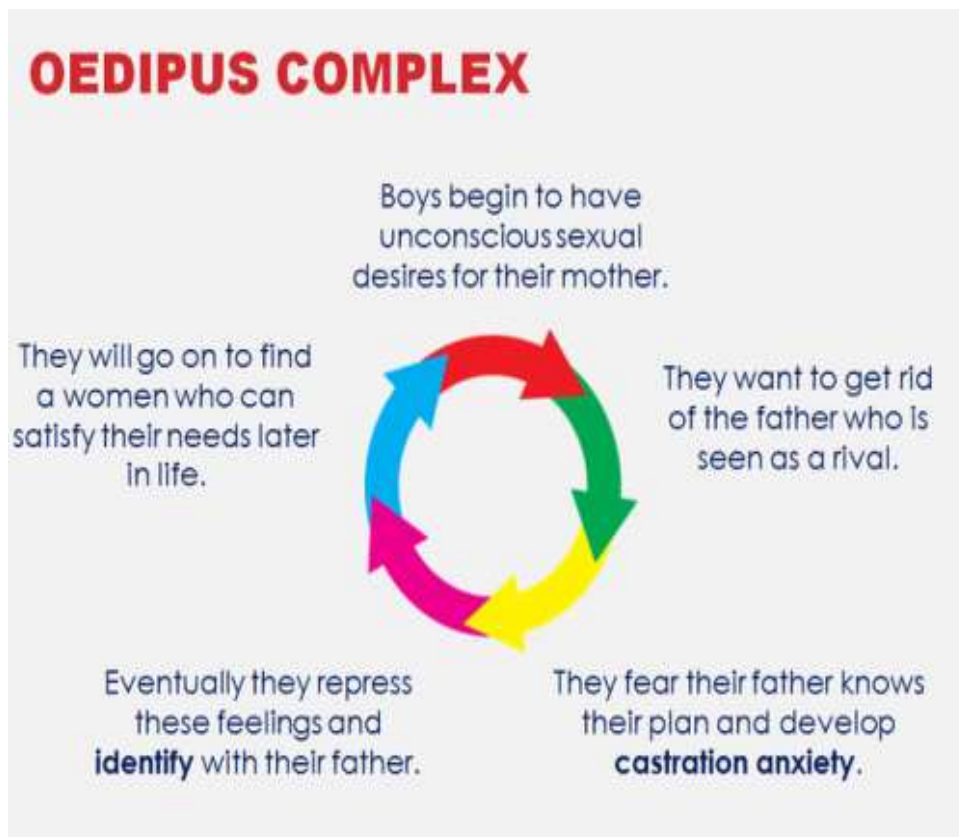


Figure 1

2. Castration-complex

Unconscious incestuous feelings for the mother are also associated with castration anxiety which is later transferred to all woman and can foster homosexuality (Bieber, 1962).

Incestuous feelings for the mother do not fade without resolution of castration anxiety and resolved relationship with the father.

As pointed out by Fisher and Greenberg (1996), leading to the boy’s castration anxiety is the discovery that, “girls lack a penis and consequent conclusion that if they can lose their penis, the same thing could happen to him” (p. 119). Another perception is that the “father is angry about his son’s rivalry and probably wants revenge” (p. 119). Another perception is the engulfment of his mother.

According to Freud (1969/1923) “if satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipus complex is to cost the boy his penis, a conflict arises between his narcissistic interest in that part of the body and the libidinal cathexis of the parental object. The first force normally triumphs, the libidinal object cathexes are given up and replaced by identification either with mother or intensifies identification with his father. The latter is of course regarded as more normal as it consolidates the masculinity in the boy’s character” (Nagera, 1990, p. 74). It is

therefore important for the boy to dissolve castration fears, to identify with his father, and go on to resolve oedipal conflict.

2.1. Empirical support. Studies Pre-1977: “There are several studies that have depicted the homosexual as being unusually concerned about being hurt as he is growing up. A number of observers have detected...an exaggerated sense of fragility and of needing to avoid the possibility of physical trauma” (Fisher & Greenberg, 1985, p. 247).

Looking at post 1977 studies up until the publication of the 1996 text (another 20 years of research analyzed), it was discovered that those who scored higher on castration anxiety scores were those who had absent fathers, supporting oedipal disruption. Post-1977 research also supported the theory that oedipal conflicts result in higher castration anxiety in males, resulting in more passivity and unexpressed hostility.

3. Electra Complex/Penis Envy

In terms of the girl, she too starts out life with her mother as the prime object of her interest and love. However, when she discovers that the male possesses a penis, she concludes that she has been castrated and therefore inferior. She will blame her mother and take her father as a love object. She will submit to having a passive vagina and have a wish for penetration. However, in a normal triangular situation, she will introject parental prohibitions against her aim and seek her own need for penis in another man. Compensation for her own lack of penis is therefore in her desire for impregnation and permitting her to produce a baby that has a symbolic penis (penis-baby equation) (Fisher & Greenberg, 1985).

The oedipal resolution is equating self with mother (identifying with mother) and perceiving men as providing her with a means of compensation for her lack of penis by impregnating her and enabling her to fashion a baby that is symbolically equivalent to a penis. Her identification with the father compensates to some extent for the missing genitals and preserves the cathexis for the mother. Unresolved, she persists in seeking a penis by emulating male activity (which could include taking on a homosexual object choice).

Hall (1954) summarized,

However, there is usually some degree of identification and cathexis with each parent. The girl's emulation of the mother brings her closer to the father and also compensates for the lost love relationship with the mother. Likewise, her identification with the father compensates to some extent for the missing genitals and preserves the cathexis for the mother. The strength and success of these identifications influence the nature of her attachments, hostilities, and the degree of masculinity and femininity in later years, as well as producing the superego. (p. 112)

Empirical support. Pre-1977, 3 studies yielded significant results: Women who scored high on penis-envy (inkblot) responses displayed masculine attitudes and behaviors (a sign of unresolved Electra Complex). Women who did not marry and had occupations usually regarded as masculinized were characterized by an unusual amount of penis-envy imagery in the research (Fisher & Greenberg, 1977; 1996). Considering all research up until that time, “The female homosexual seems to have the kind of negative and disappointing relationship with her father that could turn her away from him and other [male] love objects” (p. 252). “There are hints in the literature that the homosexual woman may have, as Freud suggested, an unusual amount of anxiety about the penis” (p. 252).

Research post-1977 - until 1996:

- Women did produce more phallic imagery when in a pregnant than nonpregnant state.
- Pregnant women seemed to be particularly preoccupied with phallic fantasies.
- Subliminal pregnancy message also produced an increase in phallic images in women.

4. Conclusion

The basic construct of Freudian theories of homosexual development have been overviewed. Freudian oedipal theory is that of parental love object and rivalry followed by castration fears, dissolution, and object desire. As discussed, the disruption in the triangular system is that male homosexuality drives from too much closeness to his mother, castration anxiety, and an unresolved distant negative relationship with his father. In terms of the girl, she too starts out life with her mother as the prime object of interest and love. However, when she discovers that her father possesses a penis, she concludes that she has been castrated and therefore inferior, taking on penis envy. She will blame her mother and perceive her father as a love object. This too, needs dissolution prior to normal psychosexual development. An additional overview of the empirical support for these theories has also been presented. It is important to understand the basic construct of theory given the rise of deconstruction and reconstruction undertakings.

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