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**A Re-reading of the Oedipus
Complex in the Light of Ogden's
Re-reading of Loewald's Reading:
Oedipus Revisited**

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Abstract

My paper sets out to do a re-reading of the Oedipus complex through the re-reading of Thomas Ogden's reading of Loewald's 'Waning of the Oedipus complex'. This re-reading is used as a springboard to develop some new ideas regarding the Oedipus complex. Within this context, it is suggested that if one returns to the original Greek myth itself, which does not reflect the Oedipus complex, it is possible to find different psychoanalytic perspectives regarding the process of 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two.

Keywords: Oedipus complex, Oedipus revisited, Loewald, Ogden, adolescence.

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Introduction

In psychoanalytic theory, the myth of Oedipus represents the conflicted, triangulated relationship between the young child and the oedipal parents. Psychological issues that are resolved at this early point in development are thought to recur in later development. In this regard, the Oedipus complex is concerned with the real and imagined fantasies and internal object relations that emerge between the ages of about three to five years. Hans Loewald (1979) presented a detailed reconceptualization of Freud's Oedipus complex in his celebrated paper, the *Waning of the Oedipus complex*. Perhaps the title conveyed the sentiments of that time that the Oedipus complex was waning and on its way out as more analysts began to focus their attention on pre-oedipal theory. Thomas Ogden (2006) engaged in a close reading of Loewald's paper and was evidently impressed with this work and claimed it was a 'watershed in the development of psychoanalytic thought' (p. 651). Ogden claims that Loewald's reconceptualization of Freud's Oedipus complex is a fresh way of viewing the essential human tasks entailed in 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two' (p. 651). It is noted however, that this is not the first time that the Oedipus complex has been reformulated. Early analytic writers such as Klein, Fairbairn, Lacan and Kohut have re-examined this concept as well as more recently, other writers have also engaged in this kind of work on the Oedipus complex (Schafer, 1983; Swartz, 2007; Freeman, 2008; Levy-Warren, 2008; Clark, 2009; Adler, 2010; Bergmann, 2010; Blum, 2010; Lachmann, 2010). All these articles offer the reader a different view of the Oedipus complex but they essentially remain close to the original ideas of Freud (1924) and do explore the original myth and what this may offer in terms of psychoanalytic processes.

It has been said that 'the legend of Oedipus does not necessarily describe the Oedipus complex, for Oedipus did not kill his father in order to possess his mother sexually. What actually took place between father and son was the ancient equivalent of a right-of-way dispute between two drivers on a highway' (Bergmann, 2010, p. 535). But what if we return to the original Greek myth and follow the story? What can we discover about the inherent themes within this story and the possible psychoanalytically informed understanding of the process of 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two'?

My paper sets out to do a re-reading of the Oedipus complex through the re-reading of Thomas Ogden's (2006) reading of Loewald's (1979) 'Waning of the Oedipus complex'. This re-reading is used as a springboard to develop some new ideas regarding the Oedipus complex. Within this context, it is suggested that if one returns to the original Greek myth itself, which does not reflect the Oedipus complex, it is possible to find different psychoanalytic perspectives regarding the process of 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two'.

Ogden's reading of Loewald's re-reading of the Oedipus complex: A brief synopsis

Ogden identifies several reformulations of Loewald which include the following ideas;

1) That what lies at the core of the Oedipus complex is the tension between what the parents want for the child and the child's inherent drive to be his own person and establish his own capacities; 2) The notion that the desire to murder the parent, to commit oedipal parricide, is essentially a drive for emancipation. Thus the murder of the parent is thought to be a rebellion against, and appropriation of, parental authority; 3) In the act of parricide is the idea that the child 'atones' by incorporating a different version of the experience of the child's oedipal parents. This internalization of a new version of the experience of the parents gives way to the emergence of a new structure within the self; 4) The idea that in killing the oedipal parents and thus parental authority, and taking such authority for himself, he actually does 'kill something vital in them' and in so-doing, facilitates their dying and the emergence of the successive generations; 5) The idea that the incestuousness of the Oedipus complex is about a healthy development of a 'transitional incestuous object relationship' which during the life-time of the individual, arbitrates and intercedes in the ebb and flow between undifferentiated and differentiated aspects of self, other and relatedness.

