

Social Explanation of Oedipus Complex: A Psycho-analysis of Human Behaviour

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Abstract

Oedipus complex, originated in the phallic stage of a child out of his/her inclination and an antagonism towards parents, is the root of the whole psychological edifice. Vestige of this complex is visible in the external behaviour of most individuals. This paper explains the nature and development of Oedipus complex. Starting from Sigmund Freud, an attempt has been made to take a different avenue in the interpretation of Oedipus complex. This paper tries to identify the impact of Oedipus complex on external human behaviour with reference to a recent survey conducted by random sampling. This paper delineates four kinds of transformation of the complex, socialised, anti-socialised, partially repressed and abnormally socialised form. Oedipus complex is the origin of all emotional attachment and abhorrence, the paper finally argues.

Keywords: Criminology, Human behaviour, Oedipus Complex, Psychology, Sigmund Freud

INTRODUCTION

Psychology deals with responses to any and every kind of situation that life presents. By responses of behaviour is meant all forms of activities, experiences and adjustment. Human psychology is concerned mainly with activities as perceiving, imagining, feeling, thinking, remembering, and acting (Williams, 1997). However, all such activities of an adult are mostly influenced by the multidimensional factors like economics, politics, social status, customs and consciousness and so on. These have hardly any impact on child psychology. In fact, the infantile life is almost a dark region of all individuals as we cannot remember pros and cons of the experiences observed throughout this period. Even then, none can deny its inevitable impact on the development of adult psychology. Behavioural traits of adult individuals can be better understood if information of their infantile psychological features is available.

FREUDIAN AND NEO-FREUDIAN DISCOURSE

Sigmund Freud, the most leading psycho-analyst, not only focused the subterranean regions of the mind of the children but also stretched prying look for the beginning and origins of the whole aspect of emotional attachment and exposure which is very basic to human nature continuing from the genesis of *homo sapiens*. Freud stated that, 'it seems to be my fate to discover the only obvious: that children have sexual feelings which every nursemaid knows' (Ernest, 1953, p. 299). He theorised sexuality so predominantly encompassing human life that aroused severe criticism. Some critics try to connect it with the multi-generationally confused family constellation of Freud. His father was

twenty years older than his mother and already a grandfather by a grandson from his first marriage when Freud was born. After uncovering the memories from his own childhood, Freud formulated a generalised principle of Oedipus complex. He considered it as 'the immovable foundation stone on which the whole edifice of psychoanalysis is based' (Freud, 1920, p. 51). He derived the term from the myth of Oedipus, a Greek hero, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. He used the term to describe the unconscious feelings of children towards their parents. The tragic play of Sophocles made a deep impression on Freud which persuaded him to formulate the theory, as in a letter once he wrote to one of his fellows named Fliess, 'I have found in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and I now regard it as a universal event of childhood. If that is so, we can understand the riveting power of Oedipus Rex' (Young, 1995, p. 74).

However, the way Freud followed in theorising Oedipus complex and its aftermaths, as per most of the critics, is not acceptable. He was pre-occupied by his childhood experience and demanded this analysis of self-experience as a universal event. One of the most passionate discussions of Freud's life and work arose in 1984 when Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson claimed in his provocative book named 'Suppression of the Seduction Theory' that many of Freud's patients were assaulted sexually in their childhood by adults, but Freud did not analyse the genuineness of the abuse. As a result, his theory concerning Oedipus complex has been critically observed. Most of the criticisms regarding the theory can be classified into five basic categories (Street, 2008):

- i. Method of data collection was very subjective;
- ii. Concepts were poorly operationalised;
- iii. Dogmatic and charismatic personal style was followed;
- iv. Over emphasis was put on sex;
- v. After haunted by personal experience, Freud did everything to establish his theory.

Jung (1912), Horney (1937), Erikson (1950), Sullivan (1953), and Fromm (1959) rejected the theory of Oedipus complex as Freud focused on sexual motivation in explaining the theory. Rather they emphasised on social sources of motivation. In that reality, this paper also concentrates on the development and aftermath of the complex and its interpretation in a social context and it justifies the reason on its own way. The research is based on a survey conducted personally by the author from July 2007 to February 2008 in Bangladesh, the home country of the author. The aim was to scrutinise the ever known social relationships, among which the author has been born and brought up and to examine them under the lance of the Oedipus complex theory in a very societal manner.

NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPLEX

In the beginning the term *Oedipus complex* was applied to both girls and boys (Bhagi, 2000). Later on the term Electra complex was used for the complex in girls. According to Greek legend, a woman named Electra helped plan the murder of her mother. Starting from a sexual foundation, Freudian Oedipus complex rejected the asexual character of human childhood which aroused controversy and serious criticism. In fact, mental disposition of a child, female or male, is asexual in nature, it will take the course in which she/he has been nurtured. Sexuality hardly has any role in shaping mental disposition of a child; rather the family milieu and surroundings of the society are crucial for moulding the psychological disposition of a child. The role of sexuality cannot be denied, but it is

applicable to adult life. A careful look at the stages of development in human life (Figure 1) shows that there are developing interpersonal relationships throughout. In both the oral (1st year) and anal (2nd year) stages, the interaction of the child is very limited, mainly with mother and father. The phallic stage (3 to 6 years) is very important because in it the child becomes aware of fabric social relations, involving people other than parents.

Figure 1: Stages of Development in Human Life

Stage	Age	Radius of significant relations
Oral stage	The first year	Maternal person
Anal stage	The second year	Parental person
Phallic stage	The third year through sixth year	Basic Family
Latency	Sixth year until puberty	Neighbourhood School
Genital stage	Adolescence to adulthood	Sex, competition, cooperation

Source: Hilgard, E.R., Atkinson, R.C. & Atkinson, R.L. (1953) *Introduction to Psychology*, Oxford and IBH, New York, p. 477.

Undoubtedly mother is the first person with whom the child builds up his/her mental attachment and this has tremendous impact on mental build up of every child. However, in the phallic stage, the child discovers a special relationship that the mother and father have with each other, which excludes him/ her. It implants the seeds of inclination in a child for the parent of the opposite sex and antagonism towards the parent of the same sex.

In a patriarchal society, a child, after developing sense, understands that the role of mother and father is different. The child sees the father as playing the role of a breadwinner, his position is dominating, influential and respected in the society. At the same time, the role of mother is that of a housewife. She is always busy with upbringing of children and household matters. A boy understands that he has to emulate the role of father and a girl has to emulate the role of mother. Considering father as always dominating mother, a boy starts to develop antagonistic relationship with father and develops strong emotional attachment with mother. A girl when understands that her mother belongs to her sex and her condition in the society is inferior, she starts to shift her mental attachment from mother to father. As an inevitable consequence, she develops strong emotional attachment with father and antagonistic relationship with mother. This social reality causes the development of Oedipus/Electra complex in boys and girls.

Attitude of parents towards a child is very important. If the parents treat a boy more importantly than a girl, this can cause the development of Electra complex in a girl. The relationship of father and mother is also very crucial for a child. The attitude and reciprocal relationship impact on the mental development of a child. A child, male or female, at the very childhood (3 to 6 years) sees everything through the eyes of mother. Mother's happiness and sorrow touch him/her deeply. The perception of outside people and outside world of a child largely depends on the way mother tries to make him/ her understand the surrounding milieu. During this time, a child also gets impression of father through mother. A child very cautiously notices attitude of mother towards father. The way mother pictures father's personality, that makes a child to incarnate the image of father, accordingly, he/she starts to love or abhor father.

A child develops emotion, liking, disliking and other psychological traits along the line he/she has been nurtured by mother. A child understands that father is the main authority (in most of the cases), power wielding and decision making person of the family. The role and activities of father then develop an idea of power, positive or negative, in a child. If a child sees father to be respectful, gentle and amiable to mother, then the child develops respect and likings for father. Children might develop antagonistic attitude to father if they see father dominates and ill-treats mother. Children can accept it as the typical role of father and condition of mother in the family, broadly women's condition in the society. Girls and boys react to this situation in different ways ultimately causing Oedipus complex in boys and Electra complex in girls. Here, social reality, not sexuality, is playing the role as catalyst.

