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Oedipality and oedipal complexes reconsidered: On the incest taboo as key to the universality of the human condition

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ABSTRACT

Oedipality is generally understood as the individual's journey through eroticized attachments with those performing maternal and paternal functions. This has evoked understandable resistance, and also unnecessary, yet sometimes scholarly, opposition. This paper briefly reviews the voluminous literature on oedipality, focusing on the resistances and objections it has evoked (mostly, but not entirely, from outside the psychoanalytic movement). Three suggestions are presented. First, debates over individual and cultural variations in family arrangements and styles of early caretaking occlude our understanding of the foundational basis of oedipality. Therefore, one should distinguish the metapsychology of "oedipality," as universal and necessary to the formation of the human psyche, from the multifarious "oedipal complexes" that are contingent on variations in early experience. Second, this mandates greater expository emphasis on the individual's processive "encounter" with the incest taboo, and less on the content of childhood relationships. Much evidence from ethnography and structural linguistics supports this. Third, Freud's articulation of oedipality was not just a clinical-empirical finding, but followed from his discovery of free-associative praxis that necessitated the cardinal tenet of resistance-repression. In a foundational sense, the "repression-barrier" should be understood as the intrapsychic inscription of the incest taboo and a key universal feature of our humanity.

KEYWORDS

Oedipality; Oedipal Complexes; Psychoanalytic Theory; Incest Taboo; Repression-barrier; Maternal and Paternal functions

In terms of the scientific progress (and regress) of the discipline of psychoanalysis, it is perhaps regrettable that Sigmund Freud articulated his discoveries about the oedipal constitution of the human condition in terms of the famous legend popularized by Sophocles' dramas (Freud 1900, 1901; Freud and Fliess 1887–1904). This articulation, which succeeded in accommodating both the insights garnered from his "self-analysis" and the need to explain his ideas to an audience educated in the classics, has led to an emphasis within our disciplinary literature on *content* (i.e. the particular *dramatis personae* composing the inner theatre of each individual's oedipal journey), rather than the essential and

universal *processes* and *structures* of oedipality as such. This articulation of his discoveries certainly enabled Freud to underscore, initially for the benefit of Fliess in a letter dated 15 October 1897, how we all “recoil in horror” (or in trenchant denial) at the very idea of our oedipal strivings (Freud and Fliess 1887–1904, p. 252). However, this mode of presentation has led to 13 decades in which oedipality has all too frequently been defined and understood in a rather specific and culturally circumscribed manner, simply because the literature has tended to focus on content. By “content,” I mean the configuration of the family arrangements and caretaking practices that contextualize the child’s development, as well as the particular styles of maternal and paternal functioning. Such issues of content are actually known to be quite variable across cultures. Consequently, this focus has somewhat distracted our thinking away from the dimensions of oedipal processes and structures that are—as will be suggested in the course of this paper—indisputably universal. In short, this expository emphasis has fueled skepticism and resistance toward the discipline of psychoanalysis.

In terms of skepticism, critics have understandably wondered how Freud, as early as 1897, could boldly announce that oedipality is a “universal event,” when he had almost no experience with non-European patients, and had only discovered the distinctive method of psychoanalysis a year or so previously (Freud and Fliess 1887–1904, p. 272). How, asks the skeptic, could Freud possibly know what mothers and fathers are like, or what the child’s experiences of the relations between them is like, across all cultures and historical epochs? After all, his immediate evidence amounted to the treatment of a handful of patients, his own efforts at “self-analysis,” and his—somewhat tendentious—reading of a legendary classic. To anticipate, this paper will suggest that his apparent hubris might have been warranted precisely because Freud already intimated the possibility that oedipality is not just a matter of the content of relations with a particular “mother” or “father,” but that it is the deeply inscribed consequence of the incest taboo.

In terms of resistance, surely every psychoanalyst has listened to countless individuals, who have not had the advantage of full psychoanalytic treatment, declare that they “never had any such feelings for” their mother or father. Freud himself reports such experiences. As is well known, Freud understood this denial—in which attraction is often only manifest as a conscious sense of disinterest or of repulsion—as indirect evidence of the operation of repression and the “repression-barrier.” At least in its inherently sexual dimension, the notion of the oedipal complex is notoriously difficult to explain to those who have not been in psychoanalysis, as has been discussed by several experienced teachers (e.g. Blass 2001). This is not because the general public fails to understand that threesomes are difficult (stimulating rivalries, loyalty conflicts, competing affiliations, jealousies, and the like). Rather, it seems to be a resistance to acknowledging the significance of the erotic feelings and fantasies of childhood, particularly as implicating early caretaking relationships. Again to anticipate, I shall suggest that this is in turn a resistance to the recognition of the formative significance of each child’s “encounter” with the—universal but culturally varied—taboo against incest (Freud 1925b, 1925b).

As is well known, these sources of resistance also occur within our profession. The history of “psychoanalysis” in the twentieth century is replete with tendencies both to focus on the descriptive rather than the repressed unconscious and to depreciate the significance of oedipality (and sexuality) in favour of an almost singular focus on primary attachments and the construction of the “self.” These tendencies have flourished,

despite Freud's clear specification that the doctrines of resistance-repression and of oedipality are two of the four definitional coordinates of his discipline (Barratt 2013), along with his unambiguous insistence that "anyone who cannot accept these tenets should not call themselves a psychoanalyst" (Freud 1923a, GW p. 223, SE p. 247, my translation). Indeed, resistance to oedipality, even within the psychoanalytic movement, has persisted despite Freud's consistent and unequivocal assertion that it is "of utmost significance for the final design of our erotic love-life," and that "an appreciation of sexuality and oedipality" are not only two of the indispensable coordinates of psychoanalysis, but are foundational to its theorization of our humanity (Freud 1923a, GW p. 221–223, SE p. 245–247, my translation). It is not that we are obliged to believe everything that Freud pronounced, but if oedipality and repression are not taken as central to the discipline of psychoanalysis, then sound reasons for this depreciation should be articulated. As will be clear in the course of this paper, my judgement is that there is no sound rationale for this depreciation, and indeed I shall try to elucidate reasons why Freud should be believed on these particular issues.

This paper proposes a recalibration of our understanding of oedipality. It suggests that we should distinguish—for the benefit of both the public and the academy, if not so much for our own—"oedipal complexes" from "oedipality." While everyone may well have some sort of oedipal complex (although this is open to challenge), such complexes are multifarious, highly contingent on individual and cultural variations in familial arrangements and practices, as well as styles of early caretaking (among other factors). They are perhaps so variable as to have made their general conceptualization unconvincing (that is, open to entrenched resistance and often specious opposition). Oedipality, however, is an underlying necessity for the formation of the human psyche. Every toddler or young child has to negotiate the incest taboo, even if it is culturally and individually variable in its performance. So it is perhaps on this factor that the expository emphasis of our disciplinary literature should focus. The implication is not only that the incest taboo is, in some form, a universal feature of human functioning (for which contemporary ethnography offers evidence), but, as I hope to suggest, that the processes of repression and what Freud called the "repression-barrier" are also key features of the universality of the human condition.