In this context, Ogden shows how Loewald re-invents Freud's version of the Oedipus complex. Ogden, in his re-reading of this work, takes on the task to reconceive the Oedipus complex. It is a comprehensive paper and Ogden selects to discuss Loewald's overlapping ideas in more or less the sequence Loewald presents them. To this end, he addresses the tension between influence and originality in the generations; the idea of the murder of the oedipal parents and the appropriation of their authority; the idea of the change of the internalization of the child's experience of the parents which give rise to a 'self responsible for itself and to itself' (p. 652); and the shift between undifferentiated and differentiated forms of self and object relatedness in the form of a transitional incestuousness object relationship which itself mediates this shift. In the paper, Ogden also presents a comparison between Freud's and Loewald's conceptualization of the Oedipus complex.

The paper by Ogden on the re-reading of Loewald sets out to present Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. The main ideas of Freud are developed on the basis of four revolutionary concepts. These are briefly; 1) All human psychology can be understood in terms of urges that have their meaning in sexual and aggressive instincts; 2) The sexual instinct is the driving force and is experienced sequentially at the oral, anal and phallic levels of development within the first five years of life; 3) the myth of Oedipus is the most well-known and used myth in psychoanalysis and presents a template for all human psychological development; 4) the triangulated set of murderous and incestuous fantasies that make up the Oedipus complex is laid down by the

genes and is thus universal and inborn and this is the way all humans organize their experience.

Ogden writes a little more about what these ideas mean and describes the pattern of development for the boy child and girl child in relation to the oedipal parents. A mention is made of the child fearing castration for his murderous and incestuous thoughts and that this threat is present in the mind of the child as a 'primal phantasy'. The fear forces the child to relinquish the sexual and aggressive strivings in relation to the oedipal parents and replace those with more acceptable identifications with parental authority and ideals. This relinquishment forms the superego.

Ogden also presents the notion of the tension between influence and originality. In this regard, Ogden shows that Loewald believes that 'no generation has the right to claim absolute authority for its creations, and yet, each generation does contribute something uniquely its own' (p. 653). In this context, 'originality is claimed for very little' (ibid). Ogden states that Loewald's paper explores in detail this tension between 'one's indebtedness' to the succeeding generation and the wish to free oneself from them and create something new, and in so doing, this becomes a process of 'becoming a person in one's own terms'(ibid). Moreover, Ogden also deals with the notion of repression in the Oedipus complex. He focuses on how Loewald draws attention to the way in which Freud (1923, 1925) writes about the fate of the Oedipus complex, and the use of the term 'destruction' and 'demolition' (1925, p. 257). This provokes Loewald, according to Ogden, to develop the idea of repression and the fate of the Oedipus complex. Briefly, Ogden at this stage remarks that the idea of the Oedipus complex as being destroyed is difficult because how are we to understand the idea that some of the 'most important experiences, in health, are destroyed' (p. 654); and 2) the idea that the demolition of the Oedipus complex is 'more than a repression' (ibid). Ogden leaves the reader to grapple with these questions and suggests that the reader must decide what the meaning of the term 'repression' is as it is used.

The notion of parricide and it being a 'loving murder' is highlighted by Ogden (p. 655). Ogden shows how Loewald re-conceptualizes the notion of 'murder' to 'parricide' and indicates that this act is committed by someone who respects and loves, and stands in a 'sacred relation' to the father, mother or relative nearby. Ogden remarks that for Loewald, parricide involves a 'revolt against parental authority and parental claims to authorship of the child' (ibid). To this end, the murder is the severing of the sacred bond and the child's striving for emancipation. There is no 'fearful threat of bodily mutilation' but rather a 'passionate assertion of the active urge for emancipation' (p. 655). Ogden discusses this point at length. He remarks that for Loewald, at the core of the Oedipus complex is a face-off between the generations, and this means the struggle for autonomy and authority. Ogden discusses this struggle in detail and shows how Loewald suggests that 'even as we fight to maintain our parental authority, we allow ourselves to be killed by our children lest we diminish them (p. 657). In the myth, notes Ogden and Loewald, the oedipal parents cannot kill their child but in so doing, they create the situation in which

their child grows up to fulfill the prophecy and kill them. In this sense, according to Ogden, both parents and also analysts set in motion a ‘process in which – if all goes well – will contribute to our dying’ (p. 657) and that we must allow ourselves ‘to be killed by our patients lest we diminish them’ (ibid). This means that parents should not undermine their children and diminish them but rather step aside as they begin their own journey to maturity and independence. The parents need to also be parents in terms of laying the ground rules in the home and establishing authority and who is in charge. Only children, who have parental rules, can learn boundaries and respect others. When this happens, the parents have been positioned as authority figures and this makes it easier, as Ogden notes, to kill the oedipal parents and appropriate their authority – there is an authority to kill and appropriate because the oedipal parents have set this up. The dying of the parents is not just a metaphor for parents relinquishing their authority but also, Loewald insists, that the ‘living out of the Oedipus complex by children and their parents is part of the emotional process . . . by which human beings grow up, grow old and die’ (p. 658).