Male Child

Father's role is important in the case of boys to create this complex. Because of such behaviour of the father, he feels strong inclination towards his mother. The little boy discovers the truth that he belongs to the father's sex and observes the role of father as authoritative. As a rival claimant of father's right over mother, he feels a sense of possession over mother. When these feelings become more and more intense for him; he starts to regard his father as an obstacle and develops an ambivalent relationship with him. It makes stand the son and his father against one another in this early childhood, as we call it Oedipus complex.

Female Child

Mother is the first love object for a girl, too. However, the question arises as to how does a girl shift her inclination from mother to father and how does she transform from a neutral phase to feminine role. In the phallic stage, the little girl understands the superiority of the male sex, predominance of the male sex in every sphere of life and discovers that she belongs to her mother's sex. As her mother represents her own sex, which is not satisfactory and desirable at all, at this stage, by understanding her inferior condition, she starts to develop strong attachment with father. In this way, patriarchal culture and sentiment itself and anti-feminism give both of such kind of hopeless envy, jealousy to the mother, a love for the father, his position, his image, which is known as Electra complex. The patriarchal society with its male dominating feature constitutes the major cause of Oedipus and Electra complex. We are inclined to ponder it as Oedipus culture.

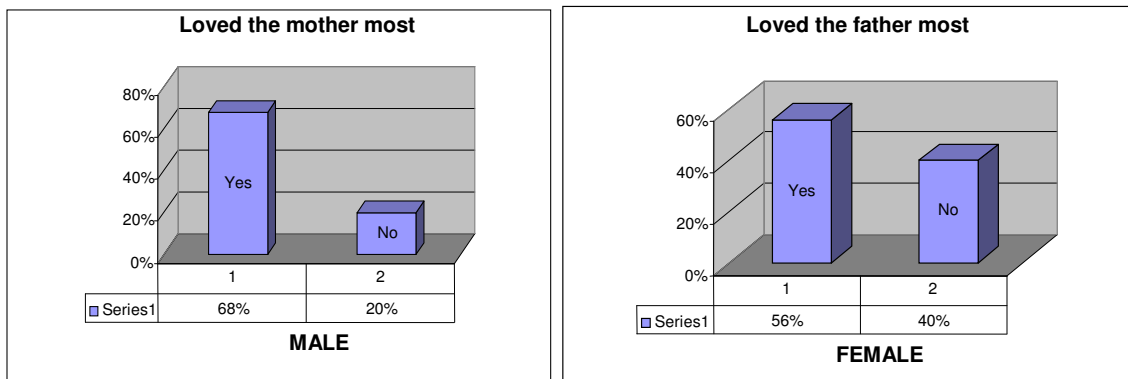
It is very much true in the social scenario of a country like Bangladesh where male is the only earner and decision maker in most of the cases in a family. Now-a-days, females are going out, making their own career and a transition from the traditional patriarchal society is vivid, but the mind set-up of both male and female seem to remain the same. To examine the reality, the author conducted a survey by supplying questionnaires to 250 males and females from different places of the country and scrutinised their responses in order to know how far the theory of Oedipus/Electra complex is reflected there.

A RECENTLY STUDY AND ITS FINDINGS

Oedipus culture has great impact on human behaviour, both female and male. To make a sketch of the impact on external behaviour, an empirical study was made on 125 females and 125 males. In the study (Figure 2), both of the groups were asked whom they loved most in their childhood. 68 percent (85 out of 125) males told that they loved their mothers most, 20 percent answered in the negative and 12 percent did not comment. 56 percent (70 out of 125) females said that they had strong inclination to their fathers, 40 percent answered in the negative and 4 percent did not comment. 8 percent females admitted that they feared their fathers, but nevertheless loved him most.

In the primary stages (oral and anal), mother was the loving image for both sexes of children. In phallic stage, emotions of the male-child become stronger; on the contrary, female-child turns to their father. Children are quite unconscious about the complex but in an adult stage when we asked them to remember or recall their feelings, males gave a clear figure (68 percent-20 percent) while the difference was very low (56 percent-40 percent) in the case of females. From the figure, it is clear that males have strong inclination towards their mothers, but females are confused regarding their emotional attachment with father.

