

# **Totem and Taboo: Freud was Right!**

## **Lecture Series**

### **Lecture 1: The Universal Oedipus Complex**

#### **Part 3: Critical Misrepresentations of Freud's Nuclear Complex**

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#### **On the lack of consensus regarding the Oedipus complex**

With regard to the perceived status of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalysis and anthropology, authors from both disciplines can be quoted as saying either that it is “universally accepted” (Spillius, 2000, p. 187) or that it has “disappeared completely”. (Strenger, 2006, p. 420) In the psychoanalytic literature addressing what Freud actually meant (e.g., Van Haute, 2016) or the most useful clinical application of oedipal theory, the lack of consensus is also well documented. (See Hartke, 2016; Adler, 2010; Greenberg 1991; Britton, 1989; Paul, 2010, 2016; Ahumada, 2016; Blass 2016; Wallerstein, 1988).

#### **Contemporary iterations of Malinowski's critique**

The continuing debate over the universal Oedipus complex is now a hundred years old and no interdisciplinary controversy is more apt to reflect the repetition compulsion due to the traumatic quality of its origins. (Smadja, 2011) The original and most enduring critique, Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927) was published at a critical moment in the institutional histories of both disciplines and continues to resurface in a variety of new forms. Some authors even still refer to the Trobriand 'matrilineal complex' as if it had been the

final word, and as though Malinowski's critique has not by now been subjected to damaging reexaminations. (Powell, 1957; Spiro, 1982)

### **On the patriarchal critique**

There are those critiques that reaffirm Malinowski's conclusion that the Oedipus complex is a function of patriarchy and more or less a pathological symptom of it. Here's one example from the contemporary literature (Bhugra and Bhui, 2002) that repeats the old thesis that the Oedipus complex "... is culture-specific and an essentially pathological outcome of a male-dominated, class-structured society." (p. 81) It's important to note that this argument allows for no contribution whatsoever from normal psychosexual development to the child's aggressive and competitive rivalry with the father for the mother's affections. All such feelings must be pathological and they can only be explained as symptomatic manifestations of the external parental environment. The argument continues:

The Oedipus complex is not built into the collective mind but is found only under specific historical circumstances, such as societies with patriarchal authorization structures and competition for wealth that stimulate rivalry and hostility. Parents as agents of such a social order, who harbour hostile and erotic feelings for their children, bring the Oedipal complex into being where it may not exist. (ibid, p.84; underline added).

Melford Spiro's *Oedipus in the Trobriands* (1982) is arguably still the most effective refutation of this old thesis and demonstrates the manner in which, in Malinowski's case, it relied upon an idealization of Trobriand matriliney and sexual customs and a vilification of the oedipal father of Western patriarchy (especially the bourgeois capitalist type!).

### **On the more common kind of critiques (by appropriation)**

Far more common and less overtly ideological are critiques that repeat Malinowski's *rhetorical device* of appropriating Freudian concepts, such as the 'nuclear complex' or 'infantile sexuality', while applying them either in relative isolation or with more or less redefined

meanings. As one of the many examples from the contemporary literature, Friedman and Downey (1995) argue that "...the construct Freud called the Oedipus complex in males is best examined in its component parts. One component—the incestuous wish—does not occur in all individuals." (p. 234) This argument essentially repeats the logic of Malinowski's thesis that if a Trobriand boy could be shown to have no oedipal attachment to the biological mother then the Oedipus complex could not be universal. I hope to show that neither of the two essential aspects of Malinowski's thesis – first, the *empirical* claim of an absence of oedipal conflicts in the Trobriands, and, second, the *theoretical* argument that this alone would refute the 'universal' or nomothetic status of oedipal theory - have withstood more than superficial scrutiny, even though it took half a century for that to happen! For the moment, however, the example is offered only to illustrate a contemporary version of one kind of strategy – the fractional appropriation of oedipal theory - that Malinowski employed in his argument against the universal Oedipus complex. This rhetorical approach in the critiques of oedipal theory is among the most common in the contemporary literature.