Oedipus revisited

It is not that the above psychoanalytic reformulations are unacceptable, but if one returns to the Greek myth of Oedipus we can discover some more aspects of psychic development not yet offered. What is missing from the above reformulations is not so much what the parents want for the child and what the child wants - an ancient theme of the inevitable entanglement between the two generations – but a focus on the oedipal parents’ attempt to murder their infant child. What is the implication of this in terms of psychoanalytic theory? The oedipal parents fail in all aspects of parenting. More importantly, they fail to confront their destiny as that of dying at the hands of their child. It is suggested that the parents must face the tasks of raising their child who, if supported, will surpass them both. In this regard, the new generation’s destiny is to overtake/surpass the achievements of the preceding generation. In terms of development, the child will fulfil his destiny despite the failings of the oedipal parents.

Moreover, Loewald claims that if the desire to murder the parents, to commit oedipal parricide, is essentially a drive for emancipation, and the murder is thought to be a rebellion against, and appropriation of, parental authority, what do we understand when there is no murder of the parents? If we look at the myth from a different standpoint, we see a young man who leaves home in order to preserve his ‘parents’ lives. The only interaction with his real, biological father was the road rage incident. But to him it was a fight with a stranger, an older man who stood in his way. It may be viewed that at the core of the Oedipus complex is not a rebellion against the oedipal parents but a desire to preserve them and thus to preserve their parental authority. In this sense, emancipation from the parents, or, as Loewald says, the child’s inherent

drive to be his own person and establish his own capacities, is achieved by recognising their authority and preserving their power. Oedipus does not appropriate parental authority but preserves it. Such preservation impels him to move from the oedipal parents and their influence and develop his own authority and establish his own sense of self.

Adolescent Oedipus leaves home and begins on his journey and in this way, only by leaving home and letting go of the parental ties and childhood itself, does he begin to face his own destiny. If we explore the psychology of adolescence, as described by Erik Erikson (1950), this is a period of time when the young person must grow up and confront the difficult challenges along the road. Oedipus does not manage well when confronted by his first major block. He loses his temper and kills the older man who blocks his way. He kills an older man but does not take the throne as a result. This killing has nothing to do with taking the older man's authority / throne but it is about the relationship between generations. The older generation may be perceived by the younger generation as being a block and hindrance to their development, and thus it is not about the younger generation feeling threatened or attacked but about the existential angst of not finding a place on the road and in the world. Both need to negotiate a plan that allows the one to pass and the other to step aside. This road rage incident is the eternal theme of inter-generational conflict when there is no understanding between them as to what the other can offer and what the other can learn. It becomes a destructive event where anger abounds, feathers fly and there is no communication except in heated arguments and rage-filled encounters. This is the fight that happens between generations in which the older generation does not know when to step aside and the younger generation does not know when to allow the older generation to teach them their place. As father and son fight to have right of way on the road, so the generations fight to establish their place and in relation to each other and their individual road/pathways. What is often overlooked in the myth of Oedipus is that he later searches for the man who killed the King. He does not know he is the murderer. His search is motivated by compassion to know the truth. We know that adolescence is a time of searching for identity (Erikson, 1950) a sense of self as well as a longing to know things; to be able to do things, to achieve some kind of status and recognition in the world of others, including older more experienced men and women. Adolescents test the boundaries of authority and push the envelope of acceptable behaviour, and sometimes confront their own short-comings. Years later when confronted by what he had done as a young man, Oedipus is so distressed he cuts out his eyes and wonders the earth, blind and ashamed. What may lie at the core of the Oedipus complex is the development of the capacity for remorse which only emerges years later when there is greater maturity. Remorse is the recognition of 'crimes done' whether consciously or without intention. It maybe that he kills something vital in the oedipal parents, as Loewald would suggest, but it is more than that. If the Oedipus complex is about the essential human tasks entailed in 'growing up, growing old and in between the two', then it includes the development of

the capacity for remorse, the realization of one's crimes against others, and the necessary self-imposed atonement and reparation.