Figure 2: Responses of Participants Regarding Whom They Loved Most in Their Childhood



Continuity of the Complex

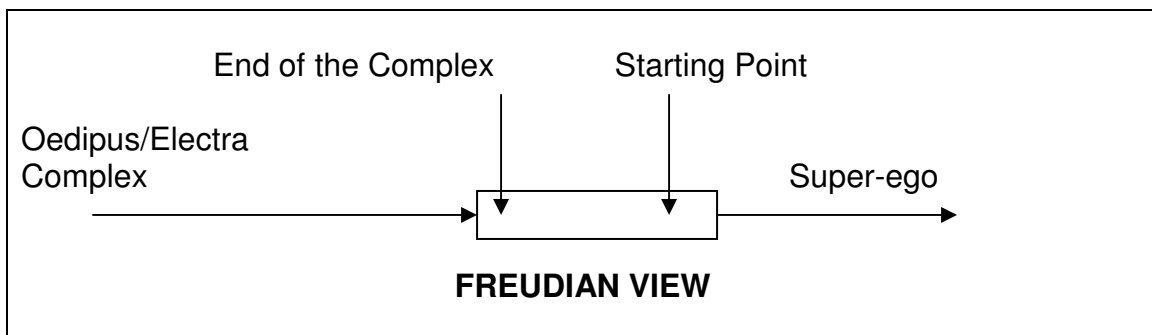
Every new arrival of this planet is faced with the task of mastering the Oedipus and Electra complex. Freud argued that a male-child's incestuous love for his mother is repressed because of the most feared punishment. He fears that the father may ultimately castrate him (Williams, 1997). Freud's argument is weaker in the case of resolving Electra complex. He tried to explain that 'in the absence of fear of castration, girls remain in the complex for an indeterminate length of time' (Williams, 1997, p. 499). Actually, Freud could not give any satisfactory explanation on how the girls resolve Electra complex. He emphasised on parental inhibition to suppress both the complexes. In fact, only fear of losing mother's love here plays a vital role. Both the child (male and female) fear that the mother has the power of withdrawing love and substituting anger, dislike, contempt, etc., instead. Both of them are dependent on the mother for her care and affection and fear of the withdrawal of her love can create anxiety in a girl, so she cannot express exaggerated love towards father. For a girl, the fear of the withdrawal of

mother's love can operate to minimise the Electra complex which Freud failed to clarify sufficiently.

However one must wonder if it is at all possible to come on an actual resolution of the Oedipus/Electra complex. It is that sort of urge that is illegal or anti-social to fulfil but the complex cannot be totally uprooted or destroyed. It takes place into the Id. Id, ego, and super-ego are three parts of the psychic apparatus as defined by Sigmund Freud to explain the structural model of the psyche. These are the three theoretical constructs by which he described the activity and interaction of mental life. According to this model, the uncoordinated instinctual trends are the 'id'; the organised realistic part of the psyche is the 'ego', and the critical and moralising function the 'super-ego' (Snowden, 2006).

However, Freud created confusion with the statement 'Oedipus complex gives rise to the superego' (Freud, 1990, p. 96). It indicates that the superego is developed only by resolution of Oedipus/ Electra complex and the complex is vanished as soon as the superego is developed (Figure 3). It is true that resolution of the complex is one of the ways but in the course of development, 'superego also takes the influences of those who have stepped into the place of parents, educators, teachers and people chosen as ideal models' (Freud, 1990, p. 96). So, superego mainly develops from external power or parental authority while Oedipus/Electra complex is an internal urge.