### **On Kroeber's 'oedipal kernel'**

Perhaps the most famous example of this occurred in anthropologist A.L. Kroeber's (1939) "Totem and Taboo in Retrospect" published shortly after Freud's death. Kroeber argued that Malinowski had vindicated Freud's theory by demonstrating the "kernel of the Oedipus situation". (p. 447) But Kroeber's so-called oedipal 'kernel' would have done without essential components of oedipal theory, such as the *superego*, which he compared to an 'incidental fantasy'. When psychoanalysts disagreed with Kroeber and pointed out that from the Freudian perspective his exclusion rendered oedipal theory incoherent, Kroeber accused them of partaking in a "delusional system" (p. 451). Once again, this restricted use and redefinition of oedipal concepts is arguably the most common form of critique today.

### **The present argument**

In this and the final part of the lecture on the Oedipus complex, I maintain that contemporary criticism in the tradition of Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*

(1927) tends to repeat one or more of a common set of misrepresentations of Freudian oedipal theory, which I have organized under two broad headings:

1. *Confusion about the meaning of “universal”*
2. *Confusion about the meaning of the complex itself*

### **On confusion about the meaning of “universal”**

Freud referred on several occasions to the universal and normative aspects of the Oedipus complex. However, not always did he do so quite as categorically or as reflective of the evolving polemics as in the following quote:

Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls victim to neurosis. With the progress of psychoanalytic studies the importance of the Oedipus complex has become more and more clearly evident; its recognition has become the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psycho-analysis from its opponents.” (Freud, 1920 note to Three Essays [1905f], p. 266)

Much has been made of Freud’s biblical metaphor here of the *shibboleth* (an enforced belief under threat of death) as evidence of the “cultic” or unscientific nature of psychoanalysis in general, and oedipal theory in particular. (See Wax, 2000) To whatever extent these charges have been justified in relation to institutionalized aspects of psychoanalysis (perhaps most often made in reference to trends in American ego psychology) they address the actual substance of specific theory no more than *ad hominem* arguments do. It’s also true that no scientific discipline advances without its defining theory. As long as theoretical constructs satisfy the general standards of scientific inquiry and are “public, replicable, testable, broad in scope, and parsimonious.” (Harris, 1999, p. 35) then they are the legitimate stuff of science. I’ve relied in this part of the discussion on Nigel Mackay’s *Motivation and Explanation: An Essay on Freud’s Philosophy of Science* (1989) which provides an analysis of Freud’s philosophy of science and the role of *theoretical constructs* in Freudian theory.

In spite of criticism to the contrary (particularly any based solely on Freud's use of a metaphors, like the *shibboleth*) the actual principles on the basis of which Freud formulated his theories and revised them reflected "a reasoned and viable philosophy of explanation." (p. 23) Mackay offers the example of how Freud's theory of motivation operated in the evolution of his structural approach, which, in turn, led him to the idea of the *superego*. Proceeding on the assumption that structure corresponds to function, Freud "postulates a superego as the structural counterpart to moral and other functions of the person". (p. 116) Mackay continues with his description of Freud's manner of theorizing:

One should note that usually there is an interaction of theoretical concepts and data. The use of the theoretical concepts leads to expectations about psychological phenomena. As these phenomena are incorporated into the theory, the theory and its concepts change. This is how the theory develops. In this way for example the superego notion develops. Initially, it is merely an aspect of the ego assigned self-evaluative functions and is called the "ego-ideal" ... But it is a fruitful notion. It helps Freud understand the motives of repression, allows him to incorporate the facts of aggression into psychoanalysis, and enables him to assimilate cultural and social factors to the theory. As this happens, the concept itself changes until it is a major psychic structure. (p. 117)

I follow Mackay's characterization of Freud's procedure in terms of this realist *theoretical construct* approach and suggest that Freud's normative and universal claims for the Oedipus complex are best understood in this sense. Mackay's account of Freud's scientific procedure, with regard to the building up of theoretical constructs and the constant testing and modification of them, is also consistent with Freud's own thinking about the function of basic psychoanalytic concepts:

[Fundamental psychoanalytic concepts] lay claim to the same value as approximations that belong to the corresponding intellectual scaffolding found in other natural sciences, and we look forward to their being modified, corrected and more precisely determined as future experience is accumulated and sifted. So too it will be entirely in accordance with

our expectations if the basic concepts and principles of the new science (instinct, nervous energy, etc.) remain for a considerable time no less indeterminate than those of the older sciences ... (quoted in Mackay, pp. 147-8)

