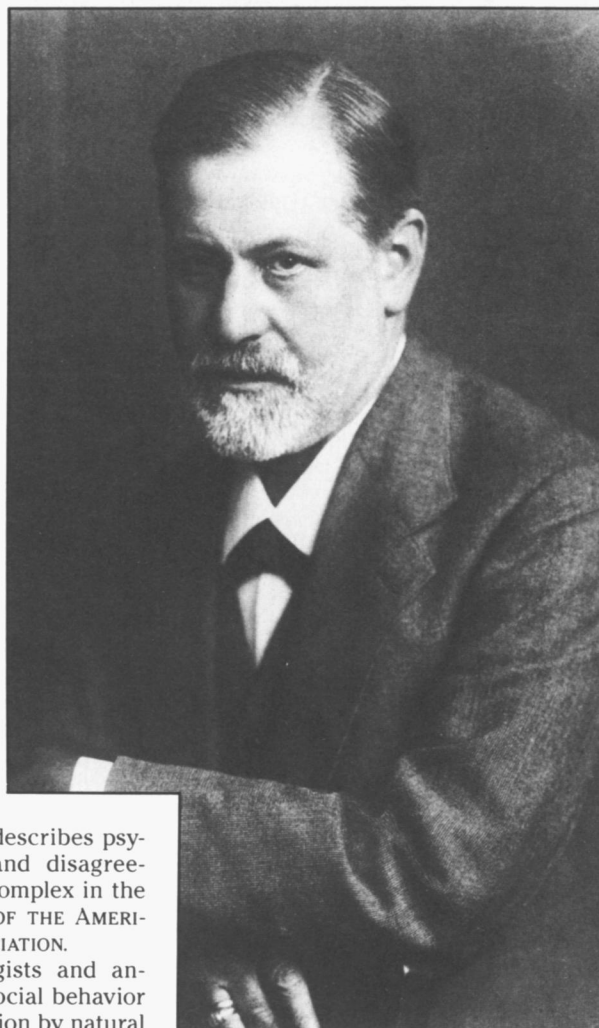


Oedipus Wrecked

Freud's theory of frustrated incest goes on the defensive

Second in a two-part series

By BRUCE BOWER



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Poor Oedipus Rex. Twice he has achieved royal status, only to have the red carpet rudely pulled out from under him. First, as described in a play written by the 5th century B.C. Greek dramatist Sophocles, Oedipus triumphantly ascended to the throne of ancient Thebes. Master of all he surveyed, the new king then hit rock bottom. Upon learning that he had unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, Oedipus gouged out his own eyes.

Much later, Sigmund Freud honored the tragic king by dubbing the central theory of psychoanalysis the Oedipus complex. Freud proposed that all toddlers direct their first sexual longings at the opposite-sex parent and consequently aim their first feelings of intense rivalry toward the same-sex parent. Healthy psychological development requires a resolution and redirection of these urges, the Viennese psychiatrist asserted. Dressed in his Freudian finery, Oedipus strutted into the 20th century and seized the imaginations of psychoanalysts, social scientists, artists, writers and other observers of the human condition.

Now, however, the Oedipus complex shows its own flair for tragedy, as it falls from grace among many of Freud's intellectual progeny and faces empirical challenges from psychologists and other researchers influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

"The Oedipus complex clearly has waned in popularity and credibility, both within psychoanalysis and within the culture at large," contends psychiatrist Bennett Simon of Harvard Medical

School in Boston. Simon describes psychoanalytic "confusion and disagreement" over the Oedipus complex in the July-September *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION*.

Evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists, who view social behavior as the outgrowth of evolution by natural selection, generally respect Freud's intellectual contributions but consider the Oedipus complex a misguided explanation of conflict between parents and children. Natural selection — the preservation in a species of genetically based traits that best contribute to the survival and reproduction of individuals and their genetic relatives — has produced typical forms of parent-child conflict that have nothing to do with incestuous desires, according to evolutionary investigators.

The Oedipus complex produced unease and dissension among psychoanalysts almost from the start, Simon points out. Freud first laid out the basis of the theory — without mentioning Oedipus by name — in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. He then elaborated the concept in works such as *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in which he proposed that the little boy's urge to kill his father and mate with his mother stemmed from one or more incidents of actual father murder carried out by Stone Age men. Ancient homicides of fathers by sons — an idea since rejected by anthropologists — ushered in incest taboos, religion and culture, Freud argued.

In perhaps his most controversial Oedipal formulation, Freud described

different paths of healthy sexual and moral development for girls and boys. Oedipal urges lead to castration anxieties in boys, who then resolve the dilemma by turning to the father for moral and religious guidance, resulting in a strong "superego," or conscience, he maintained. Freud made no secret of his difficulty in explaining female development, but suggested that girls experience penis envy, which creates anger at the mother and a subsequent turn to the father. Without the intense unconscious push males get from Oedipally derived castration fears, the female superego ends up weaker than that of males, Freud posited.