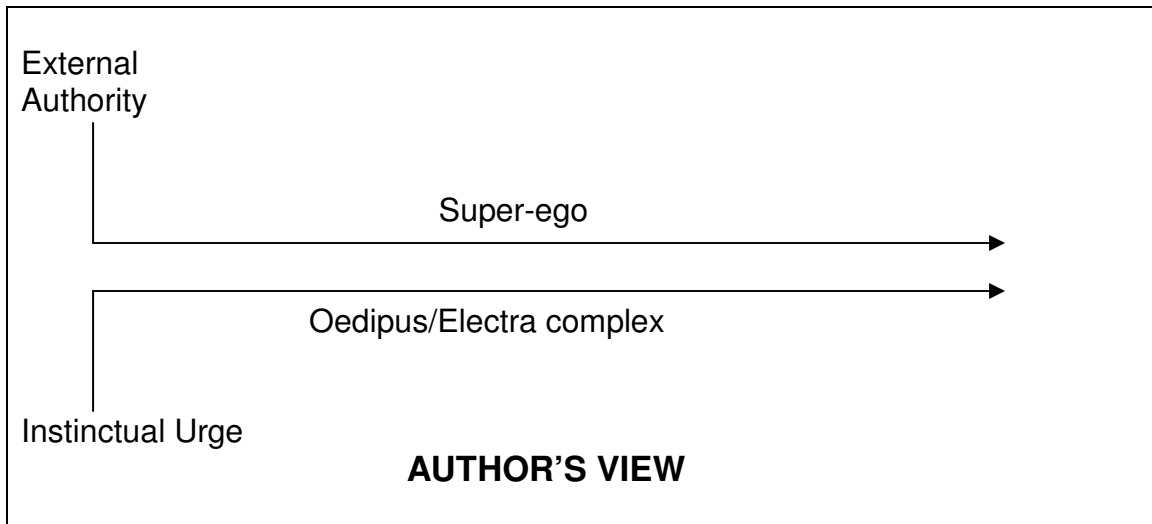
Figure 3: Oedipus Complex and the Development of Superego



Interpretation in Social Context

Though superego takes birth from the coffin of Oedipus complex but the Oedipal situation never ends its operation. Instead, it runs simultaneously with superego (Figure 4).

It is the task of the superego to socialise the complex or repress it for the rest of life. So Oedipus/Electra complex continues throughout the whole life of every adult individual. The development and evolution of this complex and its continuing effect will be expressed through different behaviours in the later part of human life. Four kinds of transformations of Oedipus and Electra complex can be listed. Socialised, anti-socialised, partially repressed and abnormally socialised.

Figure 4: Oedipal Situation and Superego**Socialised Form**

A male child's interest in his mother and a female child's interest in her father take universal form as a man becomes interested in woman and a woman becomes interested in man. Interest not always means sensual love but emotional attachment, jealousy, strong feelings etc. It can be explained by the reaction showed by males/females when they are praised by opposite sex. A female feels more delighted when she is praised by any male, similarly a man feels encouraged when praised by any woman. At the same time, males or females feel jealous when people of same sex are praised before them. This is the expression of socialised form of Oedipus/Electra complex.

During the survey, it was mentioned by 60 percent males (75 out of 125) that they become jealous if another man is praised before him by any female. But if a female is praised before him, only 24 percent men answered that they fell jealous. The result is more prominent in the case of females. 48 percent women (105 out of 125) replied that they become jealous if a girl is praised before her. If "attraction for the opposite sex and jealousy for the same sex" is the key point of Oedipus complex, it is also a complex but in a socialised form. Id is accepted as a spontaneous expression of human nature. But such behaviour is so common that we simply overlook the root of the behaviour. The psychological explanation is that, the complex grown in the early childhood, takes an enduring form in human personality. We took another endeavour to prove that this behaviour is nothing but the socialised form of Oedipus and Electra complex. This time, the touchstone is the choice of life-mates.

The childhood imprinting experiences become fully developed during adolescence. For a man, the most important influence is derived from the feelings about his mother. For a woman, father is the chief imprinting agent. These feelings imprinted during childhood engrave in their mind. 'These are not dead deposits but active constituents of the unconscious, entering into and modifying the structure that is already there. This growth and modification of unconscious is called the *endopsychic process* and the individual is

wholly unconscious of it' (Batia, 1995, p. 374). In the study, 125 men and 125 women were asked what sort of life-partner they expect. 90 males answered they want resemblance with their mother. The percentage is 72. The corresponding figure for woman is 64 percent. They pictured their life partners in the light of their father. 16 percent of males and 32 percent of females replied that they want partners of different caliber or temperament. The outcome of the study indicates that in most of the cases, the attitude, implanted during childhood, governs most individuals in selecting their life partners or guides them in developing any affair with people of opposite sex. This is the socialised form of Oedipus and Electra complex which is being expressed by the bulk of the societal people.