It must be noted that this recalibration of the emphasis of our understanding of oedipality does not in any way diminish the significance of "mothers" and "fathers" in the constitution of the child's psychic development (although I will suggest that our literature might be empowered if we considered the influence of maternal and paternal functions, rather than the *dramatis personae* that are the functionaries). However, what it accomplishes is our ability to consider the universal features of oedipality, and, thus, to discuss more cogently the considerable variations within and between cultures. In short, it enables us to defend our discoveries, across the spectrum of the human condition. Before engaging this perspective further, some brief comments on the history of our thinking about oedipality seem appropriate.

Thinking about oedipality in the wake of Freud

Today even a cursory review of the sizeable and yet strangely heterogeneous corpus of writings about oedipality, accumulating over the past century, suggests that the essential processes and structures have never been clearly differentiated from that which might be

culturally or historically adventitious (e.g. Bollack 1995; Covitz 1997; Fear 2016; Girard 1965–1985; Goux 1993; Haute and Geyskens 2012; Kovacevic 2007; Kulish and Holtzman 2008; Lacan 1969–1970; Moncayo 2012; Mullahy 1948; Nasio 2005; Pederson 2015; Perelberg 2015; Pollock and Ross 1988; Rudnytsky 1987; Schmiedel 2004; Stein 1984; Young 2001; Zepf et al. 2015). In this paper, I propose criteria for this crucially significant differentiation. This is a differentiation made more urgent by the current expansion of opportunities for psychoanalysis beyond its Euro-American centres (notably in Africa and all across Asia). Focused on this purpose, no comprehensive review of the voluminous literature on this topic will be attempted, nor any assessment of all the potentially valuable (to say nothing of the less than valuable) contributions that have been made, except to mention that these can perhaps be usefully categorized into three sets.

First, there are psychoanalytic contributions that actually might, to a greater or lesser degree, entail substantive modifications to our thinking about oedipality. Landmark examples can be found, notably in the writings of Rank (1924), Klein (1928, 1945), and Bion (1962–1970). The contributions of Bollas (1993), Britton, Feldman, and O’Shaughnessy (1990), Parsons (2000, 2014), and others have also been particularly influential in the Anglophone world and elsewhere.

Then there are psychoanalytic contributions that describe potentially important complexes that allegedly diverge from oedipality. However, in many cases this “divergence” is actually based on misunderstandings caused by a focus on the quality of the characters involved (i.e. issues of content and storyline) rather than the essential processes and structures of the complex. Leading examples of such tendencies would be those of Jung’s (1912–1913) Electra Complex (cf, H.C. Freud 1997), Kosawa’s (1931/1954) Ajasé Complex, Raglan’s (1933) Jocasta Complex (cf, Besdine 1968–1969, 1971), Devereaux’s (1953) Laius Complex (cf, Le Guen 1974a, 1974b), Ahsen’s (1984) Rhea Complex, and Gu’s (2006) Filial Piety Complex.

Finally, there are the contributions of those eminent psychoanalysts who, in discussing severe psychopathology, suggest the irrelevance of a focus on oedipality with such patients and almost seem to be on the brink of implying that there might be individuals who do not have an oedipal complex of any notable significance. Highly influential psychoanalysts who are often understood (or misunderstood) in this manner would include Balint (1956, 1967), Winnicott (1954, 1965), and Kohut (1971, 1977). For reasons to be adumbrated, I am strongly opposed to the idea that there can be a psyche without oedipality (but space will not allow an adequate discussion in this paper of the relevance of this complexity in psychotic patients).

It should be noted that there are also psychoanalysts who offer a different sort of critique, in terms of the way in which our disciplinary focus on oedipality may cause us to valorize normativity (i.e. ideologically steeped notions of “normality”). Guattari is perhaps the most celebrated practitioner associated with this standpoint (Deleuze and Guattari 1972, 1980). The profoundly significant literature of feminist criticism of psychoanalytic ideas about oedipality would also fall into this grouping (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993, 1997, 2004; Chodorow 1978; Dinnerstein 1987; Fuss 1990; Gallop 1982; Grosz 1994; Irigaray 1974, 1977, 1984; Mitchell 1974, 1983; Schmiedel 2004).

Additionally, since the 1950s, there has been a rather widespread tendency to downgrade the significance of oedipality in favour of a focus on the developmental significance of the primary caretaking relationship, which has been conspicuous with the rise of

attachment studies from Bowlby (1958) onwards. One aspect of the value of this focus is that it is now difficult for a critic to deny Freud's aphorisms that the "ego organization" or "the 'I' is above all bodily" (*das Ich ist vor allem ein körperliches*, Freud 1923b, GW p. 253, SE p. 26, my translation), or that a major significance of the primary caretaking relationship is as the "exemplar" or "prototype of every later love-relation" (Freud 1905a, GW p. 123, SE p. 222, my translation). However, a further aphorism that aligns with the latter assertion, "the discovery of an object is actually a rediscovery" (*die Objektfindung ist eigentlich eine Wiederfindung*), has often led commentators to overlook the highly significant processes by which the traces and representations of the primary object are multiply modified in the course of both the individual's induction into the domain of representational language and his or her ongoing passage through oedipality (I will elaborate on this later). The literature of attachment research all too frequently seems to imply that little matters in the formation of the individual psyche other than the quality of the primary relationship.

The contributions of transcultural research

As is well known, there is a longstanding history of debate over the extent to which Freud's ideas can be extrapolated across cultures. Almost as soon as Bose had published his 1920 doctoral thesis on repression, he entered into a lively dialogue with Freud that lasted 17 years. Much of this correspondence concerned possible differences in oedipal processes between European and South Asian patients, particularly with respect to "castration anxiety," and the boy's wish or fear of being feminized (Bose 1921–1937; Obeyesekere 1990; Ramana 1964; Vaidyanathan and Kripal 1999). Most instructively, this is Freud's primary confrontation with what has been called the "Indian Agenda" (Kapila 2007), which comprises an opposition to the unreflective extrapolation and imposition of Eurocentric ways of thinking (Barratt 2018a). Malinowski's (1922, 1927) research with the Trobriand Islanders of the Southwest Pacific also claimed to challenge Freudian theory by demonstrating the significance of familial arrangements different from those of the nuclear family that is supposedly traditional, or at least culturally ordained, in Europe. Malinowski's challenge has been much debated and somewhat refuted (Smadja 2017; Spiro 1982). There has followed a weighty history of anthropological debate over the specifics of Freud's formulations, including not only contributions from ethnography (e.g. Devereux 1978; Nandy 1995; Obeyesekere 1990; Róheim 1943; Scubla 2014), but also from researches in myth and folklore (e.g. Edmunds and Dundes 1983; Johnson and Price-Williams 1996; Rank 1909, 1912; Róheim 1940–1953).