### **On the ontogenetic and phylogenetic dimensions of Freud's universal claim**

It's important to remember that Freud defined oedipal theory in universal terms at two different levels of conceptualization: 1) the more familiar *ontogenetic* level of individual development; and 2) the often disregarded *phylogenetic* level of socio-cultural evolution. Confusion occurs at both these levels over the meaning of 'universal', such that specific variations or anomalous cases are frequently put forward as refuting the theory. Spiro (1982) provided an eloquent clarification (and refutation) of this conceptual mistake as it relates to the level of social structure:

Since at the *societal* level, ...it is the biological mother who is the child's central (if not exclusive) early mothering figure, and the biological father its most salient rival for her love **in all known societies**, it is understandable that the structure of the Oedipus complex, although cross-culturally variable in principle (and certainly in particular cases) is most probably invariant [in its structure] in fact. (p. 174; bold type added)

Spiro clarifies here what it *means* to say that the Oedipus complex (as a theoretical construct in Freud's anthropology) is 'invariant' or 'universal'. His interpretation may be applied equally to Freud's more familiar ontogenetic theory of individual development. The logical requirements that must be satisfied for oedipal concepts to be considered 'universal' at the developmental level differ in no way from those that apply to any generalizable (*nomothetic*) theory representing 'normal' maturation or development. Even the relatively uncontroversial concept of developmental 'stages' implies a legitimate distinction between the general, universal or normative construct and particular variants or anomalies. Normative theories of language acquisition, for example, depend upon invariant principles, 'steps', or norms for speech development in a manner no different from how oedipal theory depends upon such constructs. As conceptual tools they define the limits of 'normal' and 'anomalous', such

that the objects of scientific inquiry - including variant cases - can be operationalized, studied, and scrutinized by other researchers in an open forum. This, in turn, allows for new tests of a theory's power to facilitate fresh hypotheses and further building of theories. D'ercole's (2014) recent account of Freud's innovations in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905)* refers to this operational function in Freud's manner of theorizing:

Close examination of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905a)* reveals an ambiguity in Freud's language as he simultaneously tries to escape 19th-century psychiatric paradigms concerning sexuality and perversion while also retaining a normative approach to adult sexuality that created new categories of pathology. (2014, p. 249)

As with all good scientific theories (at least from the perspective of the qualified realist and *theoretical construct* approach assumed here, following Mackay) variations are defined and understood precisely in relation to the theory itself. Indeed, this is one of the essential functions of useful scientific theories.

In striking contrast to this view, even the most cursory Pep Web search now yields myriad examples of what has become a common rejection in psychoanalytic literature of all nomothetic or normative theories in general. Whether or not it is put so succinctly, all such approaches agree with the following author (Lewes, 2005) that "There is no universal normative developmental sequence." (p. 16) This obviously normative and universal rejection of all normative or universal developmental theory must, by definition, also reject the universal Oedipus complex on the same theoretical grounds, however undermined its own logic is by a *performative contradiction*, as we'll discuss below. (See Havens, 1997) The author continues: "The Oedipus Complex, with its intrinsic teleologies and optimal developmental stages as in the genital personality, is a fiction." (ibid.)

My point in offering this contemporary quote is to show how such thinking is solidly in the tradition of Malinowski's own claim ninety years ago that there could be no such thing as a universal "nuclear complex".

### **On Agreement Between Freud and Malinowski**

In all fairness to Malinowski, however, a finer clarification is necessary for this critique of his thesis to be appreciated in a balanced way. Malinowski was a brilliant and pioneering ethnographer who could not have imagined anthropology without lawful, nomothetic formulations. The polemical nature of the original debates can overshadow the fact that Malinowski agreed with Freud on the necessity of formulating cross-culturally generalizable scientific theories. And, like Freud, Malinowski believed that human social institutions must be understood on the basis of their functional interrelationships and in relation to universal biological needs. Malinowski's epic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) was an example of his groundbreaking exploration of these functional relationships. Malinowski's views on a causal connection between human biology and society showed up during the debate with Jones in his reasoning that "father-right" would be a pathological phenomenon to the extent that it grants "to the father social claims and prerogatives not commensurate with his biological propensities." (1927, pp. 31-32) I would argue that so far as it goes and stated in this manner - as a scientific hypothesis - this assertion is as useful and legitimate today as it would have been in 1927. It is certainly no more or less legitimate than the parallel claim that "mother-right" would be pathological to the same extent. It's noteworthy also that Malinowski's reasoning here - just as Freud's - rejects a rigid biological determinism; it assumes a reciprocal and causal role for human *nature* (biological inheritance) and human *nurture* (social and cultural inheritance) at one and the same time. (See related to this Paul, 2016 on "dual inheritance theory") This is simply a more-specific instance of what Freud referred to as his 'etiological formula', or the *complemental series*. In fact, this assumption of a causal role for both nature and nurture was so fundamental to Freud's own thinking that any representation of Freudian theory that fails to account for it runs the risk of being a parody. In the last lecture I quoted Horney (1950) as an example of the Neo-Freudian tendency to parody Freud's thinking in this