Anti-Socialised Form

'Anti-socialised' means going against the beliefs, values, and views of the society. A person who fails to resolve Oedipus and Electra complex in a socially acceptable way is categorised under this sub-header. The complex faced in the phallic stage becomes tremendous with the coming of age if it is not socialised under the careful guidance of the parents, social circumstances as well as by the superego. He no longer remains a mere child with jealous feelings towards the parents of the same sex but becomes an adult with latent power and potentiality to fulfil his hostility.

In this situation, 'the father would be murdered and the mother raped' (Sutherland & Cressy, 1960, p. 188). The person is aware of his erotic attachment for the parent of the opposite sex and may react in two ways:

Neurotic: The superego dominates and the ego feels guilty for his/her illegal wishes and desires; or

Psychopathic: The id (incestual urge) takes over and he or she decides to fulfil it;

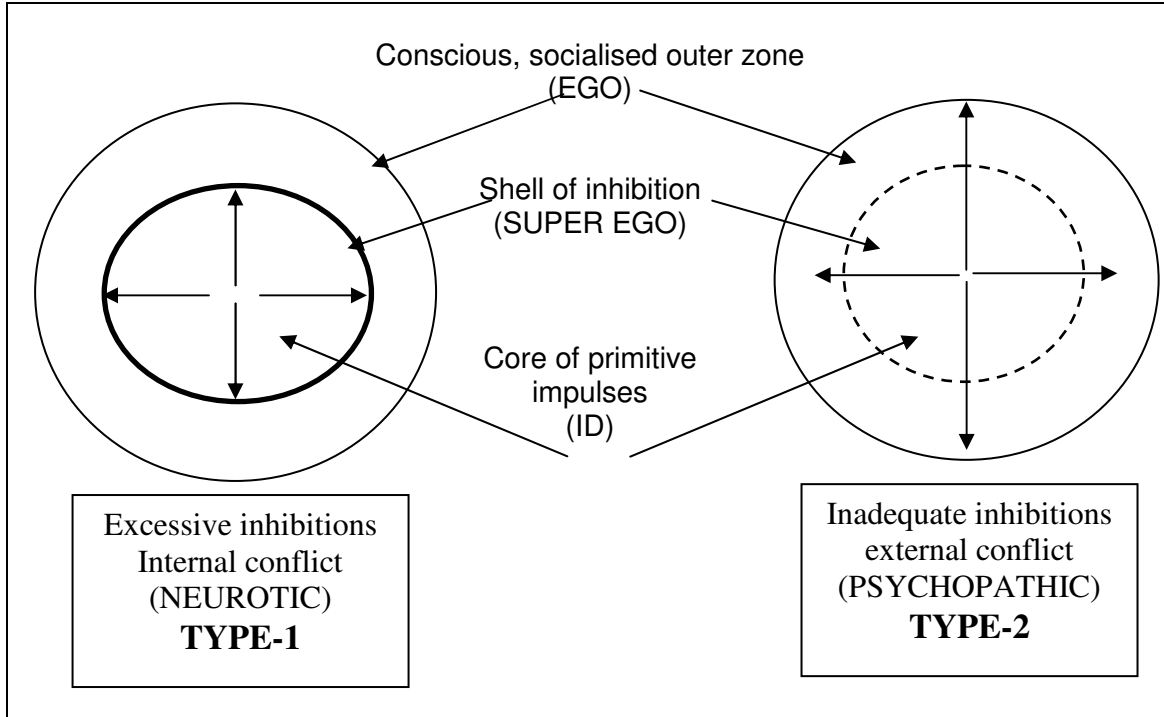
The psychiatrist Richard L. Jenkins has contracted a diagrammatic representation of personality structures that he has observed in child guidance clinics (Figure 5). This personality structures include the neurotic and psychopathic pattern. The diagrams may aid in explaining the psychological processes involved in both the patterns. Type 1, where the shell of super ego is shown in bold circle, pictures the over-aggressive superego observed in a compulsive, anxiety-ridden personality. Because of the strong, dominated super ego, ego of these neurotic patients feels guilty for his/her illegal wishes and desire. Generally, this type of patients becomes very timid, extra-ordinarily shy to mix up with other people and curses him/her for the illegal desire all the time. Type 2, where the shell of super ego is shown in broken lines, displays the lack of adequate inhibition of super ego over the Id as found in the psychopaths. This sort of people exhibits behaviour disorders who 'acts out' his/her problems and commit rape or murder of their parents as mentioned by Sutherland and Cressy (1960).

