

Totem and Taboo: Freud was Right!

Lecture Series

Lecture 1: The Universal Oedipus Complex

Part 1: Irony and Oedipus Waning in Psychoanalysis

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On the Waning of Oedipal theory in psychoanalysis

Ironically, just as anthropology was reconsidering evolutionary theory and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, psychoanalysis was heading in the opposite direction. Over a decade before Loewald's (1979) description of the "waning of the Oedipus complex" in 1979, Nagera (1966) had reported on the 'lack of precision, 'displacement', 'overshadowing', 'obscuring', and even 'disappearance' of the Oedipus complex in relation to its corollary, the *infantile neurosis*, in psychoanalytic discourse. As recently as 2005 he warned again about the essential aspects and implications of oedipal theory that continue to be "ignored, overlooked or more specifically actively denied" (p.2) Extending his description from *Early Childhood Disturbances, The Infantile Neurosis and The Adulthood Disturbances* (1966) of the oedipal phase as an *organizer* "...of the highest significance in human development" (pp. 57-58) he elaborated further on the influence of the *Oedipus complex*,

"...first as the organizer of all the phases of libidinal and aggressive development that precede it and second, as the platform from which all other development will be launched. Indeed the characteristics acquired with the resolution of the Complex will determine which path all further development will take. It is thus an essential organizer of the human personality. (2005, p.2)

In the final pages of *Oedipus in the Trobriands* (1982), Spiro had also arrived at essentially the same conclusion from an anthropological perspective; he said,

“...the continuing debates over the universality of the Oedipus complex are debates not merely about a passing episode in the psychological development of the child. Rather, they are debates about a psychological constellation, which...has pervasive cultural, social, and psychological consequences.” (pp. 173-4)

But if the Oedipus complex is so important, how are we to understand the hundred years of attacks it has received from anthropology and even more so now from within psychoanalysis? To begin to answer this question it will help to start with a brief review of the essential hypotheses that Freud first formulated in *Totem and Taboo*, the center-piece of his anthropology.

A Brief Review of Totem and Taboo

Freud’s evolutionary reconstruction asserted that human society evolved from a proto-human social group – the *primal* or primitive horde, as postulated by Darwin. This primeval social structure consisted of a dominant alpha male (‘father’), the females of the horde over which he monopolized sexual ownership, and a band of younger males (‘brothers’) who were for all practical purposes castrated (psychologically, if not literally) by the leader’s sexual monopoly and power. Freud (1913) also followed Darwin’s view on the dynamic instability of the horde structure, in which it was inevitable that the jealous brothers would eventually unite to seize “both wife and life from the paternal tyrant.” (p. 142) Freud put together accounts of the widespread practice of cannibalism throughout history, and still practiced among warring tribes, with Robertson-Smith’s study of ancient Semitic festival sacrifices of totem animals in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1894/1889). In this synthesis Freud illustrated the psychic equation of *eating* and *identification* (i.e., becoming the eaten object): “The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength”. (1913, pp. 140-142)

Freud showed that this same psychic equation operates across the different phenomena of totemic ritual sacrifice, extant cannibalism, civilized Christian communion, and neurotic symptoms. Furthermore, it operates in normal development where the earliest oral forms of identification are best conceptualized as *incorporations*, not yet differentiated from the function of eating; hence, *projections* of this process become the source of fantasies of being devoured by the mothering object. Freud quite reasonably concluded that this identificatory mechanism of *oral incorporation* functioned in the course of cultural evolution and during the primal events similar to its operation in totemic societies, where sacred totems and slain enemies are ritually consumed in order to achieve union with them or to possess their powers.

