

Oedipus and his group

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Abstract

A major developmental step in infancy is to move from being an exclusive partner in the mother-infant pair, to becoming an excluded observer of the parental couple. This suggests a significant dynamic in groups in which the individuals may seek an exclusive other while being observed, or remain observers of others who can pair together in dialogue. Such an alternation of different experiences has important effects on the capacities to think, and to feel in possession of an identity in the presence of others.

Key words: Oedipus complex, mother-infant relation, parental couple, oedipal space, capacity of observation

In the classical story, Oedipus was condemned by fate to live out a pattern for his life involving numerous others including his parents, his foster parents, Tiresias, his subsequent children, and the townsfolk of Thebes. A varied group of people inhabit this fate. In this short contribution I discuss whether this group can give clarification of the dynamics of any group.

Freud's account of the Oedipus story as one of intergenerational sexual mores has inspired others to draw on different aspects, including for instance the Sphinx who persecutes travellers with the riddle of life. However, the story is one of a social group as well as an individual's internal world. As Freud remarked in an aside:

In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well (Freud 1921, p. 69).

The Oedipal story is not an encouraging one about groups since it is about murder, incest, suicide and self-mutilation. Human beings, one of the most destructive species on Earth, perhaps *the* most destructive, is really the only one to systematically turn destructiveness against his own species. Nevertheless, we are perhaps the most creative, at the same time. The latter may be linked with the destructiveness as a recompense, a reparation as Melanie Klein called it.

One of the key elements of the story is the problem that Oedipus has with his identity, insofar as identity involves intimacy with one's family. The parents from whom one gains life, and siblings with whom one shares that inheritance are a matrix in which personal identity starts out, and from which personhood has to make itself distinct. If the Oedipal story is indeed a nuclear phantasy within each of us, we are likely to experience this interplay of generations and of love and hate, every time we enter a group of any kind; a class at school, a working situation, getting on a bus even. The replay of the story would be never ending, though perhaps slowly modified as some of the conflicts and contradictions get worked through a little in the course of living a life.

Bion's emphasis on the element of the Oedipal story that concerns the Sphinx has been an important later consideration. It connects back to the epistemophilia of Freud's idea of the primal scene and Klein's interest in the problems of learning at school in post-Oedipal children. However, a further re-reading of the Oedipal story has very significant relevance for understanding groups and group dynamics. I refer to Britton's ideas in his paper titled 'The missing link' (Britton 1993**). And I will concentrate on that development in this contribution.

Observing relationships

Britton is concerned in his paper with certain difficult patients who seem unable to reflect on themselves and certainly not on the interpretations of their analyst. This pointed him to a specific developmental step, connected with the Oedipal situation but not previously described. There are many things that a developing child has to manage in the unconscious Oedipal situation, including impulses to murder and incest. But there is a fundamental shift in the relation to reality that has to be mastered and is very difficult. The infant in arms occupies the attention of mother, father, the family and any other carer. 'His majesty the baby' occupies all the attention. This Britton calls the mother-infant relationship, or the nursing couple. The infant is in relation with a carer which may go well, or not, as the case may be.

At some point, a change has to happen. The infant is not, as far as the rest of the family group are concerned the only occupant of mother's attention. Typically as the Oedipal situation becomes more and more apparent to the infant, it has to begin the recognition that the nursing relationship it is part of is suspended, even temporarily. The infant has to accommodate to a completely different position – it is the witness of the relationship between two others – mother and father (or there can be many other

versions of the ‘two others’ in a family). The infant is confounded by being outside this parental couple. He has had to make the move from being a part of the nursing couple to being an observer of the ‘parental couple’, i.e. mother with someone else.

This moment is not one of jealousy, although of course, jealousy, envy and exclusion are involved. Fundamentally this is a relational change of position – from occupation of mother to a distant observer. There is a distance and space which has to be recognised and tolerated between the two kinds of relationships. This Britton says is the important Oedipal triangle. This is the Oedipal space.

This transition from the belonging to the nursing couple to observing the parental couple, is not just a radical change of position, but a change of function too. The infant is not occupied with being fed and nursed, he has to develop the capacity to observe, and recognise distance. As Britton says this is a fundamental property of the human mind the capacity for observation. Moreover, a part of this new function is the ability to observe that he is the observer and separate from the observed. He gains the capacity for self-observation.

Much therapeutic work, Britton conveys is involved with interpreting and working through this emotional and developmental transition. When it is not completely worked through at the original time, then it has to be worked through later in life. And perhaps a group therapy is ideal for this work. Or, at least it is a work that needs to be accomplished very frequently in a group therapy setting.