Partially Repressed Form

Now we shall investigate the surreptitious influence of Oedipus and Electra complex upon unconscious mind. In most of the cases, the complex takes a socialised form to mitigate the urges but it may sometimes, happen that the complex is partially repressed and the person is totally unaware about it. The repressed complex can split his mental process on a sudden rush to the surface in a symbolic way. Sutherland pointed out that

'the symbolic act of killing the father is forging checks on his blank account and unconscious fulfilment of relation with the mother is symbolised by burglarizing a dwelling house' (Sutherland & Cressy, 1960, p. 134).

Figure 5: Personality Structures in Child Guidance Clinics



Source: Jenkins, R.L. & Hewitt, L. (1944) Types of Personality Structure Encountered in Child Guidance Clinics. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 14, 84–94.

During the survey, our endeavour was to sort out the complex in the interaction of social relationship. 28 percent of males admitted that they show temper to the persons having resemblance with their father when they cannot do so with their own father. 36 percent of females confessed that they do the same with ladies having resemblance with their mother. Though the percentage is low and not direct outcome of Oedipus or Electra complex, it indicates that a man with repressed hostility occurred in the phallic stage has a possibility to show it against all persons who resemble his father. He may become a serial killer or may torture them in a symbolic way. Same thing may happen with the females if the Electra complex is partially repressed. The best example of such complex is the relationship of a bride with her mother-in-law in a country like Bangladesh. The bride considers her mother-in-law as a competitor in the family and other socio-economic ingredients stimulate the situation. We have a common view that the generation gap is the main cause of such conflict but unfortunately 68 percent of females replied during the survey that the root of the problem lies in the possessiveness of mother over her son. This results in hostile feelings towards a mother like woman just as the jealousy against the parent of same sex.

Abnormal Socialised Form

When Oedipus/Electra complex has been abnormally socialised in any individual he/she will exhibit behaviour abnormally different from the bulk of the people. A woman, whose Electra complex has taken an abnormally socialised form, will avoid the companion of girls and always seeks close company of boys. She does not hesitate to make intimate relation with married males or a male with age double than hers. Similarly a man whose Oedipus complex has taken an abnormally socialised shape will make indiscriminate relations with lot of females of different ages and will avoid male companion.

CONCLUSION

In the above paper an endeavour has been made to focus on the continuing effects of Oedipus and Electra complex on external human behaviour. This complex originates in the phallic stage of an individual and continues its operation till death. Due to the Freudian interpretation, the term Oedipus complex has become controversial. Freud interpreted Oedipus complex in terms of sexuality; he did not consider that patriarchal social reality was responsible for making females and males to develop Electra and Oedipus complex. Freud identified sexual origin of Oedipus complex so pre-dominantly that he rejected any other alternative interpretation. Over emphasis on sexuality by Freud aroused severe criticisms against his thesis of which some have strong rationale. But the existence of Oedipus/Electra complex cannot be denied, most individuals encounter it throughout the whole life. Social context, not sexuality, plays the vital role for developing this complex in individuals, both males and females. In the first two stages, oral and anal, every child has strong inclination to mother. In Oedipal stage, every child faces a complex; he/she develops liking for the parent of opposite sex and disliking for the parent of same sex. This first love and hate experience takes an everlasting effect on every child unconsciously and opens the door to all other emotional interests. Given the reality of our society and from the outcome of recent survey, a logical conclusion can be drawn that Oedipus complex is the origin of love and hate and it has lifelong impact on the external behaviour of most individuals.

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