It was in such a context that Sachs (1937/1947) wrote about the similarities between the conflicts of his patient, a down-and-out Shona *nganga* (a sangoma or shaman, practicing divination and herbalism, who had migrated from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg) and those of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (cf, Rose 1998). Other significant (and not so significant) work on oedipality in Africa was published in the following decades (e.g. Bertoldi 1998; Mannoni 1950, 1968; Morgenthaler and Parin 1964; Ortigues and Ortigues 1984).

My contention here is that, in large measure, these debates over oedipality in cultural contexts outside the North Atlantic and South American orbit have been tangential to the fundamental issues. Rather than pinpointing the essential processes and structures of oedipality, the discussion has focused on the content of particular familial functions and the style of parenting—that is, the quality of the particular *dramatis personae* involved.

The latter determine the genesis of the many versions of oedipal complex that have been documented clinically. However, a focus on these contributions, despite their clinical merit, has obfuscated the essential process and structure of oedipality as such. All this implies that a more sophisticated definition of oedipality is still urgently needed. That is, a redefinition that differentiates the notion of oedipality from the oedipal conflicts and complexes that it engenders, and specifically one that elevates our understanding of oedipality above the issues of cultural and individual variability in caretaking arrangements, practices, and styles.

Variability in maternal and paternal functions

I suggest that, in the past 13 centuries, it has been all too easy for the opponents of psychoanalysis—and indeed for all those who resist acknowledging the significance of oedipality—to focus debate on cultural variations that do not conform to Freud's apparent assumption that every child has a "mother" and a "father" with whom the "mother" (or her proxies) is heterosexually intimate. That culturally different forms of familial arrangement (for example, absence of the biological father or performance of paternal functions by a man who is not sexually active with the birth mother) somehow *disprove* the notion of oedipality is a position that clearly misses the point in some fundamental sense. It is important to acknowledge that the *complexes* arising from oedipality are many and varied across and within cultures. Thus, there is an urgency to define and clarify the sense in which oedipality has deeper and more universal features that are not swayed by the variations between and within cultures in early caretaking arrangements and in the considerable variability between the relations of *women/feminine* and *men/masculine* to which the child is exposed. The urgency is also made more acute by the fact that, even within the Euro-American cultures that Freud knew well, such social arrangements are today changing dramatically.

Here my reference is not only to the diversification and liberalization of familial arrangements, such as same-sex partnering, "out" bisexuality, transgendered parenting, opportunities for cross-racial adoption, and so forth (cf, Ferguson 2010; Hicks 2011; Skolnick and Skolnick 2013; White, Klein, and Martin 2014; Zinn, Eitzen, and Wells 2010), but also the expansion of reproductive technologies, including contraceptive availability, *in vitro* fertilization, extra-uterine gestation and surrogacy (cf, Ansermet 2017; Gentile 2015; Mann 2014; Virani 2016). These developments highlight the problem of confusing crucial developmental functions (maternal and paternal) with the functionary.

For example, we are surely now compelled to question: Does the maternal function have to be performed by the actual biological mother? To what extent can it even be performed by a man? Does the paternal function have to involve a single individual who is "father?" To what extent can it be performed by a number of individuals, or even by women? These questions have yet to preoccupy our literature sufficiently. I am convinced that the task of discriminating universal from culturally contingent features of oedipality (i.e. the diversity of complexes arising from oedipality) would have been empowered if our literature were to have de-emphasized the role of the specific "mother" and "father." Much skepticism would thereby be dispelled. This may initially seem to be an unrealistic suggestion, but I suggest that it is necessary, because it seems evident that the customary ways of thinking about oedipal conflicts—focusing on the functionary rather than the function

—have actually hindered our own appreciation of some of the deeper features of oedipality. It is beyond the scope of these notes to discuss in any elaborated detail what maternal functions are (and to what extent could they be performed by a man) or what paternal functions are (and to what extent they could be performed by a woman), but I am suggesting that our appreciation of the essentials of oedipality would have been empowered if our literature had, from the start, discussed these issues as functions that are not necessarily tied to the role of a particular “mother” or a particular “father.” Then psychoanalysis could have been identified with an insistence that these functions are different and that the performance of both is prerequisite to the child’s inevitable oedipality.

Without entering into details, there is compelling literature suggesting that the maternal functions required by the child, *as a prelinguistic infant*, include factors such as sustenance, erotic-nurture, and separation-individuation. These have aptly been called the “passions of motherhood” (Balsam 2012, 2014), which should not be taken to imply that they necessarily have to be performed by the birth mother, or even perhaps by a natal woman. By offering such a blunt categorization, I am *not* intending to overlook, as so many of those involved in infancy research have, the profound importance of Laplanche’s insight that the most crucially formative events of the pre linguistic years are probably not readily observable because they are *enigmatic messages*. Following a line of theorizing developed by Kristeva (1974, 1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1980, 2011/2014), these might be thought of as signs (that is, a mode of semiosis that is proto-linguistic and not fully accommodated within the symbolic order). They are messages imposed upon the pre linguistic child, bombarding and positioning him or her in a nexus of meaningfulness that is, for the child, libidinally formative, but inherently incomprehensible in the sense that such messages are unrepresentable in any sort of linguistically-structured form (Quindeau 2013). At least in outline, the significance of this for our understanding of oedipality has been well expounded by Laplanche (1970, 1981, 1987, 1992, 1992–1993, 1999, 2000–2006, 2006) and Widlöcher (2001).

The suggestion here is that, in relation to oedipality, the paternal function is principally two-fold. One dimension is the provision of an “other” who is “other-than-the-(m)other,” and it seems possible that such a function is necessarily tied to the infant-toddler’s induction into language and the capacity for triangulated cognition (cf, Eizirik 2015; Stoloff 2007). This is not to suggest that, in a descriptive sense, “fathering” the pre linguistic infant is unimportant for the quality of the child’s life. On this point there is an accumulation of clinical-empirical evidence (e.g. Davies and Eagle 2013; Diamond 1986, 1998; Dumas 1997; Etchegoyen and Trowell 2001; Zoja 2001). Rather, what is implied is that, in our literature, there has been a pervasive difficulty in distinguishing—perhaps even a general, albeit understandable, failure to distinguish—the influence of actual “father figures” from the paternal function of the “symbolic father” (Barratt 2015a, 2015c, 2016a). This is a complex issue that bears upon another dimension of the paternal, but one that is surely essential to understand, which is how the oedipalized structuring of psychic life is universal. Namely, there is, in the child’s mind, the function of being the one who says *No!* to his or her ongoing access to the maternal body. I will return to this shortly, because there is an accumulation of clinical evidence in terms of this “no” (which, by 1923, Freud understood as the genesis of the superego) that if children do not directly experience a prohibitory threat (“if you do that, I will inflict a dire bodily punishment upon you”), for example because of the absence of any actual father figures, they

will project this threat onto someone, actual or fantasized. The literature on the superego testifies that it can develop as harshly in circumstances that appear licentious as in those that are manifestly strict and punitive.

