Implicit and Explicit Dimensions of Oedipal Phenomenology: A Reassessment

James L. Fosshage, Ph.D.

In lieu of an abstract, I begin with a synopsis. In light of nonlinear dynamic systems theory and recent empirical research, the Oedipus complex is no longer theoretically viable as a posited hard-wired linear phase of development. Oedipal phenomenology, in my view, most aptly refers, in its positive form, to a particular relational configuration in which the child expansively tries on the role of a heterosexual partner of the opposite-gendered parent and variably feels identified with, as well as competitive with, the same-gendered parent. *Romantic love,* I have proposed, captures more inclusively the phenomenology of loving, erotic experience. With rudimentary implicit procedural beginnings in early childhood, the Oedipal relational configuration gains momentum especially with the hormonally charged onset of sexual attraction around the mean age of 9–10. As an important, but not sole, childhood/adolescent romantic relational configuration, its success as to self-enhancement or depletion and to the consolidation of a heterosexual orientation emerges out of parental responsiveness within the parent–child interaction. Systems theory leads us to believe that, at a process level, there are many possible, and often unpredictable, pathways for the development of romantic love, sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation. Anchored in ongoing implicit and explicit learning, developmental processes in these arenas are infinitely complex and variably interconnected processes. Our focus is now shifting to more detailed studies of what contributes to the development, enhancement, and maintenance of romantic love.

It was 1968. I was 28 and it was my first year of psychoanalytic training at the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health of New York City.1 In those days, the Postgraduate Center was known as an “eclectic Freudian” psychoanalytic institute. I soon learned that *eclectic* meant id psychology and ego psychology. Although recognition of the pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother was gathering momentum, the Oedipus complex from the classical perspective was still the ultimate focal point of development and every analysis. In Freud’s (1905) words, “Every new arrival on this planet is faced with the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis” (p. 226). The Oedipus complex was viewed as the central linear developmental phase driven by libido and aggression and structured by universal unconscious fantasies. These fantasies, as you know, express, in their positive form, sexual desire for the opposite-gendered parent and competitive, aggressive rivalry with the same-gendered parent. Boys become fearful of the father’s castrating retaliation; girls become inhibited due to penis envy. In Freud’s linear develop-

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1The Postgraduate Center for Mental Health was the first interdisciplinary psychoanalytic institute in the United States, established in the 1947.
mental scenario, the Oedipus complex first emerges between the ages 3 and 5, followed by a latency period, and reemerges in a fuller form at the onset of puberty. Resolution of the Oedipus complex, as the theory goes, is achieved typically by identification with the parent of the same sex and temporary renunciation of the parent of the opposite sex, who is subsequently rediscovered in his or her adult sexual object choice.

It was during that first year of training that my patient, a lovely social worker, 4 years younger than I, began to develop an erotic transference. I felt then, as I do now, that the term romantic transference better captures the phenomenology that includes, but is not limited to, the erotic dimension. Although I had certainly learned a good deal theoretically about Oedipal dynamics, I had no idea as to what to do with an erotic transference. In those days, transference was understood as exclusively generated by the patient’s intrapsychic displacements and projections. Although the romantic feelings certainly felt personal, and even titillating, I was taught that the patient’s feelings had little to do with me personally, except that I was a stand-in for her father. On the one hand, the displacement model of transference rescued me from taking any of the patient’s feelings and reactions personally. It kept me clean; that is, I was not implicated in the emergence of my patient’s romantic feelings. On the other hand, the classical transference model dehydrated the analytic relationship for both patient and analyst in that it deprived the analytic relationship of anything emotionally personal between us. From my status as a projection screen and “stick” figure, and my patient’s status as a projector and displacer, the only possible retrieval of a smidgeon of the reality of our interpersonal relationship was Greenon’s (1967), at that time relatively new, formulation of a real relationship that coexisted with the transference relationship.

With these conceptualizations, I faced my almost daily dilemma as to what to do in the heat of a romantic transference. What rescued me was to think developmentally and raise the question as to what my patient needed from me to move ahead with her life. After all, I had studied, and was taken with, developmental psychology in graduate school. Freud, of course, had postulated a developmental theory, although with a considerable intrapsychic tilt. Without full awareness of the theoretical implications, I assumed that the Oedipus complex was structurally an inherently relational phase of development. Having had a critical and distant father, as well as a fairly cool and critical mother, it was not surprising to me that my patient felt unattractive and had dated minimally. Being a young adult and not too far from adolescence myself, I envisioned my patient as an adolescent girl in love with her father and concluded that she needed me to respond to her as a good father would to his adolescent daughter. I recognized that the father–daughter relationship during the Oedipal phase was a time in which the daughter expansively flirted and played and needed a father to be affirming and sufficiently flirtatious and playful, without overly sexualizing the encounters. Through this father/daughter relationship, I thought, the adolescent girl consolidates, or not, her sense of attractiveness and desirability to men and develops, if you will, her feminine ways with men. Now, I recognized even then that our relationship was far more complex, for I was of the age of a potential suitor. Nevertheless, I remember that this developmental formulation was pivotal in helping me to interact with my patient in a way that gradually facilitated a vitalizing view of herself as attractive, desirable, and competent in relating to men as a young woman. As her positive self-feelings increased, my patient, transmitting these feelings, began to evoke men’s interest. Soon, she began to date and, 4 to 5 years down the road, fell in love with a man, married him, and had a family, goals of hers that had previously seemed impossible.