way: “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...” (p. 371). \*

### **On the common fallacy of the *performative contradiction***

In order to present Malinowski’s views fairly, I’ve gone to some lengths to stress that both he and Freud agreed on formulating lawful (or ‘universal’) constructs for the purpose of cross-cultural research. Likewise, Malinowski recognized the reciprocal and causal roles of *nature* and *nurture* in explanations of human society no less than Freud. With this in mind, I wish now to proceed with my argument that contemporary rejections of this kind of generalizing or *nomothetic* theory (e.g., “*There is no universal normative developmental sequence*”) repeat a conceptual problem in Malinowski’s own claim ninety years ago that there is no such thing as a universal – and specifically *oedipal* - nuclear complex.

Malinowski set himself the dubious task of refuting the Freudian Oedipus complex on more than just empirical grounds alone (i.e., that he had found empirical evidence for some kind of *non-oedipal* nuclear complex in the Trobriand case). On these grounds alone, Spiro’s *Oedipus in the Trobriands* was fairly devastating. Moreover, as we’ve seen, such an empirical finding – assuming that Malinowski had been correct - would not, in itself, even have constituted a refutation of oedipal theory. It’s quite possible, after all, that the Trobriand case might have represented an anomaly best identified and explained precisely in light of Freud’s theory. The problem is that Malinowski also rejected the possibility of a universal Oedipus complex on purely *theoretical grounds*: namely, that Freud’s construct *could not be applied universally* given Malinowski’s view of what it would take to satisfy a universal claim and given his own redefinition of the ‘nuclear complex’. Malinowski redefined the nuclear complex as that “system of sentiments” that exists in family relations according to each particular

\* Many of Freud’s statements on the *complemental series* can serve to refute this parody of Freud. Another early example from Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905) is “The phylogenetic disposition can be seen at work behind the ontogenetic process. But disposition is ultimately the precipitate of earlier experience of the species to which the more recent experience of the individual, as the sum of the accidental factors, is super-added.” (p. 31)

society's family structures. (1927, p. 75) There was nothing specific in this definition. The logic of Malinowski's thesis was that cross-cultural variations in family structures correspond to varying "nuclear complexes" and thus preclude any universal application of oedipal theory. In Malinowski's formulation, "[if] the conflicts, passions and attachments within the family vary with its constitution ... as in fact they do, then the nuclear complex of the family cannot remain constant in all human races and peoples ; it must vary with the constitution of the family." (p. 4)

On closer scrutiny, it can be seen that Malinowski's critique of oedipal theory is undermined by a logical fallacy, one that returns again and again in contemporary critiques. On purely theoretical grounds based in the concept of cross-cultural variation Malinowski rejected any nomothetically-defined "nuclear" family construct for all human society while simultaneously formulating one for widely differing matrilineal societies. The fallacy is what philosopher Jürgen Habermas would call a *performative contradiction*. (See Havens, 1997; Whitebook, J., 1993) According to Malinowski's reasoning, his rejection of a universal complex renders his own "discovery" of the matrilineal complex of matrilineal society incoherent, for the simple reason that there is not just one kind of matrilineal society. They are all different! They vary in the structure of their institutions - often profoundly so - according to a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative variables, all of which would influence the "conflicts, passions and attachments" in each particular society. These variables include differing admixtures of kin reckoning and inheritance, institutions of power (matriarchal vs. patriarchal), post-marital residence rules (matrilocal vs. patrilocal, duolocal, even neolocal), marriage forms (monogamous, polygamous, polyandrous). Matrilineal societies in Africa differ from those in Melanesia, and regional differences occur even within a given country. On the basis of Malinowski's own reasoning, the most he could logically have claimed to have made were reliable empirical observations for Trobriand society, but even this would have been saying too much, unless he had shown that the "conflicts, passions and attachments" in family relations did not vary according to subtler differences from one Trobriand island to the next.