With hindsight, our discipline would have been spared much of the conflicts it has had with scholars from other disciplines if the term “oedipality” had been used as the general and generalizable notion referring to the universal processes in which the child “encounters”—for want of a better term—the incest taboo. Later, I will suggest that there may be virtue to the Lacanian argument that this “encounter” is tied to the child’s induction into a linguistic system that permits not only triangulated cognition (that gives the prohibition “no” a new sense of consequence), but also the “I” of self-reflectivity. If oedipality is defined this way, then the term “complexes” could have been reserved for the consequent (and narrower) issue of all the struggles that children undergo negotiating their diverse and various attachments to, and identifications with, maternal and paternal figures. Considered in this way, the child’s struggle with the apparent binarisms of sex-gender (including gender role and sexuality) and of generation (including the disparities of power, prestige, privilege, property, and protection) can be seen as derived from the induction into language with its crucial capacity to convey incest prohibition in the form of triangulated representations and the *No!* issued by whoever (in actuality or in fantasy) performs the paternal function in the child’s mind. Later, some aspects of the justification for this approach will be further mentioned, but, before that, I want to propose a definition of oedipality.

(Re)defining the discovery of oedipality

Surely none of the opponents of psychoanalysis can deny how significant it is for children that they “encounter” the prohibition of the incest taboo? I will continue to write of an “encounter,” even though, as I will indicate shortly, there may be problems with it. The connection between the infant and the primary caretakers is nothing if not sensual. The maternal nurturance that the child requires is erotic (gazing, caressing, feeding, bathing, rocking, and so forth). However, the opponents of psychoanalysis have traditionally contested the notion that infants and toddlers are “sexual” because they wish mistakenly to restrict the notion of sexuality to post-pubertal genital activities. In an important sense, this is precisely the salient issue. Children have an intense and ubiquitously erotic bond with their early caretakers, but later “discover” that certain sorts of erotic activities are profoundly forbidden in relation to the very individuals with whom they are most attached. Paradoxically, the very reason that the opponents of psychoanalysis have cavilled at our theories of childhood sexuality is the point that, in a serious sense, actually proves the significance of oedipality. Oedipality is, in an essential manner, the process by which the child comes to accommodate to the impossibility—the unrealizable or forbidden nature—of genital desires being expressed incestuously. That is, specifically, forbidden in the context of the maternal relationship within which all sorts of other erotic gratifications have been permitted and indeed indulged. Psychoanalysts well know how this specific taboo becomes generalized into a substantial range of forbidden impulses that most individuals harbour internally (e.g. in the formation of the “superego”).

It is surely of profound significance that all such human cultures feature the stricture of incest taboos (all such cultures are also distinguished by language as what Lacanians call a

“symbolic register,” which is a matter to be discussed later). Even if the performative interpretation of taboos is, within certain limits, quite culturally variable (penile–vaginal contact between first cousins is notable in this respect), the ethnographic evidence is unequivocal as to the universality of this prohibition at its most fundamental level (e.g. Arens 1986; Brown 1991; De Young 1985; Durkheim 1898; Rank 1912; Turner and Maryanski 2005; Wolf and Durham 2005). We know unequivocally that, in no human culture can you—without inevitable and irreparable damage to the basic structure of one’s psychic reality—have genital intercourse with those by whom you were procreated or raised. This applies foremost to “she” who performed the maternal functions and then also—as if secondarily—to “he” who performed the paternal functions. Moreover, we also know that this taboo does not only apply to those with whom we have genetic connections, in as much as it pertains to those who raised the child, even if they are not the biological parents. Westermarck’s (1891) studies demonstrated this point, quite convincingly and have not been seriously refuted.

Freud clearly understood the significance of what he called the “incest barrier” (Freud 1900, 1905b). However, it is also clear that he wrestled to understand the origin of this profound and universal prohibition. For example, in 1924, Freud suggested, with a tone that suggested a sense of unease, that he had “deduced the incest barrier from the prehistory of the human family” such that the “current father”—and we might modify this to whomever holds the paternal function of delivering the prohibition—becomes “the real obstacle that erects incest barriers” in each “new individual” (Freud and Abraham 1907–1925a, pp. 479–483), and it is notable in this passage that the paternal function is understood not as the origination of the incest barrier, but rather of its concrete representation or delivery.

A century later, we still do not know precisely how the incest barrier is transmitted. However, although Freud himself dabbled with this explanation (e.g. Freud 1912), it seems clear that the transmission of the prohibition is neither as simple nor as concrete as the impact of a menacing father figure, who claims all the women as his property and threatens genital mutilation or death to any rivals. Obviously, there are such paternal functionaries, but I do not think it is our general experience as practicing psychoanalysts that all fathers (including absent ones) actually threaten to mutilate the genitals of their sons, if the latter were to be aroused in the presence of “his woman” (or women). However, clinical-empirical evidence suggests that many if not all boys *fantasize* such threats coming from “he” who performs paternal functions, and that many if not all girls *fantasize* that they have already been, or should be, punished for their incestuous longings. Moreover, the evidence suggests that there is little or no remission of the taboo or of the associated “castration anxiety” when there is no father figure apparent in the child’s life. That is, the paternal function of the actual or imagined “delivery” of the taboo can operate even in the apparent absence of a father figure.

Against the simplistic explanation of a father figure who actually delivers manifest threats and punishments, many claim that the origin of this taboo is a sort of biological imperative, transmitted behaviourally in the ethological manner of a genetically encoded modal action pattern—the “fixed action patterns” which have an “innate releaser mechanism” as described by Tinbergen (1951), von Frisch (1974), Lorenz (1982) and their many successors in the fields of behavioural genetics and ethology. Others, notably those influenced by Lacanian thinking, suggest that the taboo is somehow inherent in the

structuring of language. That is, language itself conveys, as it were, this paternal function—at least to some degree or in some fundamental sense. This suggestion is not incompatible with the proposal that the taboo is genetically encoded, and it is plausible insofar as the prohibitory *No!* certainly requires the capacity for triangulated cognition in order to be understandable (*Y* issues a prohibition against the subject engaging in certain ways with *X*, a third party). This triangulated cognitive capacity seems to be associated with, or determined by, the toddler's entrance as a reflective subject, an "I" within the linguistic system. Although such matters are controversial, many evolutionary anthropologists currently estimate that, around the late Pliocene or early Pleistocene era, hominid cultures emerged in the way that involved a threefold concurrent emergence of social fatherhood (i.e. the involvement of males in "family life" beyond conception) and systems of symbolic communication (including rituals and myth-making, especially around death), along with the elaboration of the incest taboo (cf, Tattersall 1998, 2012; Wilson 1983, 1991). Such a co-emergence indeed suggests the strongly triune association between the taboo against incest, language as the capacity for symbolic representation, and the predominantly patriarchal organizations that ubiquitously characterizes post-Pleistocene social arrangements in all known human cultures (Bachofen's ideas, propounded as long ago as 1861, about matriarchy preceding patriarchy seem to be given little credence by most contemporary anthropologists, although there are indeed cultures in which women are politically powerful, as well as some that are matrilineal and polyandrous).