With this relational developmental scenario in mind, and I well know that this was not unique to me, you can imagine how I, and others, felt validated and fortified when Restoration of the Self
appeared in 1977. In this book, Kohut reformulated the Oedipus complex, placing it squarely within a relational context. Emerging out of his clinical work, Kohut conceptualized that the development of the self was primary (what relational self-psychologists today call more phenomenologically the development and consolidation of a positive cohesive sense of self). Following a sufficient development of the self, Kohut found that patients entered a comparatively abbreviated and relatively nonconflictual Oedipal phase. In contrast to Freud, he asserted that the Oedipal phase of development, not the Oedipus complex, is universal. The degree to which the Oedipal phase becomes a conflictual Oedipus complex depends on the responsiveness of the Oedipal self-objects, that is, the responses of the parents that facilitate or interfere with the consolidation of one’s attractiveness, desirability, and competitive competence as a man or a woman. In other words, deficient or problematic parental responses create powerfully conflict-ridden Oedipus complexes in their children. Kohut’s accentuation of the importance of relational experience in promoting a child’s development or in creating oedipal conflict contributed to the gathering momentum of the relational turn that first emerged in the 1980s.

Times have changed, indeed, since 1968! Propelled by the pivotal change in paradigms from objectivism to constructivism, the relational turn has variably affected all analysts. Those who hold to the original intrapsychic models of transference, psychological development, pathogenesis, and therapeutic action are increasingly recognizing the shaping influence of relational experience. Many others have left behind the intrapsychic models and have fully embraced and contributed to the development of relational theories. The new theory, what I call the organizing model of transference (Wachtel, 1980; Hoffman, 1983; Stolorow and Lachmann, 1984/85; 1998; Fosshage, 1994; Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1996), based on the integration of cognitive science, refers specifically to a patient’s patterns of organization that emerge out of lived experience and contribute to the coconstruction and cocreation of the analytic relationship. Psychological development, framed in systems and complexity theory, are now viewed as nonlinear emergent phenomena (to be delineated). Relational theories of therapeutic action have expanded, embracing the more traditional exploratory/reflective process, as well as the implicit and explicit relational experience occurring within the analytic relationship (Stern et al., 1998; Boston Change Process Study Group, 2008; Fosshage, 2005, in press; among many others). In my view, explicit reflective exploration and implicit relational experience tend to work in tandem with the relative importance of each dimension of experience changing during the ongoing interplay of the analytic process.

THE OEDIPAL MYTH

Freud (1905) chose Sophocles’s Greek tragedy, Oedipus Rex, to name and further buttress his postulation of the universality of the Oedipus complex. Psychoanalysts and Greek scholars have puzzled over the various meanings of this tragedy within Greek society, as well as within our current social contexts. Freud’s understanding rests principally on the Delphic Oracle’s prediction that Oedipus, son of Laius, would kill his father and marry his mother. Freud interpreted the Oracle’s

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2For example, in his discussion of the case of P. (Fosshage, 1990), Curtis (1990), a classical analyst, recognizes traumatic relational influences and, yet, in his mixed model, maintains that the child’s universal (hard-wired) fantasies distorted her perceptions of her parents.
prediction and Oedipus’s subsequent actions to be manifestations of Oedipus’s unconscious wishes (unconscious motives) to kill his father and marry his mother, what Freud postulated to be a repressed phylogenetically based motivation and fantasy.

Freud’s interpretation of the Greek tragedy as depicting Oedipus’s unconscious incestuous and murderous wishes can easily be challenged, for Oedipus, hearing of the Oracle’s prediction, left the kingdom and his parents to avoid just such an occurrence, not knowing at the time that he had been adopted and was not living with his biological parents. Kohut (1982) was among the first to point out that any father who attempts to kill his son surely will engender a son’s murderous wishes toward his father. Kohut writes:

It is as if analysts had reversed their usual stance as regards King Oedipus by taking the manifest content—father murder, incest—as the essence, while disregarding clues, in particular genetic clues, that may allow us to see the relationship between parents and son in a different light. Is it not the most significant dynamic-genetic feature of the Oedipus story that Oedipus was a rejected child? [p. 404]

Although Kohut importantly recognizes the relational origins of Oedipus’s actions, note that he still maintains that Oedipus’s actions were based on unconscious wishes (motives; Freud’s assertion), albeit not phylogenetically based wishes (motives) but wishes (motives) that emerge out of relational abusive experience. Although unconscious motives that counter conscious intentions can be assumed, to do so here flies in the face of the very structure of Sophocles’s drama, that is, Oedipus’s rapid departure from what he thought were his biological parents upon hearing of the Oracle’s prophecy, the fact that Laius, not Oedipus, subsequently provoked the latter in what became a death battle in a precipitous right-of-way contention as each was traveling to another province, and the fact that Oedipus was offered Jocasta’s hand for successfully answering the Sphinx and rescuing Thebes from a devastating plague.