Freud acknowledged the “monstrous air” conveyed by his account of the primal events and anticipated that critics would deny the plausibility of his reconstruction for this reason. In fact, the mobilization of psychological defenses in response to even the fantasies of such acts was central to Freud’s thesis. Defensive adaptations to the consequences of the primal deed were made by the surviving horde, and these would have a defining impact on human psychological and cultural evolution. After all, killing and devouring the leader had simultaneously undermined the pre-existing structure and safety within the group and had eliminated the father’s protection from outside dangers. The murderous ‘deed’ had also mobilized fear of retaliation from the dead father’s spirit and generated remorse due to the loving side of the group’s *ambivalent* feelings for him. Eventually, the rituals, beliefs and structures of totemic society arose as a solution to these consequences and were organized around worship and appeasement of the slain father in the displaced form of an ancestor totem animal. (This ‘happened’ repetitively over the course of centuries and certainly not in any fully conscious manner).

Also established in response to the primal events were the two universal totemic prohibitions against *marriage within the clan* and *killing/eating the sacred totem*. The prohibition against killing and eating the totem would be reversed on ceremonial occasions; at these times sacrifice and communal consumption of the sacred ancestor would become mandatory and served the purpose of reaffirming the group’s *identification* with the ancestor.

Freud argued that this structural feature of totemism reflected its function as a *compromise formation*, similar to any neurotic symptom, serving not only *renunciation* of the primal impulses but also *reenactment* of the original deed:

The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (1913, p. 142)

Freud proposed that the same dynamics driving the evolutionary transformation from primal horde to totemic society continue to operate in modern society, art and religion for the simple reason that the fundamental drives and associated psychological conflicts remain operative in the human species. Thus, Freud (1913b) would reassert in various ways that the "...whole course of the history of civilization is no more than an account of the various methods adopted by mankind for binding their unsatisfied wishes." (p.186) The wishes unleashed in the primal trauma and bound up in social structures are the same wishes that must be 'civilized' in the course of individual development (*ontogeny*) by means of a similar renunciation and identification in relation to the oedipal father/parent – in other words, by means of the *resolution of the universal Oedipus complex*.

Freud's anthropological theory centers precisely on this relation of the Oedipus complex to cultural evolution. The discovery of the Oedipus complex began to take shape during Freud's own self-analysis and he referred to the concept already in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In *Totem and Taboo* Freud integrated this into his evolutionary formulations and described the Oedipus complex of his 5-year old patient, Little Hans:

He regarded his father (as he made all too clear) as a competitor for the favours of his mother, towards whom the obscure foreshadowings of his budding sexual wishes were aimed. Thus he was situated in the typical attitude of a male child towards his parents to which we have given the name of the 'Oedipus complex' ... (1913, p. 129).

As in his other writings, in *Totem and Taboo* Freud's oedipal theory entailed the *complete* Oedipus complex, a subtlety sometimes overlooked by Freud's critics. This included both the 'positive' and 'negative' dimensions of the complex due to the universal *bisexual* aspect of children's feelings toward both parents. This feature of oedipal theory was of central importance for Freud's thesis because it defined the biological foundations for *ambivalence* and *intra-psychic conflict* as these manifest in outer forms and structures of social relations. It is important to note here that ambivalence in human relationships was one of Freud's concepts in *Totem and Taboo* that anthropologists found to be extraordinarily useful, in spite of its emphasis on a universal biological aspect of human nature, which anthropology, especially in the United States, has tended to minimize. The concept underscored the operation of innate factors requiring the mobilization of defenses against dangerous or forbidden impulses; these then become projected or externalized onto acceptable objects in the environment, as in the animal phobia of Little Hans: "...the child finds relief from the conflict arising out of this double-sided, this ambivalent emotional attitude towards his father by displacing his hostile and fearful feelings on to a substitute for his father. (ibid)

Essential to Freud's thesis was his demonstration that the *obsessional rituals* observed in child animal phobias reveal the same unconscious *displacement* of *oedipal* ambivalence from the father to the animal that operates in the relation of primitives to their ancestor totem. Likewise, universal ambivalent conflicts between love and hate contained and expressed in totemic structures are the very same wishes that must be managed in the resolution of the Oedipus complex during individual child development:

If the totem animal is the father, then the two principal ordinances of totemism, the two taboo prohibitions which constitute its core – not to kill the totem and not to have sexual relations with a woman of the same totem – coincide in their content with the two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, as well as with the two primal wishes of children... (1913 p. 132)

The sacred ancestral totem of totemic religion in turn represents a survival of the original displacement that occurred when the totem god was created as an (unconscious) symbol of the murdered primal father. Thus, Freud arrived at his audacious conclusion that "...the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex". (p.156)

On the counter-assault from anthropology

Not surprisingly, anthropology took Freud's hypotheses as something of a usurpation of their object of study. Freud had effectively subordinated anthropology and its explanatory insights to psychoanalytic psychology, basing sociocultural objects of investigation upon biological-psychodynamic foundations. One influential anthropologist would capture the somewhat predictable response on behalf of his discipline:

Now this cultural factor is the chief concern and object of study of the anthropologist, and he is adverse, naturally, to seeing it disqualified at the outset. He is then further disturbed to see the totality of culture explained as a sublimation, as a channelization of the repressed elements of the Oedipus complex into more acceptable avenues. (Opler, 1935, p. 145)

Totem and Taboo was largely rejected by anthropology and became the focus of intense criticism dating from A.A. Brill's first English (American) translation in 1918. Oxford trained anthropologist, Robin Fox (1967) reflected on the history of criticism elicited by *Totem and Taboo* saying, "...rarely has any theory been so universally condemned". (p.416) One of the earliest important critiques was a 1920 review by A. L. Kroeber, America's first PhD graduate in anthropology under Franz Boas. In Milton Singer's (1961) words, "Kroeber devoted most of the review to demolishing Freud's principal thesis that the origins of culture and society meet in the Oedipus complex". (p.10) The few positives that Kroeber expressed had little to do with oedipal theory and in the context of his demolition seemed more like an act of damning Freud with faint praise.

On Malinowski's 'matrilineal complex' and the debate with Jones

But the seeds of a far more significant confrontation in writing during the 1920s – the Malinowski/Jones debates over the universality of the Oedipus complex - had already been sown two years before Kroeber’s review. In 1918, the year of Brill’s translation, C.G. Seligman, then Chair of Ethnology at the University of London, sent psychoanalytic literature to the Trobriand Islands where Malinowski (his student) was completing the third and final year of an original field study that would lead to his groundbreaking *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). This fieldwork would be the ethnographic basis for Malinowski’s several publications in his debate with Ernest Jones, including the single most influential argument of the 20th century against the universal Oedipus complex, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927).

Malinowski (1927) recalled that Seligman encouraged him to investigate “...the manner in which the Oedipus complex and other manifestations of the "unconscious" might appear in a community founded on mother right ...” (p.12) (This old term “mother right” is roughly equivalent to *matrilineal* society - where kinship is reckoned on the basis of descent from one’s maternal ancestors.) As we’ll see, in spite of the confusion that arose over what Malinowski intended in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, his actual argument was straightforward enough: *the Oedipus complex simply didn’t exist in Trobriand society and therefore it could not be universal*. With a clever inversion of Freud’s definition of the Oedipus complex as the *nuclear complex* of the neuroses, Malinowski argued instead that all societies have some form of nuclear complex, of which the Oedipus complex was only one possible type (specific to patrilineal and patriarchal society). In Trobriand *matriliny*, a different type of nuclear complex existed, which Malinowski called the ‘*matrilineal complex*’. As we’ll see, there was nothing oedipal about it according to Malinowski.

On the Influence of Malinowski’s critique

It’s not easy to overstate the influence of Malinowski’s argument against the universal Oedipus complex for so many decades across multiple disciplines in spite of the fact that it turns out to be incorrect. The aura of unquestionable authority that hovered like mana around it

was enhanced by the ethnographic brilliance of Malinowski's previous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*; and it only increased as his original fieldwork in the Trobriands acquired its legendary status as "the principal founding moment of modern ethnography" (Pulman, 2002, quoted in Smadja, 2011, p.988) and became the prototype of *participant observation* for all future anthropologists.