In whatever way one conceptualizes the universal origination of the incest taboo, the prohibition is clearly a central aspect of every human's oedipality, and the experience of its delivery is a crucial dimension of the paternal function in the child's life (even though this delivery does not need to take the punitive or retaliatory form of explicit threats to kill or mutilate). I am suggesting that, even if attributed to, or delivered by, a woman, the *No!*, the harsh reality of prohibition, is a paternal function. Two further issues about the incest taboo deserve consideration. One involves the extent to which it is bound to language as a "symbolic register." The other concerns the possible connection between the incest taboo and the intrapsychic processes of repression.

Notes on the so-called symbolic register

The consensus of anthropologists is that all cultures of *Homo sapiens* have had language that enables—determines or is determined by the possibility of—cognitive consideration of triangulated relations. That is, the representation of ternary or "second-order" configurations (Berwick and Chomsky 2016; Fitch 2010; Jackendoff 2003; Nunn 2011). It is possible that *Homo erectus* also had such capacities, but probably not the *Australopithecus* or *Paranthropos* species. In most discussions of the universal features of the human condition, this capacity for symbolizing (i.e. involving triangulated, ternary, or second-order relations) is prominent.

As an appreciative critic of Lacanian views, I am not going to reiterate here my arguments for and against Lacan's "take" on psychoanalysis (Barratt 1984/2016, 1993/2016, in press). As is well known in psychoanalytic circles, what Lacan (1953, 1954–1955, 1966) called the "symbolic register" is the system of linguistically-structured representation. So here, without much elaboration or argumentation, I will simply suggest three ways in which it seems plausible that the incest taboo not only requires such a system

for its delivery, but also is complexly inherent to its structuring. “Language”—at least as examined in structural linguistics—would seem to have three features profoundly relevant to the establishment of oedipality.

First, as a network of signifiers governed by rules and regulations (of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics), language intrinsically facilitates triangulated thinking. The available research on cognition in infancy demonstrates quite clearly how babies make rudimentary distinctions between “me” and “other” in their first year, and before the end of the first year they become able to distinguish their main “other” (i.e. the primary caretaker) from different others (e.g. Banaji and Gelman 2014; Joseph 2011; Oakes et al. 2010; Rakison and Oakes 2003; Rochat 2014). This is often referred to as the discrimination of a third-term, which is convincingly documented by studies of separation anxiety, as well as other empirical evidence. In our literature today, it has become quite fashionable to theorize the significance of the “third” or “third-term” (e.g. Ogden 1977, 1993). However, the ability to discriminate “thirds” is not equivalent to triangulated thinking, which requires that the subject not only can think about one “other” and “other others,” but also about the relation between an “other” and “other others.” Thus, triangulated thinking is more than the capacity to cognize a third-term (a *Y* as well as an *X*). In the context of oedipality, this is the power to think about a relation from which the child is excluded (the relationship between *Y* and *X*), precipitating not only experiences and fantasies that we call those of the “primal scene” (which are varyingly educative and/or disturbing), but also all the challenges about conflicting attachments and identifications that we know clinically to be the warp and woof of oedipal complexes. The suggestion here—strongly supported by contemporary linguistics and by much experimental cognitive psychology—is that this capacity for triangulation is either dependent on or emerges concomitant with the child’s induction as a subject into the system of linguistically-structured representationality. That is, a “language,” whether German, Romanian, Korean, or Isizulu.

I realize this claim is not entirely uncontested. Notably, there are Kleinians who attribute quite advanced—triangulating—cognitive capacities to the infant (cf. Barratt 2017b). I also anticipate that the claim might also be disputed by some sophisticated (non-Kleinian) psychoanalysts such as Wurmser, who seems to allude to jealousy occurring in primitive dyadic contexts (e.g. Wurmser and Jaruss 2008). However, the proposition that triangulated cognition emerges with linguistically-structured representationality seems to be endorsed by most relevant empirical (albeit non-psychoanalytic) research. In this respect, there seems to be a forceful plausibility to the proposition that oedipality necessitates a capacity for triangulated cognition, and that this is probably dependent on linguistically-structured representationality.

Second, the child’s capacity to “encounter” a symbolically inscribed prohibition also depends on triangulated cognition, which language facilitates. Recall again how the paternal function of *No!*—if it is to be accommodated and assimilated by the toddler—requires a formula in which “he” issues a prohibition against the subject engaging with “she” in the very ways “he” himself does. Thus, the symbolic prerequisites of the child’s accommodation to and assimilation of the incest taboo seem evident. That my hand recoils if it were to touch a cinder from the fire does not seem to require linguistically-structured representationality or anything symbolic. That my hand recoils if it were inadvertently to touch my mother’s breast (given that I am now an oedipally constituted adult) intrinsically requires the triangulating capacity endowed by language. This is, of course,

central to the way in which we understand oedipality, particularly in relation to the set of “internalizations”—which may not be just that—called the “superego.” As mentioned previously, the incest prohibition is probably not as simple as the internalization of explicit injunctions against certain sorts of incestuous contact (imagine a caretaker saying, gently or not so gently, to a young child something like “children and parents don’t touch each other like that”). This is why I write with significant qualification of an “encounter” with this taboo, because the experience of an interaction, an “encounter,” in which a father figure actually threatens the child, may not be necessary at all. As is suggested here, there are substantial reasons to believe that the taboo is far stronger, and more deeply encoded, than could likely be communicated by an explicit inter-generational articulation. If indeed the prohibition is tied to language (or if it were to be found to be genetically encoded, like a modal action pattern with an innate releaser mechanism), then certain aspects of our prevailing theories of the formation of the superego will need theoretical revision.

Third, given the organization of the symbolic register as a network of signifiers governed by a law and order that is mostly recondite, languages are not only organized in terms of triangulated relations with the capacity for a symbolic *No!*, but are centripetally hierarchized in relation to any two particular signifiers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate either the proposition of the inherent “phallogocentricity” of language (Lacan 1966) or that of the inherent “logocentricity” or “phallogocentricity” of every text’s “making sense” (cf, Derrida 1967a, 1967b, 1967c, 1972, 1975, 1995, 1996). However, such insights—while perhaps unsusceptible to proof in any empirical sense—might help us illuminate Freud’s (1912) insistence *both* that for all of us there is always an abstract (or “dead”) Symbolic Father in addition to whatever actual “fathers” we may experience (and there are, for each of us, almost always multiple performers of the paternal function), *and* consequently that an absent father can be more powerful than the living (cf, Kalinich and Taylor 2009).