But Malinowski did not restrict himself to this empirical claim on strictly empirical grounds. He claimed to have discovered the “matrilineal complex” of matrilineal society, in striking contrast to the Oedipus complex of Western patriarchal society, and he concluded *on theoretical grounds* that his discovery therefore refuted the universal applicability of Freud’s oedipal theory. In effect, Malinowski wished to have had it both ways. The Oedipus complex could not be universal if different family structures correspond to different “conflicts, passions and attachments”, but the matrilineal complex could be applied in a universal or nomothetic manner to matrilineal society, in spite of profound differences across all matrilineal societies.

The identification of this logical fallacy of the *performative contradiction* in Malinowski’s original critique is most important for our present purposes because it shows up again and again in contemporary critiques of Freudian oedipal theory.

### **On Confusion about the meaning of the complex itself**

Turning now to the meaning of the complex itself, confusion occurs when the Oedipus complex - best characterized as a uniquely human *developmental conflict* (Freud, 1914, p. 63) involving multiple developmental lines – gets reduced to one or more of its components; or when the component concepts get redefined or misrepresented in some manner that renders the overall theory more or less incoherent. Misconceptions that arise because of this then become grounds for rejecting some or all of oedipal theory. Here are some specific ways that this shows up:

- The Oedipus complex is frequently portrayed, either in one-dimensional terms, such as solely in terms of its ‘positive’ or heterosexual dimension; or in overly concrete terms, as applying only to biological relationships in the ‘traditional’ nuclear family triangle. (see Johnson and Price-Williams, 1996, pp. 3-5) Of course, this was never Freud’s understanding of oedipal theory; such a formulation would preclude the Oedipus complex in situations like adoption, where one or both parents may not be biologically related, or in inter-generational situations, where the ‘mother’ or ‘father’ is some surrogate, such as a grandparent. It would also imply that the Oedipus complex would not emerge for

children being raised by same-sex parents, as though the roles of ‘mother’, ‘father’, oedipal object and rival, are solely determined on the basis of biological sex.

- Phenomena specific to Freud’s “phallic” oedipal stage (such as infantile sexual theories, or libidinal and aggressive objects or aims) become obscured and confused with those pertaining to post-pubertal and adult genital experience. One consequence of this is that the Oedipus complex is erroneously considered as synonymous with fantasies of incestuous intercourse and parricide, as these would be imagined or understood in adult terms. This neglects Freud’s later elaborations on the Oedipus complex [see Van Haute, 2016] and obscures the profound differences between phallic-oedipal and post-pubertal object relations, ego and drive development in Freudian theory. It also obscures the role of unconscious mental representations of oedipal objects from childhood, which get confused with actual persons in the external world. Malinowski, for example, considered the denial of conscious sexual fantasies on the part of Trobriand men for their actual aging mothers as evidence against the Oedipus complex. This confusion not only mistakes the past for the present, but it also eliminates the essential distinction in Freudian theory between external reality and psychic reality, both of which differentiations are central to all of Freud’s thinking.
- The proper relation of *pre-oedipal* to oedipal stages in Freud’s mature developmental model becomes obscured, such that these stages become conflated or poorly integrated conceptually. Oedipal dynamics are described as arising ‘from scratch’, as it were, without reference to the pre-oedipal determinants or distortions of the form the Oedipus complex takes. Conversely, *pre-oedipal* manifestations are described in pristine terms, without reference to the manner in which they are *inflected* through the prism of oedipal and post-oedipal stages. Another particularly unfortunate consequence of this has been a sort of *splitting* in the history of pre-oedipal and oedipal theorizing, such that one is represented as either more or less important somehow than the other. (See Loewald, 1979; Nagera, 1966 for discussion of this.)

- Finally, critics have failed to deal squarely with the fact that Freud based oedipal theory solidly upon one particularly unique (and fascinating) feature of human biology: namely, the ‘premature’ timing of genital drive development relative to the protracted dependency of the human child. In no other animal species is this lack of synchrony between the early arrival of genital impulses and the much later achievement of reproductive and social independence so pronounced as it is in *Homo sapiens*. Evolutionary biology has only confirmed and strengthened Freud’s many references to this developmental incongruity and the human co-adaptations that correlate with it. (Gould, 1977; Roheim, 1950). No matter the circumstance or culture, all humans lucky enough to survive the dangers of childhood must master this developmental conflict; and human communities rise and fall, in part, according to how well they provide institutionalized solutions to facilitate this mastery. We’ll return to the implications of this later in the next part of the lecture.