Malinowski's critique would certainly have satisfied Seligman, his teacher, as the latter came to consider Freud's formulations on infantile sexuality to be a 'regrettable excrescence'. The matrilineal thesis quickly solidified as dogma within anthropology for nearly half a century and profoundly influenced theory and opinion across the social sciences and in popular intellectual and political discourse. Spiro (1982) observed that it was the source for much of the claims for cultural relativity within anthropology and for charges of *ethnocentrism* leveled at Western (European, patriarchal) science and Freudian theory:

Malinowski's thesis] convinced anthropologist and psychoanalysts alike ... [It was held up] as disproof of the universality of the Oedipus complex not only in anthropology textbooks....[but] also in the work of psychological...and psychoanalytic...anthropologists, as well as of classical (Fenichel 1945: 97) and Neo-Freudian (Kardiner 1939: chapter 3; Fromm 1949) psychoanalysts. (p.1)

Not too unlike Trobriand *gwadi* (youth) undergoing their collective rites of initiation, some two generations of anthropology students would be trained to reenact Malinowski's slaying of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Fox (1980) recalled his own training at Oxford: "As a student, I was told not to read the book at all – a waste of time. It was "known error". "[And one] reader on comparative religion" even printed [A.L.] Kroeber's two [famous critiques of *Totem and Taboo*] without printing a word of *Totem and Taboo*!" (pp. 54-55) Robert Paul (2010) agreed with Fox's portrayal of the institutionalized goal of the attacks, "...each supposing itself to be the final nail in the coffin...". (p. 231)

On the irony in the Neo-Freudian critique: Abram Kardiner

To examine the specific influence of Malinowski's argument over so many for so long we can turn to the work of the American psychoanalyst, Abram Kardiner. As a student and analysand of Freud, Kardiner was in a unique position to be one of the most influential collaborators with anthropology, particularly in his major contributions to the '*culture and personality*' studies that became so dominant in American anthropology. For this reason, his views on Freud's anthropology will serve as an exemplar of some of the most lasting criticisms that came to be taken for granted by so many in both disciplines, in large part due to Malinowski's critique; and this was especially true for Neo-Freudians within psychoanalysis. As I will argue, these critiques suffered from two major problems: firstly, they failed to appreciate the role of Freud's concept of the *complemental series* in his theory of motivation; and, secondly, they failed to recognize the sociocultural implications of Freud's *instinct theory* and its role in his anthropological thinking.

In his seminal *The Individual and His Society* (1939/1949) published the year of Freud's death, Kardiner gave a distinctly Malinowskian critique of Freud's anthropology:

In working with the individual in our culture Freud made some assumptions about the universality of man's reaction types which he attributed to "instincts" and not to the interaction of institutions and human needs. He never expected that he might be obliged to make comparisons between different types of institutions, because the evolutionary hypothesis precluded the necessity for any such comparison. [and]...on the basis of the apparent universality of the Oedipus complex [Freud] assumed that special institutional conditions had no bearing on its formation. (1939/1949 p.)

On biological vs cultural determinism

It's important to recall that at the time of Freud's death in 1939 Malinowski's argument had still gone virtually unchallenged. Additionally, a uniquely intense version of *cultural determinism* (and its corollary, *cultural relativism*) had already evolved in American anthropology from Franz Boas' passionate stress on unique historical and particularistic facts for ethnography versus theoretical schemes, especially if these involved evolutionary or

biological explanatory models. It would be nearly impossible to understand how Kardiner could have misconstrued Freud in the way he does in this passage without keeping these things in mind. Let's look again at the following parts of Kardiner's statement:

- ...Freud made some assumptions about the universality of man's reaction types which he attributed to "instincts" and not to the interaction of institutions and human needs.
- ... on the basis of the apparent universality of the Oedipus complex [Freud] assumed that special institutional conditions had no bearing on its formation.