By the late 1920s, some prominent psychoanalysts questioned the alleged inferiority of the female conscience and downplayed the role assigned to the Oedipal complex. Freud's closest protege, Otto Rank, noted the "anti-Oedipal" tendency displayed by children trying to keep their parents together when divorce loomed, and cautioned against the rigid application of the Oedipus complex to individual patients. One current school of psychoanalytic thought rejects Freud's assertion that the Oedipus complex occurs universally, arguing instead that psychologically disturbed parents some-

times stir up incestuous and intensely competitive feelings in their children.

Other psychoanalysts cast off conflict and sexuality as the prime Oedipal movers and shakers. For instance, psychiatrist E. James Lieberman of George Washington University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C., contends that Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" emphasizes themes of family love and altruism, not the hostility and fear described by Freud. In the play, Oedipus grew up with adoptive parents whom he dearly loved, and only left them when told of his incestuous and homicidal fate by an oracle, Lieberman observes. At the time of his departure, Oedipus did not know that the oracle's prophecy referred to his biological parents.

"Legal or biological paternity needs a human relationship to give it significance," Lieberman writes in the June HARVARD MENTAL HEALTH LETTER. "Oedipus really loved his [adoptive] father. The moral of the drama is that honest, loving family ties are the best defense against dire prophecy and the greatest security in an uncertain world."

T rue enough, respond evolutionary theorists, but mounting evidence indicates that even loving parents and their children encounter important conflicts that fall outside the realm of incestuous desire. Two theories guide the evolutionary approach. The first, proposed by Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck in 1891, holds that natural selection has endowed humans and other animals with an unconscious mental tendency to avoid inbreeding and its harmful genetic effects on offspring. This mental "adaptation" automatically motivates sexual avoidance among individuals raised together in the same family or group, regardless of the degree to which their genetic backgrounds match, Westermarck argued.

A second model, developed since 1974 by Harvard University sociobiologist Robert L. Trivers and several others, maintains that natural selection has produced children, daughters and sons alike, who generally covet more attention, help and other resources than parents — and mothers in particular — reasonably can offer, especially as additional offspring enter the family. The result: occasional parent-child friction and sibling rivalries even in the most tranquil families.

An analysis of homicides within families fits the Darwinian perspective better than Freud's Oedipal scenario of childhood rivalry with the same-sex parent, report Canadian psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, both of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, in the March 1990 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY. Their review of all reported murders of children by their parents and all murders of parents by their children in Canada

between 1974 and 1983, and in Chicago between 1965 and 1981, finds no evidence of a same-sex bias in killings of children during the Oedipal phase (ages 2 to 5). Whether the mother or father committed the murder, the proportion of male to female victims remains nearly even. And no evidence of same-sex bias in the physical abuse of young children by mothers versus fathers turns up either, the researchers observe.

At all ages except during the Oedipal years, sons outnumber daughters as murder victims, more often at the hands of their fathers, Daly and Wilson note. Impoverished parents make up the bulk of child murderers, they add.

Adolescent boys display the greatest likelihood of murdering a parent, particularly the father. This trend probably reflects rivalries over the use and control of family property, Daly and Wilson suggest.

Freud collapsed two distinct father-son rivalries into one, the two psychologists conclude: an early conflict over access to the mother that does not involve sexual rivalry, and a later rivalry during adolescence — often seen in nonindustrial, polygynous societies — involving competition for women other than the mother or the control of family wealth.

F reud — and many scholars in his wake — also erred in assuming that all human societies retain explicit taboos against incest within the immediate family, contends anthropologist Nancy W. Thornhill of the University of

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New Mexico in Albuquerque. Incest rules primarily exist to regulate mating between in-laws and cousins rather than close genetic relatives, who show little interest in incest, Thornhill concludes in the June BEHAVIORAL AND BRAIN SCIENCES.

Thornhill tracked information on mating and marriage rules in the ethnographies of 129 societies — from the 16th-century Incas to the 20th-century Vietnamese — stored at the Human Relations Area Files in New Haven, Conn., a research arm of Yale University. Only 57 of the societies — less than half — specified rules against nuclear family incest, whereas 114 societies designated rules to control mating or marriage with cousins, in-laws or both, Thornhill reports.

Rules regulating mating between in-laws serve as checks on paternity and obstacles to female adultery, mainly in the societies that require a woman to live with her husband and his relatives upon marriage, the New Mexico researcher argues. Only 14 of the ethnographies describe societies that require a man to live with his wife and her relatives upon marriage, and most of those societies either lack rules regarding in-law mating or mete out mild punishments for an infraction of the rules, she adds.

Rulers of stratified societies enforce sanctions against cousin marriage and inbreeding in order to secure their lofty positions by discouraging the concentration of wealth and power within families other than their own, Thornhill notes. In non-stratified societies, with no central rulers and relatively equal distribution of food and other resources, dictums against cousin unions foil the accumulation of wealth in extended families and maintain the level social playing field trod by most men, in her view.

I n Thornhill's survey of worldwide societies, the more highly stratified the society, the more kin outside the immediate family fall under inbreeding regulations. However, rulers in stratified societies rarely observe those rules and frequently marry their own relatives — although they may not mate with them — in the quest to consolidate their power, Thornhill points out.