### **On the Nuclear Complex**

Since the concept of a ‘nuclear complex’ has been so central to the debate over the Oedipus complex, it’s useful to clarify in more detail the difference between Freud’s use of this concept and the anthropological appropriation of it that first arose in Malinowski’s critique of *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Malinowski considered his “first problem” to be the task of understanding “the dependence of the nuclear complex upon the constitution of the family.” (1927, p. 6) As we’ll see, what Malinowski – and, by extension, his students and followers - meant by the ‘nuclear complex’ differed substantially from Freud’s meaning.

### **Freud’s Version of the “Nuclear Complex”**

Freud’s ‘nuclear complex’ referred to the central role of the Oedipus complex in neurotic symptom formation. The persistence into later life of unconscious conflicts associated with infantile genital desires and jealous hate in the oedipal triangle of childhood represented, for Freud, “the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis”. (1913, p. 132) So important has been this discovery of the nuclear complex for psychoanalysis that Greenberg (1991) was moved to describe it in these impassioned terms:

The Oedipus complex is the greatest monument we have to the timeless power of childhood. Etched forever in the unconscious, oedipal wishes, fears, fantasies, and impressions continue to shape experience throughout life. Clinically, the Oedipus complex remains the most effective tool for talking to adult patients about their archaic past. It provides a powerful link between contemporary psychopathology and its prehistoric roots. (p. 22)

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Beyond this specific relation to psychopathology, however, the Oedipus complex (together with its resolution) was ‘nuclear’ also by virtue of its crucial role in normality, including normal conscience formation, mature psychosexual functioning, and the satisfactory relinquishment of childhood attachments. It was “at once the climax of infantile sexual life and the point of junction from which all of its later developments proceeded.” (Freud, 1925, p. 55) Van Haute (2016) referred recently to this normative function of the Oedipus complex “that structures the development of the human psyche in the infantile period and that regulates our progressive inscription in the world of culture.” (pp. 578-79)

However, it was not until *Totem and Taboo* (1913) that Freud defined the ‘nuclear complex’ in its most controversial sense, in relation to human cultural evolution (phylogeny). Just as the Oedipus complex was the “nuclear complex of the neuroses”; and the *superego* was “heir to the Oedipus complex”; so also, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud declared that “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex”. (p. 156). In this manner, the Oedipus complex was defined as the nuclear complex of human civilization.

### **Malinowski’s Version of the “Nuclear Complex”**

The explanatory breath and systematic interrelation of concepts involved in Freud’s oedipal theory was lost with Malinowski’s redefinition of the nuclear complex. Malinowski explained that he employed Freud’s term “in order to adapt ourselves to psycho-analytic terminology” (1927, p. 75) He then proceeded to redefine the meaning of the nuclear complex in the service of his refutation of Freud’s oedipal theory. As we’ve already seen, Malinowski’s concept of the

nuclear complex was non-specific, in that it referred simply to the variable “system of sentiments” that governed an individual’s family relations according to each particular society’s kinship structures. The logic of Malinowski’s thesis was that cross-cultural variation in family structures (ex., rules governing marriage and descent, sexual proscriptions and taboos, residence patterns, and so forth) corresponds to different “nuclear complexes”. Once again, in Malinowski formulation, “[if] the conflicts, passions and attachments within the family vary with its constitution ... as in fact they do, then the nuclear complex of the family cannot remain constant in all human races and peoples; it must vary with the constitution of the family.” (p. 4) Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with Malinowski’s own definition of a variable ‘nuclear complex’, in so far as it goes. The problem is that, taken on its own terms, it doesn’t go very far because it is redundant. The nuclear complex of Malinowski’s critique could not possibly have been universal (oedipal, matrilineal, or otherwise) because it was, *by definition*, that system of family sentiments that varied according to family structure. On the other hand, in so far as Malinowski proceeded on the basis of his redefined nuclear complex to claim that his Trobriand data refuted Freudian oedipal theory, he also rendered his own nomothetic claim to have discovered the nuclear complex of matrilineal society – the “matrilineal complex” – incoherent, as discussed above in relation to the *performative contradiction*.