Freud’s (1905) interpretation is based remarkably on a one-to-one correspondence between motivation and action, that is, the actions of murder and incest were intended (desired), and, if they were not consciously intended, then they were unconsciously intended (unconsciously desired). Similarly, in his interpretation, the state of unawareness is not attributed to a state of not knowing, but is equated with unconscious awareness. For example, even though Oedipus did not know that Laius was his father or Jocasta his mother, Freud’s interpretation assumes that he must have unconsciously known. These two interpretive assumptions are deeply problematic, for they do not capture the usual complexities of the relationship between motivation and action, and knowing and not knowing.

We can deepen our understanding of the meaning of this Greek tragedy if we extend our exploration of the genesis of the Oracle of Delphi’s prediction. As Ross (1982) has delineated, Laius (Oedipus’s father) was also subjected to abandonment and abuse. Following his father’s death when Laius was one year old, his uncle usurped his father’s throne and expelled Laius from his kingdom. As a young man, Laius was a guest of King of Elis and tutored the King’s son, Chrysippus, in chariot racing. Laius, an abused child, then violated the sacred laws of hospitality by abducting and raping Chrysippus. Irate, the King of Elis took the matter to the Oracle of Delphi, who promptly cast a punishing doom over Laius and his descendants.

Subsequently, Laius regained his father’s throne and married Jocasta. When Oedipus was born, Laius heard from the Oracle of Delphi that “he [Laius] is doomed/To perish by the hand of his own son” (the Oracle’s prophetic punitive doom leveled at Laius for his previous violation of the laws of hospitality). To protect himself, Laius abandoned his son, Oedipus, to be killed. Oedipus was
saved by shepherds and raised in another kingdom. As a young man, hearing of the Oracle’s prediction, Oedipus, not knowing that he was adopted, left the kingdom in order to avoid the prophecy. Oedipus, not knowing that Laius was his father or that Jocasta was his mother, inadvertently kills Laius (his father) over a contentious right-of-way battle provoked by Laius (not Oedipus). Oedipus subsequently answers the riddle of the Sphinx, frees the land of Thebes from a devastating plague, and, as a reward, is offered the hand of the Queen, Jocasta, whom he does not know is actually his biological mother.

In contrast to the assumptive interpretation of unconscious intrapsychically-generated incestuous and murderous wishes (motives), we, in my view, could far more convincingly conclude on the basis of the structure of Sophocles’ tragedy and this Greek epic that, if a man does not respect the laws of hospitality and treats others with abuse and disrespect, emanating from what had been done unto him, then that man is doomed in familial relationships as well, a fate that an understanding of intergenerational transmission of unconscious and conscious (implicit and explicit) relational patterns readily explains. The stories are about “generations of bad parenting” (Ross, 1982, p. 175). More specifically, childhood abuse creates unending destructive intergenerational relational patterns, patterns that have an unrelenting inevitability to them due to implicit and explicit procedural learning and cannot be sufficiently explained and captured by the concept of phylogenetically based unconscious wishes or motives. In other words, violation of the sacred laws of hospitality (that is, civil, respectful treatment of others) unleashes an inevitable deteriorating spiral of destruction of self and progeny. The tragedy of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* lies in the inevitable unfolding of life’s events involving abuse and transgressions of which Oedipus, ultimately, has no knowledge or power to alter.

Freud’s interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* has been accepted over a hundred years as representative of a hard-wired normal phase of psychological development. In my view, the generations of parental abuse and abandonment apparent in the Greek tragic epics of Oedipus and his forbearers powerfully depict a relational model of pathogenesis, a model illustrating when familial relational patterns, over which one has little if any control, have gone deeply awry.

Kohut (1982) considered Freud’s choice of a Greek tragedy to be a brilliant move to buttress and etch into the minds of his followers his theory of intergenerational rivalry and conflict. Indeed, Freud succeeded at that, even though he selected only a portion of the Greek epic and “creatively” (Bergmann, 1992) interpreted Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* in keeping with his theoretical assumption of universal unconscious incestuous and murderous wishes.