Finally, it must be added that, if indeed oedipality is tied to the toddler’s induction as a subject within a linguistically-structured system of representationality—a subject that appears to have “acquired” the use of language—there may be profoundly important implications for our understanding of the way in which oedipality structures *all* psychic life (and not just that which occurs after the developmental benchmark that psychologists call “language acquisition”). This concerns the non-linear “pluritemporality” of psychic life and, specifically, the impact of *Nachträglichkeit* or “afterwardsness” (Birksted-Breen 2003; Green 2000a, 2002; Lacan 1953–1954, 1966; Laplanche 1970, 1987, 1992, 1992–1993, 2000–2006, 2006; Laplanche and Pontalis 1968; Scarfone 2006–2014). The notion points to ubiquitous processes in which prior experiences are assimilated to modes of representation only available at a chronologically later time. When Freud wrote to Fliess in 1896 that the traces of lived-experience “are subjected from time to time to a *re-arrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances, to a *re-transcription*” (Freud and Fliess 1887–1904, p. 206), he opened a vision of the multiple time (that I am calling the “pluritemporality”) of the psyche as running in ripples, loops, and eddies (Barratt 1993/2016, 2013, 2016b). That is, psychic life is not only governed by the equitable sequentiality of clocktime ($t_1 \dots t_2 \dots t_3 \dots$) or the successional law of narratological time (*beginning/middle/end*). Rather this temporal law and order is disrupted by the anarchic movement of “desire” that is repressed (Barratt 2013, 2015b, 2016b, 2018b; Quindeau 2013). This can be

considered as the way in which repressed thing-presentations, as the embodied traces of lived-experience, impact the logical and rhetorical law and order of the representational world. This is a particular interpretation of Freud's (1915b) notion of "thing-presentations" that is articulated by Green (1999, p. 46), when he argued that "in the preconscious you have words and thoughts, but in the unconscious you are not supposed to have words and thoughts, you only have thing-presentations" (cf, Barratt 2017a).

Freud can be read as effectively suggesting that all pre-linguistically encoded experience could be, or perhaps might have to be, re-transcribed following the child's induction into linguistically-structured representationality. The rather dramatic implication of this proposal is that lived-experience prior to the child's induction into language can only be remembered in the form that it has been translated subsequently—transcribed into the oedipal modality of linguistically-structured representationality. Freud, thereby, opens us to the thesis that *there is no conscious recollection of pre-oedipal experience in the form that it occurred*. As is well known, Brenner (2002, p. 413) took this to mean that there is

no reason to doubt the significance of what happens in the earliest years, but the evidence available to us at present supports the view that its importance lies in its effects upon the sexual conflicts and compromise formations that characterize the ages of three to six years.

However, not only does Brenner position oedipal issues at a comparatively late date (the toddler's entrance into language is typically earlier than 3 years, but definitely not in the first year as some Kleinians speculate), but he fails to avail himself of Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (despite Lacan's exposition of this notion almost five decades earlier).

To understand the importance of this notion, it must be emphasized that its significance is definitely *not* that pre linguistic experience somehow becomes irrelevant to the development of our psychic life. On the contrary, its relevance is well established. Rather, the point here is that the accessibility of such experience to our reflective consciousness in adulthood is only in a form that has been oedipally re-transcribed. That is, pre-linguistic experience is somatically encoded and only accessible to, or remembered by, our reflective self-consciousness in a modality of representation that is oedipal—that is, as linguistically-structured representationality. So, for example, traces of experiences at the breast are either somatically encoded or, if in some sense remembered, then only accessible in the manner that they have been represented subsequently once the child has been "oedipalized" as it were (i.e. has become a subject within the world of language). This is echoed in Green's (2000b, p. 44) famous aphorism "there is no such thing as a mother–infant relationship," not only because the father is "in the mother's mind," but also because whatever the mother represents and whatever the child's eventual repertoire of representations have necessarily been—simply because they are indeed representable—"oedipalized".

Notes on the incest taboo and the repression-barrier

As previously mentioned, late in his life Freud told Karl Abraham that he had "deduced the incest barrier" from his understanding of human evolution. Whatever his knowledge of the evolutionary science of his time, I want to suggest here that Freud may have been at least partially mistaken in this recollection. What is surely remarkable—and cannot be

insignificant—is that Freud’s ideas about repression emerged concurrently with his formulation of oedipality. Does this not suggest that this formulation was not just a clinical-empirical discovery based on his having listened to the content of many individuals’ stories—including his own and augmented by his capacious knowledge of classical and folk literatures—concerning the *dramatis personae* that generated their oedipal complexes? I suggest that, in addition, this discovery might also have been derived or “deduced”—with or without direct awareness—from the major metapsychological proposition that Freud generated on the basis of his discovery of free-associative praxis, namely the doctrine of repression.

His famous shift to the method of free-association, which even later in his life Freud (1916–1917, 1924, 1925a, 1937) consistently identified as the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis, immediately produced the “auxiliary notions” (Freud’s *Hilfsvorstellungen*) of resistance and repression. His experience with this method seems immediately to have convinced him that his patients not only *suppressed* disturbing content that could be represented, but that was exiled beyond the purview of reflective consciousness. There was also a process of *repressing* thoughts and wishes into a status that continued to be psychically active or impactful, but that, as Green (1999) articulates, could no longer be adequately or sufficiently rendered as a linguistically-structured representation. That is, once repressed, there is a “failure of translation” (Freud 1896, p. 207). As is well known, Freud was so convinced that, in this way, the power of repression is qualitatively different from the mere suppression of thoughts and wishes, that he soon came to argue for the idea that repression involves a “barrier” (Freud 1905b). It should surely be noted here that the notion of a barrier (*Schranke*) indicates a far more significant demarcation than a border (*Grenze*). Thus, Freud insisted both that this is not a matter of gradations in the clarity of thoughts and wishes, which can be brought into reflective consciousness, and that the repression-barrier constitutes an unassailable rupture within the life of the psyche, distinguishing the impactful activity of thing-presentations from the representationality of verbal or verbalizable contents. As is well known, Freud (1915a) came to insist that this doctrine is the “cornerstone” on which the entire discipline of psychoanalysis rests.

Experience with free-associative praxis necessitated the initial articulation of the metapsychological doctrines of resistance, repression, and the repression-barrier. Significantly, Freud’s (1905b) first reference to the repression as involving a “barrier” came immediately after his first discussion of the “barrier against incest” (Freud 1905a); the terminology is identical (*Verdrängungsschranke* and *Inzestschranke*). Thus, very shortly after the discovery of the free-associative method, there is a striking co-emergence of ideas about repression, oedipality, and the incest taboo. Leaving aside Freud’s (1915a, b) speculations about “primal repression” (*Urverdrängung*), if we take the doctrine of “repression proper” (*eigentliche Verdrängung*) seriously, we must surely ask why and how the toddler starts engaging (so to speak) in repressive activity with the consequent establishment of the repression-barrier. Obviously, we know clinically that “repression proper” can be engaged for many reasons, but it seems profoundly plausible that the initial engagement of this process might occur precisely in response to the *No!* of the incest taboo (that would seem to require the “symbolic register” for its intrapsychic impact). The implication of this is that the free-associative method necessitated the doctrine of resistance-repression, which in turn led Freud to the doctrine of oedipality that pivots on the significance of the incest

taboo in the formation of psychic life. In short, there might be a foundational sense *in which the repression-barrier is the intra-psychic inscription of the incest taboo*, both in its origination and in its daily operation. Moreover, if the line of reasoning outlined in this paper has validity, repression and the establishment of the repression-barrier are dependent on the toddler's induction into linguistically-structured representationality, which precipitates the "encounter" with the taboo against incest.