The thinking space

The position for observation creates the possibilities for further functions. Britton was interested in the group as a thinking space, and he described the opening of the Oedipal space:

If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child's mind, it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. Given this, we can also envisage *being* observed. This provides us with a capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves. This is a capacity we hope to find in ourselves and in our patients in analysis (Britton 1989, p. 87).

The accomplishment of this position by managing to tolerate the parental link which had been missing previously in development, brings in the capacity to observe, to be observed and for self-observation. In other words, it is the origins of being able to think, to place one point of view beside another.

This is a conception which adds to the understanding of the Oedipal situation as a source of jealousy and envy. It is a problem of the capacity to observe and to think

The group space

It is clear that some of this transformation of position is a significant part of accommodating to being a member of a group. A group member has to be reasonably adapt at moving from being a participant in a discussion to being an observer of other's discussions. In fact, this may be one of the greatly important aspects of group therapy. It is a therapeutic advance to be able to tolerate this move to the observing position, because it is beset by considerable and intolerable feelings that at root are felt to be seriously damaging, even annihilating to the infant, including the 'infant' in each of the adult group members.

A somewhat similar view of this difficult position within a group was described by Turquet (1975), writing about the large group. The issues may be less in a smaller group, and some people would argue that, but it seems from Britton's account that it is distressing enough even in a group of only three.

Turquet pinpointed the experience of boundlessness. The ego needs boundaries to capture and sustain a sense of identity as a functioning person. Loosing that sense of coherence and position with the environment is the nearest we come to the experience of the psychotic. This problem that is posed in a group is to struggle with the feeling that the self is not located properly in relation to others.

What may be different is that methods of avoidance are easier to find and to establish with the co-operation of other members. In larger groups, members tend to refrain from fully entering the group and to remain silent. He called this a state of being a singleton, which all inhabit at the outset of a group. The need to enter the group in a psychological and social way needs some help with the experience of losing boundaries, and this he described as being the need to use the 'skin-of-my-neighbour'. By this he meant that any verbal contribution a member makes needs a response from a neighbour in the group, even if that neighbour is located on the other side of a large room. When a singleton does manage to enter the group

psychologically and make his contribution from his own experience, Turquet calls this an 'individual member'. However, many will be side-tracked he said by performing roles on behalf of the group which he refers to as a 'membership individual'. Thus he classifies three states of being in the group; a singleton on their own, an individual member who can be himself, to a degree, and a membership individual who plays a part unconsciously assigned.

These states of mind are very much to do with the experience of oneself as positioned within a group's space. The member has to negotiate the group space by contributing, and needing a 'neighbour' who will provide a boundary or skin to give a sense of being in contact within a relationship. The resort to a nursing couple experience needs to be potentially available. So often that experience feels less and less unachievable as the group size increases. In contrast, a member may struggle to contribute but remains unattended to, to become a forlorn onlooker whose contribution is ignored. He can observe but is not a part of a contact with another in this space.

Gender identity

In a way Freud knew something of this group problem of self, or of being an identity. He described a related issue in normal gender development when identity is being formed. The two genders diverge in specific ways as they tend towards identification with different Oedipal parents. Freud makes a distinction:

In the case of a male, his mother becomes his first love-object as a result of her feeding him and looking after him, and she remains so until she is replaced by someone who resembles her or is derived from her. A female's first object, too, must be her mother: the primary conditions for a choice of object are, of course, the same for all children. But at the end of her development, her father - - a man -- should have become her new love-object. In other words, to the change in her own sex there must correspond a change in the sex of her object (Freud 1931, p. 228).

In this sense, there is an especial draw for a man to sustain a notion of the nursing couple into his adult relations as he forms a relationship with his loved object of the same sex as mother. Indeed, Freud would say this is merely a substitute. This may therefore, in male identification sustain a resistance to the position of exclusion which could almost be regarded as normal, and perhaps much earlier on in development. A woman on the other hand has to relinquish the 'other' of the nursing couple in a more radical way. She not only has to move to the excluded, observing position, but this is enhanced by the tendency to substitute a gender other than mother's for her loved

object. The difference that Freud is pointing out will have, I am suggesting, an impact on the nature of the move from nursing couple to excluded observer which has have different implications and different degrees of difficulty for the different genders.

Conclusion

I have tried to briefly develop the implications of the Oedipal situation in terms of the early experience of the 'third' position, that of an observer, and the impact on the keeping a sense of identity and a boundary to the self. The fundamental difference between being an individual (in a relationship) and being a member of a group (so easily excluded to become an observer) is a very early confrontation with reality, and can functions so often as an obstruction to development of the personality. There are important implications for membership of a group, and the ever fragile sense of gender and other forms of diversity, where exclusion can be a social reality.

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