The portrayal of extreme *biological determinism* in Freud's theories had come to be taken for granted in anthropology and also by Neo-Freudian psychoanalysts like Kardiner, Fromm, Horney, Erickson and others. Horney (1950) rendered her own version of it: "Freud's evolutionistic-mechanistic thinking", according to Horney, "...implies that present manifestations not only are conditioned by the past, but contain nothing but the past; nothing really new is created in the process of development..." (p371). Horney and others imputed a static and one-sided theory of biological determinism and "human nature" to Freud's theory that he never asserted, as we will see.

On irony in the Lamarckian critique

This accusation of rigid biological determinism illustrates one of the impressive ironies so typical of the critiques leveled at Freud's theory of culture; for at the moment that Kardiner and others were attacking Freud's theory for not taking sufficiently into account the influence of environmental and developmental factors in relation to the instincts, anthropology was actively criticizing Freud for exactly the opposite reason: *his continued adherence to Lamarckian factors for human adaptation*. As we'll see in more detail in the fourth lecture, the criticism in this case was precisely that Freud had overestimated the determining role of environment and development on the evolution and expression of the instincts. In fact, although Freud's essential thesis in *Totem and Taboo* doesn't even depend upon Lamarckian mechanisms contemporary authors continue to repeat the erroneous claim that his hypotheses had long been refuted for this

very reason. But Freud had by then become used to these two-sided, all/nothing kind of misrepresentation of his formulations.

On irony in the Neo-Freudian critique: the “complemental series”

But in addition to the Lamarckian critique from the opposite side of the attacks, a theorist of Kardiner’s stature certainly would have been familiar with Freud’s emphasis on the *complemental series*. With this formulation Freud repeatedly and explicitly defined the reciprocal relation between innate/biological and experiential/environmental factors operating in the etiology of human motivations. If only from this concept alone, the critics had every reason to know that Freud never regarded the instincts as emerging in some pure form, undetermined by developmental or environmental factors and rigidly determining human motivation. Freud had defined this early on (in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1916-17a [1915-17], p. 347, and note) and would reemphasize it often throughout his career. Even as early as 1914 in *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement* (1966/1914b) Freud described this concept, without yet labeling it, in his formulations on the etiology of sexual trauma:

Disposition and experience are here linked up in an indissoluble aetiological unity. For disposition exaggerates impressions which would otherwise have been completely commonplace and have had no effect...; while experiences awaken factors in the disposition which, without them, might have long remained dormant and perhaps never have developed. (p. 180)

Fully aware of the misrepresentations of his theory, one of Freud’s most explicit references came in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) published the year he died, the very year of Kardiner’s critique. Here Freud repeats his formulation:

We then have the conception of a sliding scale, a so-called complemental series, where two factors converge to complete the aetiology; a minus in one factor is compensated by a plus in the other. Generally the two factors work together and only at either end of the series can we speak of a simple motivation. (p.73)

In my previous lectures on “Freud’s Anthropological Theory”, I described the importance of this complementary series for a proper understanding of Freud’s theory of the universal Oedipus complex. He certainly considered the Oedipus complex to be a biological “...phenomenon which is determined and laid down by heredity...” (1924 p.174) However, Freud also repeatedly stressed the concurrent determining role of environmental factors on drive development. Nowhere was he more insistent about this than in his theory of the Oedipus complex, where he explicitly accounted for environmental factors in *superego formation* via the *introjection* of parental and social values. In *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* (1924) he stressed that “The justice of both these views cannot be disputed. Moreover, they are compatible. There is room for the ontogenetic [developmental/experiential] view side by side with the more far-reaching phylogenetic [evolutionary] one.” (ibid). A year earlier Freud had asserted this environmental factor also for general ego development: “We have repeatedly had to insist on the fact that the ego owes its origin as well as the most important of its acquired characteristics to its relation to the real external world.” (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 1938/1940, SE 23, p. 201)

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