The integral connection between the barriers of incest and repression seems to be what Freud was intimating in 1912, when he wrote to Ernest Jones that "... every inner repression-barrier is the historical consequence of an outer obstruction—thus, the history of humankind is reflected in its proclivity to repression and the internalization of resistances" (Freud & Jones, 1908–1939, p. 148). In Freud's understanding, what he came to call the cultural "barrier against incest" is intimately and, in a crucial sense, determinatively tied to the formation of each individual's repression-barrier; moreover, as I have suggested, it seems quite likely that both are tied to the individual's induction as a subject within—and apparently a user of—linguistically-structured representationality.

All acculturated individuals know, as if "deep in their bones", the taboo against incest, even though it is surely significant that they cannot necessarily articulate its parameters, nor explain its necessity. For example, asked about the possibility of genital intercourse with their mother, most individuals will give the lamest of justifications for abstaining (she is not sexually interesting, she is repulsive, it is "wrong"). This surely lends quite substantial weight to the tenet that each individual's repression-barrier is an inscription of the culturally necessary taboo against incest. This tenet implies that Freud's revelations about the universal conditions of oedipality were not merely a clinical-empirical breakthrough (which he then extrapolated wildly from his professional practice to a conclusion about all humanity), but rather were the necessary outcome of his adventures with free-associative discourse and of the discovery of the repression-barrier, as well as the pluritemporality and polysexuality of psychic life that followed from those adventures.

Concluding notes

In a 1920 footnote added to the Fourth Edition of his *Three Essays* (1905a), Freud insisted that oedipality is "the shibboleth that differentiates psychoanalysts from their opponents" (GW p. 128, SE p. 226, my translation). As I have argued elsewhere, it is the method of free-association that led Freud to the four main coordinates of psychoanalysis (Barratt 2013, 2014, 2016b). These are Freud's disciplinary *Grundpfeiler*, about which he unambiguously insisted that "anyone who cannot accept these tenets should not call themselves a psychoanalyst" (Freud 1923a, GW p. 220–222, SE p. 244–246, my translation). As is well known, the first three of these are: the doctrine of resistance-repression; the formative developmental temporalities or pluritemporality of psychic life; and the libidinality, psychic energy, and polysexuality of psychic life (with its regulation by *Lust/Unlust*) as the *fons et origo* of the psyche. The fourth coordinate, oedipality, has the same sort of status as a metapsychological tenet, but not if one equates it with the multifarious versions of oedipal complexes. This is one fundamental reason why oedipality should be discussed as a process and structure, differentiated from all the various contents of narratives that comprise the diverse oedipal complexes with which individuals struggle.

My conclusion here is that we should discuss oedipality foremost as a metapsychological construct referring to the universal formation of psychic life in terms of the repression-barrier that is established via the “encounter” with the incest taboo, which depends on the toddler’s concomitant induction into linguistically-structured representationality as an “I” (the subject of reflectivity). Despite the centrality of these phenomena in clinical treatment, only derivatively should we emphasize the content and storyline of each individual’s travails of attachment and identification in relation to those who perform maternal and paternal functions, because on this level it is very difficult to make statements that could be generalized across cultures or historical epochs. In this respect, to define oedipality in terms of the individual’s idiographic journey in relation to such functions (i.e. the specific complexes) is a mistake. Indeed, it is a mistake that has not only made Freud’s “oedipus” almost impossible to define (or to claim its universality), but also has embroiled our discipline in so many—often rather pointless—debates, controversies and antagonisms.

Again, this shift in emphasis does *not* depreciate the importance of maternal and paternal functioning for the content or storyline of every child’s psychic development. However, I am suggesting that our science would be enhanced (especially in the generalizability of its conclusions) if we addressed maternal and paternal functions rather than the particular and often presumed functionaries. Psychoanalysis has extensively documented the diverse consequences of the idiographic journey of oedipality, notably including: (i) The resolution, or multiple attempts at resolution, of what Freud (1923b, 1925a) called “the constitutional bisexuality of each individual,” but which might better be termed the individual’s polysexual potential; (ii) The convergence or divergence of sexual expression and relational intimacy; (iii) The powerful and seemingly unavoidable conflicts that individuals have over matters of power (prestige, privilege, property, protection, and so forth); (iv) The associated challenges of aggression in relation to infanticidal, matricidal, and patricidal impulses, as well as the related tasks of managing rivalrous, jealous, and envious ambitions; and (v) The genesis and the trajectory undertaken by each individual in relation to shame, humiliation, and guilt, including the development of what we know as “ego-ideal” and “superego” structures. These and all the other clinical issues of oedipality are found routinely in the complex journeys of psychoanalytic exploration. In short, how oedipality is variously negotiated sets the individual’s life course in terms of relationships, sexuality, and perhaps less obviously the anticipation of death.

The metapsychological argument that the repression-barrier is the intra psychic inscription of the incest taboo, and that both are dependent on the subject’s induction into the system of linguistically-structured representationality, does not impact the value of the clinically oriented literature on oedipus complexes. It does, however, make our discipline more scientific and more comprehensible to non-psychoanalysts, especially because it makes plain why oedipality is universal, despite all the cultural and individual variations in oedipal complexes.

That oedipality is connected to the toddler’s induction within the “symbolic register” is a proposition that continues to demand serious consideration. That it is tied to the establishment of the repression-barrier and the intra-psychic inscription of the incest taboo in every human being is surely why oedipality, as the quintessence of human sexuality, constitutes, as Freud prophesied, “the strongest of motives for resistance to psychoanalysis” (1920, GW p. 32, SE p. 134, my translation).