In sharp contrast, Kohut (1982) asserted that the joyful participation in the growth of one’s progeny, that is, intergenerational support, rather than intergenerational rivalry, is foundational for human beings. In a countermove to illustratively support his theory with a well-known myth, Kohut selected the *Odyssey*, a Greek epic poem told by Homer. As you will recall, Odysseus, a young man and ruler of Ithaca, had returned from the Trojan wars to be with his young wife and baby son. When he heard that the delegates of the Greek states were arriving to conscript him once again and return him to the Trojan wars, Odysseus, wanting to remain with his wife and child, malingered and feigned insanity by ploughing his fields with an ox and ass yoked together and flinging salt over his shoulder. Sensing Odysseus’s trickery, one of the delegates seized Telemachus, Odysseus’s son, and placed him directly in front of his plow. To avoid injuring his son, Odysseus immediately ploughed a semicircle around him, revealing Odysseus’s sanity and trickery. Even though Odysseus would certainly be conscripted into military service and potentially threaten his own life, saving his son’s life took priority and,
thus, he curved the pathway of his plough, what Kohut (1982) called "the semi-circle of mental health."

Although both nurturance and conflict exist in every intergenerational dyad, it makes sense in terms of biological systems that the theory of intergenerational protection and support, taking care of and fostering the development of one's children, is biologically foundational, making survival, development, and evolution of our species possible. In other words, apart from the daily conflicts that occur in families, children who are basically loved and supported by parents, who themselves felt loved and supported (or through reflective awareness have been able to overcome an insecure attachment (Fonagy et al., 1991; Fonagy, 2001) do not harbor unconscious incestuous and murderous wishes toward their parents but return the love and love themselves, their parents, and others as well.

The Oedipus Complex in Light of Contemporary Theory and Research

Let us review some of the problematic assumptions of the Oedipus complex in light of current theoretical and empirical advances. Although a number of problematic features of the Oedipus complex have been addressed (for example, Bergmann, 1992; Brothers and Lewinberg, 1999; Shulman, 2003), I will limit my discussion to the following: (1) the linear developmental model, as compared to nonlinear dynamic systems theory; (2) a two-stage developmental sequence from dyadic to triadic relationships, as compared to the simultaneous developmental emergence of dyadic and triadic relationships; (3) bifurcation of gender, as compared to a varied and nuanced view of gender and its development; and (4) the hypothesized developmentally early, as compared to later, emergence of sexuality, especially sexual attraction.

1) The Oedipus complex is framed within a linear developmental model, that is, a model that hypothesizes genetically based successive developmental phases. In the event of a fixation or arrest in development within any one of Freud's hypothesized psychosexual developmental phases, the task for a patient in psychoanalysis is to regress to the point of fixation in order to resolve the conflicts at that point, enabling the patient to move along the developmental pathway.

Over the past two decades, systems or complexity theory, originating in physics, chemistry, and mathematics, has been applied to the biological sciences and, most relevant in our considerations, to cognitive and psychological development. A nonlinear dynamic system refers to independent and interdependent elements that, over time, mutually influence and transform each other in a relatively unpredictable fashion. Importantly, an inherent property of any system is that it becomes self-organizing, that is, it establishes patterns that, in turn, become the more predictable features of the system. In addition, every system organizes at increasingly more complex levels.

In close studies of process of cognitive and behavioral development, Thelen and Smith (1984), using nonlinear dynamic systems theory, described three fundamental findings. First, they discovered that many cognitive and psychological developmental features that were previously seen as driven by an inherent, genetically based design to be, instead, unpredictable (nonlinear) developments emergent out of the interplay of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental factors. Second, they found that the interactive processes in cognitive and behavioral development are typically too complex to differentiate constitutional and environmental constituents. And third, they focused on what previously appeared as innate features of cognitive development. When looking
more closely at a process level, they recognized previously unseen primitive aspects of certain functions and capacities within the baby, that is, biological givens, that later emerge nonlinearly into more mature functions (Fosshage, 2010). For example, "infants show elements of abstract numerical thought, a complex naive physics, and ‘theories’ of causality. There is a common core, a continuity, in the thinking of babies and adults" (Thelan and Smith, 1994, p. 22).

Within systems theory, development can be viewed from two different perspectives with remarkably different observations. The sweep of development from the "view from above" appears, according to Thelan and Smith (1994), "orderly" and "more than just orderly, it is progressive or directional" (p. xiv). It becomes increasingly complex, that is, an increase in the number of parts and activities and relations among them. The "view from below," however, reveals that development is far more complex and messy. Thelan and Smith write:

> What looks like a cohesive, orchestrated process from afar takes on the flavor of a more exploratory, opportunistic, syncretic and function-driven process in its instantiation. ... The paradox is that the organism moves along as an adapted, integrated whole as the component structures and processes change in fits and starts. ... The boundaries of progressive stages are equally blurred by seeming regressions in performance and losses of well-established behaviors. [pp. xvi–xvii]

From a longitudinal perspective (view from above) the overall progressive direction of development becomes apparent. Development occurs, however, at a moment-to-moment process level that is fluid and messy with fits and starts and changing contexts and not in accordance with a grand plan (Fosshage, 2010). Thelan and Smith (1994) state, "Development is linear and quantitative, as growth is always incremental. At the same time, development is also nonlinear and qualitative, since complexity invokes new forms and abilities" (p. xvi).