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### **False agreement over Freud’s “central tenet”**

Remarkably, in spite of his rejection of the Oedipus complex, as Freud had defined it, Malinowski maintained that his findings were “*in a sense* a confirmation of the main tenet of Freudian psychology” (p. 82; italics added) because he had discovered “a deep correlation between the type of society and the nuclear complex found there.” (ibid) But this was a rhetorical sleight of the hand, given that Malinowski had redefined the nuclear complex and decoupled it from Freudian oedipal theory. It was only Malinowski who considered the “main tenet” of Freudian psychology to be the “correlation between the type of society and the nuclear complex found there”. *Totem and Taboo* was indeed one of the most (if not the most) important applications of Freud’s main psychological tenets (the Oedipus complex being among them) to

socio-cultural questions. And although it is true that he considered the correlation that he discovered there to be among the most important findings of his career, nonetheless nowhere had Freud defined the “main tenet” of his psychology in terms so well-suited to Malinowski’s critique. In his account (1914) of the history of psychoanalysis published a year after *Totem and Taboo*, Freud included unconscious defenses, childhood sexuality, repression, transference and resistance, in addition to the Oedipus complex, among the central tenets of his psychology. Later, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he referred to the differentiation of ‘*unconscious*’ and ‘*conscious*’ as the “first shibboleth of psychoanalysis” (p. 13) (once again using the infamous metaphor) and stressed that the “property of being conscious or not ...[was] in the last resort our one beacon-light in the darkness of depth-psychology.” (p. 18) But nowhere in Freud’s collected writings could I find anything resembling the claim that the “main tenet” of Freud’s psychology was the correlation between social structure and the nuclear complex.

Of course, neither Freud nor his defenders would ever have disagreed with Malinowski’s simple statement of such a correlation, because *one so generally defined* was never the problem to begin with. At stake was the fact that Freud’s socio-cultural claims for the universal Oedipus complex in *Totem and Taboo* constituted an assault on the anthropology of his day; and Malinowski’s ethnological response was *the* authoritative counter-assault, pointed directly at Freud’s polemical claim for the Oedipus complex. For Malinowski to declare in the course of his attack on the universal Oedipus complex that he was “in a sense” confirming Freud’s main tenet was nothing else than a rhetorical means of damning oedipal theory with faint praise. Of course, Freudians like Ernest Jones and Geza Roheim recognized this and replied simply that Malinowski had misunderstood and misrepresented Freud’s theories, and in the process had also misinterpreted his own ethnographic data.

Let’s look more closely at some specific aspects of Malinowski’s original critique. This will help in our concluding discussion of the contemporary debates.



### **On the absence of incest motivations for the mother**

In Trobriand matrilineal society, according to Malinowski, a just-weaned boy of three-to-five years of age had no incestuous longings for the mother, and no sexual rivalry whatsoever with the mother's sexual partner, who was very much the biological father. In fact, where Malinowski said the boy's rivalrous hate did occur - toward the maternal uncle – it was only at puberty and had nothing to do with murderous fantasies toward a competitor in a phallic-stage sexual triangle. The dynamics of the Trobriand matrilineal complex, as Malinowski formulated it, were essentially dyadic in nature, in this sense, and the boy's hate toward the maternal uncle was due simply to the latter's social/legal authority over him. As Spiro (1982, p. 34) points out, the triadic Freudian model of oedipal dynamics (where hate is a function of frustrated desire and competitive 'phallic' rivalry with the father) simply disappears in Malinowski's formula.

### **On the non-oedipal longings for the sister**

The oedipal-age Trobriand boy's incestuous longings show up toward the sister in Malinowski's account, around whom strict incest taboos adhere. However, according to Malinowski's interpretation, the nature of these incestuous longings would require a radical redefinition of oedipal theory. (Spiro, 182, pp. 174-5) In Malinowski's portrayal of Trobriand psychosexual development, the incestuous longings toward the sister *were interpreted as proof that a displacement of repressed sexual attachment to the mother had not occurred.* Malinowski insisted that the oedipal-age boy's sexual attachment to the mother was already extinguished "spontaneously" by virtue of its previously unfettered expression. With regard to the boy's sentiments toward the mother, "...*nothing suppressed*, nothing negative, no frustrated desire forms a part of them. (1927, p. 72; italics added) For Malinowski, this was a consequence of the sexually permissive matrilineal Trobriand culture, where there was "... no repression, no censure, no reprobation of infantile sexuality of the genital type." (p. 43)