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Translations of summary

L'Œdipe et les complexes œdipiens revisités : le tabou de l'inceste comme clef de l'universalité de la condition humaine. L'Œdipe est généralement considéré tel un chemin que l'individu doit parcourir à travers les relations d'attachement érotisé envers ceux qui exercent une fonction maternelle ou paternelle. Ce point de vue a suscité une résistance qu'on peut considérer comme légitime, mais aussi une opposition stérile, quoique fort érudite parfois. L'auteur de cet article passe brièvement en revue l'abondante littérature consacrée à la question de l'Œdipe, en centrant son attention sur les résistances et les objections que celle-ci a soulevées (surtout, mais pas seulement, à l'extérieur du mouvement psychanalytique). L'auteur émet trois propositions. Premièrement, les discussions autour des variations individuelles et culturelles des structures familiales et des modèles de soins précoces entravent notre compréhension des fondements de l'Œdipe. Par conséquent, nous devons établir une distinction entre la métapsychologie de l'Œdipe comme quelque chose d'universel et d'essentiel à la formation de la psyché humaine et la diversité des « complexes œdipiens » qui dépendent des variations des expériences précoces. Deuxièmement, il nous faut mettre davantage l'accent sur le processus de « rencontre » de l'individu avec le tabou de l'inceste que sur le contenu des relations dans l'enfance, comme en attestent l'ethnographie et la linguistique structurale. Troisièmement, l'articulation de l'Œdipe par Freud n'était pas seulement une découverte empirique clinique, mais découlait de la mise à jour par lui de la pratique de la libre association qui reposait sur le principe cardinal du refoulement comme résistance. Dans un sens fondamental, la « barrière du refoulement » devrait être considérée comme l'inscription intrapsychique du tabou de l'inceste et une caractéristique universelle clef de notre humanité.

Ödipalität und ödipale Komplexe in Neubetrachtung: das Inzesttabu als Schlüssel zur Universalität der *Conditio humana*. Im Allgemeinen versteht man unter Ödipalität die Reise des Individuums durch erotisierte Bindungen an jene Menschen, die Mutter- und Vaterfunktionen erfüllen. Dies hat verständlichen Widerstand, aber auch überflüssige, wenngleich mitunter wissenschaftlich begründete Opposition geweckt. Der vorliegende Beitrag geht kurz auf die umfangreiche Literatur zur Ödipalität ein und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Widerstände und Einwände gegen das Konzept (die ihren Ursprung zumeist, aber nicht immer, außerhalb der psychoanalytischen Bewegung haben). Vorgestellt werden drei Thesen. Erstens erschweren Diskussionen über individuelle und kulturelle Varianten von Familienarrangements und Stilen der frühen Erziehung unser Verständnis der fundamentalen Basis der Ödipalität. Aus diesem Grund sollten wir die Metapsychologie der „Ödipalität“ als einer universalen und notwendigen Voraussetzung für die Entwicklung der menschlichen Psyche von den facettenreichen „ödipalen Komplexen“ unterscheiden, die durch Variationen der frühen Erfahrung bedingt sind. Zweitens verlangt dies eine stärkere erklärende Betonung der prozesshaften „Begegnung“ des Individuums mit dem Inzesttabu im Gegensatz zur Betonung des Inhalts seiner Kindheitsbeziehungen. Für diese Annahme sprechen nachdrücklich die Funde der Ethnographie und der strukturalen Linguistik. Drittens war Freuds Konzipierung der Ödipalität nicht nur eine klinische, empirische Beobachtung, sondern das Ergebnis seiner Entdeckung der Praxis der freien Assoziation, die die Formulierung des Lehrsatzes von Widerstand und Verdrängung erforderte. In einem grundlegenden Sinn ist die „Verdrängungsschranke“ zu verstehen als die intrapsychische Einschreibung des Inzesttabus und als universales Schlüsselmerkmal unseres Menschseins.

Ripensare la situazione edipica e i complessi edipici. Sul tabù dell'incesto come chiave per comprendere l'universalità della condizione umana. In genere si pensa alla situazione edipica come al percorso che ciascun individuo compie attraverso gli attaccamenti erotizzati sviluppati con le persone che, nel corso del suo sviluppo, hanno esercitato nei suoi confronti le funzioni materne e paterne. Questo modo di intendere l'Edipo ha suscitato una serie di comprensibili resistenze e ha parimenti provocato risposte antagonistiche che, per quanto in alcuni casi valide dal punto di vista accademico, non appaiono davvero necessarie. Il presente articolo passa brevemente in rassegna la corposa letteratura sull'Edipo, concentrandosi sulle resistenze e sulle obiezioni che tale

concetto ha suscitato (soprattutto, anche se non esclusivamente, dal di fuori del movimento psicoanalitico). Verranno a tale riguardo formulate tre proposte. Si sosterrà in primo luogo che i dibattiti sulle differenze individuali e culturali a livello di organizzazione familiare e di stili di accudimento precoce costituiscono un impedimento per la nostra comprensione dei fondamenti stessi dell'Edipo. Occorrerebbe perciò distinguere la metapsicologia della 'situazione edipica' (universale e necessaria per la formazione della psiche umana) dai molteplici 'complessi edipici' contingenti e legati al variare delle esperienze precoci di ciascuno. Questa considerazione – e passo qui alla seconda proposta – richiede di porre maggiormente l'accento, nelle nostre spiegazioni, sul progressivo 'incontro' dell'individuo con il tabù dell'incesto, dando meno rilievo al contenuto delle relazioni infantili: sia la ricerca etnografica sia la linguistica strutturale offrono peraltro abbondanti prove a sostegno di questa prospettiva. In terzo luogo, va tenuto presente che l'articolazione freudiana del concetto di situazione edipica non rappresentava soltanto una scoperta clinica empirica, ma era diretta conseguenza della sua scoperta di una prassi basata sull'associazione libera che necessitava del puntello concettuale fondamentale della rimozione. In senso fondativo, la 'barriera della rimozione' dovrebbe essere intesa come l'iscrizione intrapsichica del tabù dell'incesto come come fondamentale elemento universale del nostro essere umani

Reconsideración del edipo y los complejos edípicos: Sobre el tabú del incesto como clave de la universalidad de la condición humana. El edipo (*oedipality*) suele entenderse como la travesía del individuo a través de apegos erotizados con aquellos que desempeñan las funciones materna y paterna. Esto ha suscitado una resistencia comprensible y también una oposición innecesaria, si bien en ocasiones académica. El presente artículo reseña brevemente la voluminosa literatura sobre el edipo, centrándose en las resistencias y objeciones que ha suscitado (en gran medida, pero no enteramente, desde fuera del movimiento psicoanalítico). Se presentan tres sugerencias. La primera: los debates sobre las variaciones individuales y culturales en los arreglos y los estilos de cuidado temprano en las familias ocultan nuestra comprensión de la base fundamental del edipo. Por lo tanto, deberíamos distinguir la metapsicología del "edipo", como universal y necesaria para la formación de la psique humana, de los "complejos edípicos", que son contingentes a las variaciones en la experiencia temprana. La segunda: esto exige un mayor énfasis expositivo en el proceso de "encuentro" de las personas con el tabú del incesto, y un menor énfasis en el contenido de las relaciones de la infancia y la niñez. Mucha evidencia de la etnografía y la lingüística estructural respalda esta idea. La tercera: la articulación del edipo de Freud no fue solo un hallazgo empírico clínico, sino que se derivó de su descubrimiento de la práctica de la asociación libre que requería el postulado cardinal de la represión resistente. En un sentido fundacional, la "barrera de la represión" debe entenderse como una inscripción intrapsíquica del tabú del incesto y un rasgo universal clave de nuestra humanidad.

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