From a systems perspective, the complexity of development does not enable us to demarcate developmental phases, such as the Oedipal stage, to which we can regress. The concept of regression is based on a linear developmental model and, in light of nonlinear dynamic systems theory, is no longer a viable concept. Although there might be striking similarities to earlier points in development, we are never exactly the same as we once were. When erotic or romantic feelings emerge within the analytic relationship, we, thus, can no longer view this as a regression to an earlier oedipal phase. Rather, they are variable expressions of sexual/romantic and corresponding competitive feelings that are affected by the patient’s and the analyst’s past relational experience within the current patient and analyst interactive context (something that Davies, 1994; Hirsch, 1994, Fosshage, 2007, Lichtenberg, 2008, and Hoffman, 2009, among others have been delineating).

2) Theoreticians utilizing the Oedipus complex posit a two-staged developmental sequence. The pre-Oedipal phase of development involves a mother-centered dyadic relationship, followed by the Oedipal stage that introduces a triangular relationship. Based on this model, the appearance of any threesome is typically interpreted as referencing Oedipal phenomena. Oedipal phenomena include triangular relationships, sexuality, and competition.

This two-phase developmental hypothesis, from a contemporary perspective, runs counter to our understanding of family systems. A baby is born into a family system that is comprised of interacting parents, siblings, pets, and extended family. On the basis of infant–familial observation Dan Stern (1995) suggested, "The process of becoming a triad takes place ... roughly in parallel with becoming a dyad, under normal nuclear family conditions" (pp. 145–146). In addition to the
long-standing family systems theories, the ground-breaking research of Fivaz-Depeursinge and Corboz-Warnery (1999) has invalidated the two-stage theory. They found that infants as early as three months of age, when engaged in a “proto-conversation” (Bateson, 1979) with their mother, will look over to their father, implicitly inviting his participation (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fossbake, 2010). These research findings that the infant reacts and relates to all members within a family system confirm the prediction of systems theory. I remember well those occasions when my wife and I embraced and our son, beginning at an early age and continuing through the Oedipal ages of 3 to 5 and beyond, would run to be included in what became a family (a threesome) hug—issues of loving attachment and desired inclusion, not Oedipal sexuality and competition. On these occasions, parental exclusion can increase a child’s aggressive impetus for inclusion that, in turn, has often been interpreted as Oedipal.

3) Gender identification is bifurcated in Oedipal theory, what Benjamin (1996) refers to “the oedipal logic of opposites.” Bifurcation of male and female genders includes heterosexual attraction, same-gendered competition, and different developmental pathways. Within a systems framework, the evidence suggests that the establishment of gender identity is a much more nuanced and multivariated process, what Adrienne Harris (2005) has so aptly called the “soft assembly” of gender. Identifications and self-expanding competitions are multiple and not necessarily gender-specific. These new views, of course, are in keeping with our changing cultural contexts in which gender differences are softening.

4) Last, Oedipal theory stipulates that sexuality and the Oedipus complex emerge first between the ages of 3 and 5, followed by a latency period and a reemergence at puberty.

Research studies challenge the assumptions that healthy children, at an early age, experience sexual attraction to the opposite-sex parent and aggressive rivalry toward the same-sex parent. On the basis of three research studies, McClintock and Herdt (1997) depict three steps in the development of sexuality: attraction, actual desire, and a readiness to act on the desire. They found that the hormonally charged onset of sexual attraction is typically first manifested in the fourth grade, ages 9 or 10. In addition, they conclude that sexual development is a continuously unfolding, gradual process without evidence of a latency period.

There are, undoubtedly, gender-related implicit and explicit procedures of relating that begin to develop early within a family that enter into future sexual relating as defined by McClintock and Herdt (1997) and could be referred to, in part, as Oedipal phenomenology. However, the Oedipal complex, thought to emerge first between the ages of 3 and 5 years of age, involves incestuous sexual wishes, a feature of sexuality that, according to McClintock and Herdt, does not emerge at an age earlier than 9 or 10.

Reported earlier developments of sexuality are, at times, based on what Ferenczi (1933) called a “confusion of tongues”—that is, adults project their own views of sexuality and/or sexual response onto children. For example, as a grandfather of a 3-and-1/2-year-old granddaughter, I observe and experience her feminine charm, ways of relating, that undoubtedly will become part of her implicit procedures of relating to men, but at this time have nothing to do with sexuality. At the recent Postgraduate Society conference on the Oedipus complex (March 2010), an attractive, young-looking grandmother told the story of holding her grandson high in the air, both clad in

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3I am indebted to Brothers and Lewinberg (1999) for their making me aware of the invaluable McClintock and Herdt (1997) study.
swimsuits, and the lad saying, "Grandma, let's go naked!" The grandmother, an analyst, quipped with an obvious Oedipal reference, "That was the best proposal that I had had for a while!" This Oedipal interpretation, in my view, revealed a confusion of tongues. The boy's remark understandably engendered sexual references in the adult. Although we, of course, do not know the meaning it had for the boy, we know how young children delight in running naked. Most probably, the boy felt that the clothes encumbered a physical and sensual, as distinct from sexual (Lichtenberg, 1989), freedom.