### **On the Post-Partum Sexual Taboo, infant extrusion, and weaning**

Malinowski's own Trobriand data revealed his interpretation to be highly improbable. A strict Trobriand post-partum sexual taboo required that the father be exiled from the mother's bed at the time of the boy's birth, and this lasted through the lengthy period of breast-feeding,

which typically could extend well into the third and even the fourth year, precisely when the child's genital feelings are intensifying. During this entire period at the mother's breast, the Trobriand boy replaces the father in the mother's bed and enjoys unfettered sexual access to her body. Malinowski cites these circumstances, together with the absence of any restrictions on sensual gratification in the mother/infant dyad, to support his contention that the oedipal age boy no longer has a sexual attachment to the mother by the time weaning occurs.

### **Nothing stressful during weaning**

In Malinowski's (1927) account of weaning there is nothing stressful for the Trobriand child, because it takes place "...at a moment when the child neither wants nor needs the mother's breast anymore." (p.26) The long "blissful harmony" of the pre-oedipal phase, during which the boy's "undiminished, passionate desire" was given full reign, is described as causing the complete extinguishing of any sexual attachment, because "...all the infantile craving of the child for its mother is allowed gradually to spend itself in a natural, spontaneous manner." (p. 80)

### **Male Extrusion: Loss of breast, the mother's bed, and the mother's village**

In both *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927) and *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) Malinowski's own ground-breaking ethnographic data supplied the best reasons to doubt his idyllic portrayal of weaning in the Trobriand Islands. We learn from his latter account that in the process of being weaned the Trobriand boy is expected not only to forfeit both mother's breast and her bed, but even proximity to the mother as well. In fact, he must be exiled from the mother. Custom requires that the boy be separated from the mother and sent to the father's village until the actual process of weaning is complete. Here is Malinowski's description of the process:

During the weaning the child is separated from the mother, and sleeps with its father or with its paternal grandmother. When it cries at night a dry breast is given to it, or some coconut milk. If it is fretful and loses condition, it is taken to some distant village where

it has relatives, or from inland villages to the seaside, so that it may regain its normal health and good spirits. (p. 235)

Remarkably, Malinowski seemed not to have noticed that his account is self-contradictory and missed an obvious point with regard to the enforced child extrusion. For if weaning were as spontaneous and non-conflictual as Malinowski assessed it to be, and if it were true that this was because the child “neither wants nor needs the mother’s breast anymore”, there certainly would be no need to separate the child from the mother’s village in order to facilitate the weaning.

### **On rites of initiation and the two analogous extrusions**

The simultaneous loss of the mother’s breast, bed, *and* village in order to facilitate weaning is analogous to a second extrusion from the mother’s village that takes place at puberty in the Trobriand Islands and similar traditional societies. In fact, cross-cultural surveys of these customs demonstrate that where infant-extrusion at weaning is weakly enforced or missing the extrusion at puberty becomes even more indispensable and is more likely to be paired with violent and painful puberty rites of initiation into manhood. (Whiting, Kluckhohn and Anthony, 1958). This finding represents powerful evidence that both types of extrusion and the severe initiation rites in such societies share common functions in relation to managing the boy’s remaining identification and strong libidinal attachment to the oedipal and pre-oedipal mother. It also underscores the positive correlation that exists between the level of violence deemed necessary in such societies to insure the pubertal boy’s identification with his collective fathers (and the limits this imposes upon his sexual and aggressive drives) on the one hand, and the power of his remaining identification with the mother and libidinal attachment to her, on the other hand.

The picture that emerges here, corresponding to the relationship between individual development and collective institutions, supports the more face-valid conclusion made by Spiro that, contrary to Malinowski’s claim, the Oedipus complex not only exists in Trobriand society,

but it remains even more intense and unresolved than is typical in “western” patriarchal European and American societies. [Spiro, 1982, pp. 160-74]

*In the next and final part of this first lecture on the universal Oedipus complex we'll continue with Malinowski's thesis and conclude with a final discussion relating to contemporary formulations.*

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