Although increasing reports in the United States and elsewhere of parent-child incest seem to demonstrate strong — indeed, sometimes overpowering — Oedipal urges within the nuclear family, appearances prove deceiving, according to Thornhill. In fact, data on incest cases tend to support Westermarck's theory, she says. For instance, studies in the United States and Canada find that stepfathers, not genetic fathers, most often initiate incest, and typically had no regular contact with a youthful victim during the first few years of the child's life. Reports of incest between genetic fathers and their daughters involve sexual inter-

course far less often than incest between step-fathers and daughters, Thornhill says.

Sexual intercourse between close genetic relatives rarely occurs because natural selection has molded a human psyche that promotes paternity concerns in men and the striving for status and resource control through social competition in both sexes, Thornhill proposes. Cultural and moral taboos against incest sprang from these psychological foundations.

Psychoanalysts — psychiatrists and psychologists who undergo special clinical training and receive psychotherapy based on Freud's theories — remain largely ignorant of the evolutionary theories about family conflict, even as their enthusiasm for the Oedipus complex subsides, says psychologist Malcolm O. Slavin of Tufts University Counseling Center in Medford, Mass. Slavin, a trained psychoanalyst, uses an evolutionary perspective in his psychotherapy.

"Fathers and children engage in much competition and rivalry over the mother's scarce time and resources, even in loving families," Slavin asserts. "It's often hard for family members to reconcile this conflict with the love and support they give to one another."

Family conflict swirls in a cauldron of deception forged by natural selection, Slavin argues. Men who successfully seek

additional or more desirable mates, and women who attract the best marriage prospects often employ deception to mislead same-sex competitors and maximize the deceiver's perceived attractiveness, he says. What's more, deception works best when the deceiver remains unaware of his or her true motives and cannot give the strategy away. Thus, according to Slavin, evolution has promoted the psychological repression, or unconscious stowing away, of disturbing thoughts, fantasies and selfish motives.

"We're never motivated to reveal ourselves fully to others or to ourselves," he maintains.

Some psychoanalytically oriented researchers, however, see no reason to discard Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. They believe it works in concert with evolutionary tendencies to discourage incest.

Evolutionary or sociobiological theories address the reproductive concerns that have fostered incest avoidance in the human species, while psychoanalytic theory explains how individual development further blocks the possibility of incest, asserts anthropologist Robert A. Paul of Emory University in Atlanta. Freud argued that the child normally represses erotic feelings toward an opposite-sex parent or sibling out of fear of

reprisal from the same-sex parent, Paul says. Freud's emphasis on the child's experience in the family and Westermarck's focus on natural selection provide complementary explanations of the rarity of incest, he remarks.

"The human superego is a powerful part of this 'incest avoidance complex,'" adds anthropologist David H. Spain of the University of Washington in Seattle. The largely unconscious influence of the child's emerging moral conscience as a result of Oedipal conflicts helps explain why most of the societies studied by Thornhill require no explicit incest taboos, Spain contends.

Thornhill disagrees. The traditional Freudian view assumes intense sexual attractions naturally occur among family members, while evolutionary theories present evidence of sexual repugnance among close genetic relatives, she says.

Freud, who considered his theories a preliminary step toward a scientific psychology, might extract a certain intellectual excitement from the debate surrounding the Oedipus complex. "Mediocre spirits demand of science the kind of certainty which it cannot give, a sort of religious satisfaction," he wrote to his friend Princess Marie Bonaparte toward the end of his life. "Only the real, rare, true scientific minds can endure doubt, which is attached to all our knowledge." □

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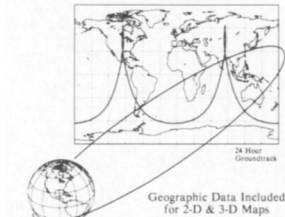
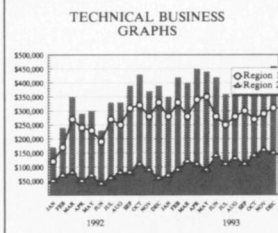
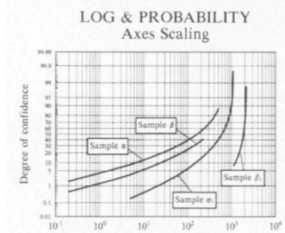
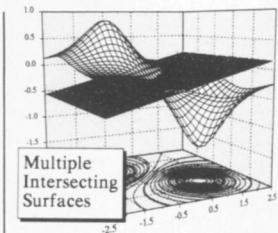
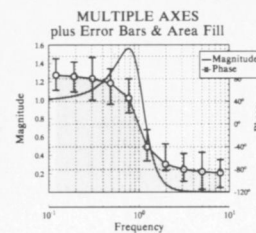
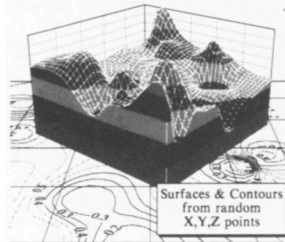
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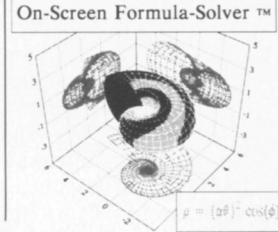
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