In addition to the confusion of tongues, early developments of sexuality emerge out of familial pathology that might involve sexual overstimulation, sexual abuse, and/or absence of tender sexual experiences. Sexual abuse interferes with normal sexual development and, instead, leads to an anxiety-laden, driven, confusing mixture of sexuality and aggression. When parents infer sexuality, in contrast to sensuality, Lichtenberg (2008) has cogently described how parents shaming reactions begin to affect the differentiation of sexuality from sensuality that can either inhibit or stimulate sexual interest and aversive reactions to parental prohibitions. Early expressions of excessive sexual interest can also reflect a child's attempt to self-stimulate and/or efforts to connect to an absent or unresponsive parent.

Reformulation of Oedipal Phenomenology

In light of these considerations, I suggest that the Oedipus complex, rather than a normal developmental occurrence, is, as Kohut (1977) asserted, a pathological development emergent out of a pathological familial system. However, Kohut's formulation of an Oedipal phase is itself conceptualized within a linear developmental frame.

To extricate Oedipal phenomenology from viable linear formulations, I suggest that the term Oedipal, in its positive form, most aptly refers to a particular relational configuration in which the child expansively tries on the role of a heterosexual partner of the opposite-gendered parent and variably feels both identified with and competitive with the same-gendered parent. Beginning with early precursors in gendered child–parent implicit relating, relational procedures continue to accrue and be refined throughout childhood into adulthood. Research indicates that the more specific hormonally charged sexual features of sexual attraction, however, are added around the ages of 9 and 10, depending. I would add, on the particular family system. The Oedipal relational configuration is perhaps a frequent, yet only one possible, relational scenario that contributes to the development of romantic (including sexual) experience and a heterosexual orientation. I say "perhaps," for it is difficult to assess how much the psychoanalytically and culturally embedded theory of the Oedipus complex has commandeered child and clinical observations. Emerging out of a secure attachment, a sufficiently positive sense of self and affirming parental responses, the Oedipal relational configuration is enhancing and growth-producing. In contrast, when an adolescent is attempting to compensate for negative self-percepts or is subject to parental insecurities and agendas, the Oedipal relational configuration, of course, can become quite problematic. Identification and competitive expansiveness with the same-gendered parent, as well as the opposite-gendered parent, in my view, is not solely an aspect of the Oedipal relational configuration but is foundational in parent–child dyadic relations in establishing a sense of competence in many arenas. In addition, the normal development of homosexual orientation involves a matrix of male–female implicit relational procedures that differ from the described Oedipal matrix that contributes to a heterosexual orientation.
Systems theory leads us to believe that, at a process level, there are many possible and often unpredictable pathways for the development of sexuality, romantic love, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, romantic feelings, depending on parents and child and perhaps especially in the case of a single parent, might bypass the parents and are expressed and explored primarily with peers, teachers, and idolized popular figures.

Clinically, when erotic and romantic feelings emerge within the analytic relationship, I no longer, as I did when I was 28, view this as a regression to an earlier phase of development. I view their emergence as a continuing open-ended striving for further psychological development, especially in the areas of sexuality and romantic love, as well as possibly sexual orientation and gender. Anchored in past and current implicit and explicit learning, developmental processes in these arenas are infinitely complex and variably interconnected processes.

TO LOVE AND TO BE LOVED AND THE EMERGENCE OF ROMANTIC LOVE

Romantic love, in my view, includes, yet certainly is not limited to, the Oedipal relational configuration. The origins of romantic love lie in the development of feeling loved and loving, a topic I will briefly address.

In a recent paper, I (Fosshage, 2007) wrote:

Fundamental experiences of love—that is, to love and to be loved—are central in development and maintenance of vitalized self-experience. Ferenczi was the first of many (Bacal and Newman, 1990; Shaw, 2003) to believe that “love is as essential to a child’s healthy growth as food” (Thompson, 1988). To love involves a deep empathic knowing, liking, respect, caring, and tenderness for the other. To feel loved is to feel deeply understood, known, respected, affirmed, liked and cared for, and treated tenderly. With various shadings, nuances, and emotional valences love experience ranges from parental love, to love of parent, to caregiver’s love, to friendship love, to romantic love. [p. 330]

The experience of feeling loved and loving, or not, begins at birth, if not before, through touch, eye-to-eye contact, and nonverbal and verbal communications. Implicit and explicit affective experience immediately begins to accrue and is logged at birth in imagistic symbolic and, later, verbal symbolic memory (Paivio, 1971, 1986, 2007; Fosshage, 1983, 2005, in press; Bucci, 1985). Bucci (1997) adds a third subsymbolic form of encoding and processing. Infants begin life stirred and guided in their choices of action by evolution-derived “biases” or “values” (Edelman, 1992). The evolved values and the intentions and goals that derive from them, what Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and I (Lichtenberg, 1989; Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1992, 1996, 2003, 2010) call motivational systems, remain operant as strong dispositions throughout the life cycle. Considerable evidence points to an overarching developmental motivation that I define as “an inherent tendency in human beings to grow or develop, meaning to expand in function, to self-organize with increasing complexity in keeping with basic and evolving motivational values or preferences” (Fosshage, 2010, p. 12). The experience that emerges from the interplay of motivational values and the intersubjective realm (environment) is subsequently categorized and mapped, all of which gradually establishes a sense of self and others. These categories and mapping become expectancies on the basis of which we tend to anticipate and organize future experience. Beginning with these early familial experiences, an infant begins to develop a sense of self and others, of feeling loved, valued, cherished, respected or not. Stern (1985) identified the sense of an emergent
self, the sense of a core self, the sense of a subjective self, and the sense of verbal self, all remaining fully active throughout life. Attachment research (Ainsworth, et al., 1978; Main, 2000) has demonstrated the occurrence and psychological impact of secure or insecure attachment experience. Kohut (1984) has postulated that mirroring, idealizing, and twinship selfobject needs and experience all contribute to the development and maintenance of the self. These are all dimensions of experience that contribute to the various senses of ourselves and of others, of our dispositions to feel loved or not, to feel loving or not. It is out of this complex array of implicit and explicit attitudes toward ourselves, others, and the world that sexual attraction and romantic love emerges. Romantic love thrives when anchored in secure attachment or sufficient reflective awareness to overcome insecure attachment (Fonagy, et al., 1991; Fonagy, 2001), positive attitudes about one self and others, relational procedures that enhance the depth of emotional connection, and comfort with sensuality, touch, romance, and sexuality.

Repetitive thwarting of developmental needs for love during childhood establishes negative percepts of self and self-with-other and other implicit patterns of thinking and relating that seriously encumber cocreating experiences to love and to be loved needed throughout one’s life. In the analytic relationship, a patient often searches for developmentally needed experiences of love and, yet, on the basis of past repetitive traumatic experience constructs (perceptually, cognitively, and interactively) with expectancies of rejection. A patient, generally speaking, enters the analytic arena with two sets of expectancies—expectancies of hope for what is needed for growth and expectancies of repetition of the problematic past. Reciprocally, the analyst enters the arena with his or her needs and implicit and explicit patterns of thinking and relating. With their respective subjectivities, patient and analyst interact implicitly and explicitly.

For Freud, the centrality of the Oedipus complex required its emergence and analysis in every psychoanalytic treatment. Patients often complained, “Do I have to fall in love with you for treatment to work?” And analysts often felt under a similar pressure. In contrast to the assumptions of the displacement model of transference, wherein a patient displaces and projects regardless of the personhood of the analyst, the organizing model of transference reveals that a patient and analyst variably contribute to the patient’s transferential reactions. In my view, whether or not romantic love emerges within the analytic relationship depends on a host of variables, including a patient’s and analyst’s genders, ages, and sexual orientations, a patient’s satisfaction with an external romantic relationship, and a patient’s developmental needs. A patient’s conflicts, constrictions, and expansions of romantic love need to be addressed in those relationships in which the patient is experiencing romantic love. Any requirement for romantic love to enter the analytic relationship imposes an unfortunate agenda on patient and analyst. Love in any form requires emotional space and freedom to emerge.

CLINICAL VIGNETTE

I conclude with a clinical vignette to illustrate the complex interplay of past relational experience and developmental thrusts within the arena of romantic love, emerging, in this instance, within the analytic relationship.

When Lauren entered psychoanalytic treatment, she was 27, married, and depressed.4 Having come from a family in which there was considerable marital discord, her depression was related to

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4This clinical vignette involves a patient that is a composite of several patients so that recognition is not possible.
feeling unloved and unlovable. I was 48 at the time and married. I experienced Lauren as intelligent, attractive, and reflective. Marked by idealizing and mirroring selfobject components, we formed an intense connection in the analytic relationship. These selfobject components were periodically interwoven with highly charged romantic and erotic fantasies involving marriage and a lifetime of togetherness. By the end of the first five months of treatment, Lauren’s depression had lifted and her vitality was noticeably reestablished.

Six months into treatment, Lauren this particular day declared with passionate conviction, “You know I am absolutely convinced that you and I are going to get married.” Internally, I felt alarmed at her strong sense of conviction. On the one hand, I could momentarily entertain and enjoy her fantasy and, on the other hand, there were, of course, just a few problems with that fantasy. What struck me was her absolute conviction. I wondered to myself as to its origins. “What is this about her? What is it about me, about us? Had my deep caring for her been experienced as seductive?” I, of course, explored her feelings and thoughts in an attempt to understand them.

Almost a year later, Lauren decried how her father’s love was not a genuine love of her but was a “self-invested love”; how she felt that he did not really love her but needed her for his own reasons. In the context of intense marital discord, her father had emotionally distanced himself from her mother and had chosen Lauren, to him the more beautiful and intelligent of his two daughters, to be his “special one,” his surrogate wife. Although there were no explicit sexual transgressions, Lauren’s father was emotionally romantically taken with her.

Lauren had entered treatment feeling unloved and unlovable, in part, we came to learn, as the result of her father’s “self-invested love.” Through mirroring and idealizing selfobject transfer components in the analytic relationship and her expanded reflective awareness of her thematic feelings and their origins, Lauren began to feel much better about herself. When romantic love emerged, a certain confidence also became manifest. It finally dawned on me that she had learned, implicitly and explicitly, that she was the chosen one and was irresistible. When she wanted to marry me, she, understandably, on the basis of past experience with her father, felt absolutely convinced that I, in turn, would want to and would marry her. Now we understood the source of her emotional conviction. We could then better understand the various components of her romantic love. Although we recognized how she was attempting to expand and deepen her capacity and feeling for mutuality in romantic love within the analytic relationship, we also were able to illuminate how her implicit relational knowing that she was irresistible was operative. This sense of irresistibility, however, did not feel quite real, for on a deeper, mainly unconscious level, she had felt father’s personal investment that had detracted her from developing a more realistic sense of herself as desirable, as well as establishing a sense of relatedness with men and, in this instance, with me.

IN CONCLUSION

In light of recent scientific developments in nonlinear dynamic systems theory and empirical research, the Oedipus complex is no longer viable as a posited hard-wired linear phase of development. In contrast to Freud’s creative interpretation of Oedipus Rex in keeping with his theory of the centrality of the development of the Oedipus complex involving universal unconscious incestuous and murderous wishes, a close analysis of the Greek tragic epic reveals generations of parental abuse and abandonment and formation of corresponding implicit relational patterns that un-
leash an inevitable deteriorating spiral of destruction of self and progeny. The tragedy of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex lies in the inevitable unfolding of life’s events involving intergenerational relational patterns of abuse and transgressions of which Oedipus has no knowledge and, ultimately, no power to alter.

In the psychoanalytic lexicon, the term Oedipal is used loosely to refer to triadic relationships, initially child, father, and mother, that involve libidinal/incestuous and aggressive/competitive wishes. Based on empirical research, I have addressed four problematic assumptions of the Oedipus complex and offered current alternatives: (1) the linear developmental model, as compared to nonlinear dynamic systems theory; (2) a two-stage developmental sequence from dyadic to triadic relationships, as compared to the simultaneous developmental emergence of dyadic and triadic relationships; (3) bifurcation of gender, as compared to a varied and nuanced view of gender and its development; and (4) the posited emergence of sexuality between the ages of 3 and 5, followed by a latency period and a reemergence of sexuality with the onset of puberty as compared to the early development of gender-related implicit procedures that enter into the later emergence of sexuality, including the much later hormonally charged sexual attraction around the ages of 9 and 10, and, finally, the development of full romantic love.

In place of an Oedipal complex or phase of development, I have proposed that Oedipal phenomenology (in its positive form) most aptly refers to a particular relational configuration in which the child expansively tries on the role of a heterosexual partner of the opposite-gendered parent and variably feels both identified with and competitive with the same-gendered parent. Beginning with early precursors in heterosexual gendered child/parent implicit relating, relational procedures continue to accrue and be refined throughout childhood into adulthood. Identification and competitive expansiveness with the same-gendered parent, however, is not only an aspect of the Oedipal relational configuration but is foundational in child–parent dyadic relationships involving the same or opposite genders, in establishing a sense of competence in many arenas.

I have proposed that romantic love is a far more inclusive term that captures the phenomenology of romantic, erotic loving experience. The Oedipal relational configuration in its positive form is an important, but only one, configuration that affects heterosexual romantic experience. For example, romantic feelings, depending on parents and child and perhaps especially in the case of a single parent, might bypass the parents and, instead, are expressed and explored primarily with other relatives, teachers, peers, and idolized popular figures. Systems theory leads us to believe that, at a process level, there are many possible and often unpredictable pathways for the development of sexuality, romantic love, gender, and sexual orientation. Anchored in past and current implicit and explicit learning, developmental processes in these arenas are infinitely complex and variably interconnected processes. Our focus is now shifting to more detailed studies of what contributes to the development, enhancement, and maintenance of romantic love.

Clinically, I now view the emergence of romantic and sexual feelings in the analytic relationship not as a regression to an earlier phase of development, but as a continued open-ended striving for further psychological development, especially in the arenas of sexuality and romantic love as well as possibly sexual orientation and gender. Many variables, however, contribute to whether or not romantic love emerges within the analytic relationship. Not to expect or require the emergence of romantic feelings within the analytic relationship helps us to embrace the nuanced complexity, conflict, and striving for growth in those relationships in which romantic love makes its appearance.
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Suite 250
250 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10107-0500
JLF@jamesfosshage.net
www.jamesfosshage.net