It is not a coincidence that the Sphinx appears to the young man Oedipus. He has killed the stranger on the road and finds himself facing yet another challenge. Late adolescence and young adulthood is the stage of development where the person becomes more aware of life and death and the flawed nature of humanity. It is only when a certain level of maturity occurs (such as in late adolescence) that such awareness develops. In the myth, the story entails the challenge set by the Sphinx in the form of a riddle. If anyone could answer the riddle correctly, he would 'win the throne' of the dead king and the hand in marriage of the king's widow. The riddle was: 'What walks on all four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?' Thus it is the Sphinx who has the power to hand over the authority of the throne. It is thus the awareness of life that enables the riddle to be answered. Oedipus answers correctly and in so-doing describes the process of 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two' - 'Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and; in old age, he uses a cane or walking stick'. How do we make meaning of this? Loewald suggests the murder of the parents is thought to be a rebellion against, and appropriation of, parental authority. But it is not the father's authority which is appropriated. It is the Sphinx's authority. The implication of authority and kingship being conferred by someone outside the triangulated parental-child unit implies that 'the other' evolves to become important and relevant to psychic development. The other is now significant in the development of the adolescent. We know that in adolescence, the family plays less of a role in shaping the destiny of the young person while friends and girlfriends or boyfriends play a great role. The implication is that the importance of the oedipal parents wane in terms of internalized object relations, although there remains an on-going relationship with their parents, they learn they need to leave behind their childhood. In striving for independence and agency, adolescents develop new kinds of object relationships with others outside of the oedipal triangle. As they become more independent of parents and engage more with peers and seek some sense of belonging and identity, adolescents progress towards shifts in their internal representations of self, other and the world. The parents become less large in their lives while the peers become more valued in terms of internal representations of who they are. This is the time of self-definition in relation to others beyond the oedipal triangle.

Levy-Warren (2008) describes the Oedipus complex in adolescence as the re-emergence of the adolescent's sexual and gender-based lives. As the onset of puberty occurs the body of the adolescent becomes more and more like the adult. She remarks that as they develop, they are expected to be more adult in behaviour, and their gender-based identifications are expected to be more in line with adult notions of gender expectations. In the context of moving away from parents and finding a sense of self shaped by the broader community and culture in which they live, they spend time developing a firmer sense of gender or what it means to be male and female. Whatever they learnt in childhood

about the private parts of others' bodies and the private sexual lives of adults, that is, about sex, must be revisited and re-negotiated (Levy-Warren, 2008). If we follow this line of thought, issues of gender identity, sexuality and sexual orientation are heightened during this time. In the myth of Oedipus, he marries and engages in sexual relations which produce four children. The implication is that the child has grown up to become a sexual and sexualised person, ready for mature sexual encounters with self and other. If the Oedipus complex is about the essential human tasks entailed in 'growing up, growing old and in between the two', then it includes the capacity for mature sexual relations throughout the life cycle. The central issues in adolescence become the working through of sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual fears, and sexual intimacy. In this regard, adolescence is concerned with the creation of new oedipal fantasies about private parts of bodies and private sexual lives of others and self. New self-representations develop in relation to new sexual experiences and the establishing of a sense of being sexual. What may lie at the core of the Oedipus complex as it emerges in adolescence is not so much a recurring of the earlier oedipal phase of childhood gender identity and understanding that adult (oedipal parents) sexuality excludes them, the acknowledgement that the mother loves another (the father) but the emergence of sexuality that excludes the oedipal parents and includes the new other.

Ogden identifies Loewald's notion that the incestuousness of the Oedipus complex is about a healthy development of a 'transitional incestuous object relationship' which during the life-time of the individual, arbitrates and intercedes in the ebb and flow between undifferentiated and differentiated aspects of self, other and relatedness. Extending this concept to adolescence, the 'incestuousness' of the Oedipus complex is emphasized in that this is the time when the erotic becomes a focus and there is a 'joining to another' which potentially is dangerous if the other has not experienced earlier phases of symbiotic 'incestuousness' and healthily shifted from undifferentiated experiences of self to differentiated experiences of self in which self is first defined before merging again with another. Related to this is the notion of being in love. Adolescence is the stage of being in or falling in love. The only completion is the guy next door and not the father. It was Freud who felt he was as a child in love with his mother and jealous of his father. This personal experience he generalised to all others and in so-doing he developed the understanding of the universal incest taboo. But Oedipus is an adolescent who soon marries and there is little evidence for the universality of the love for the mother and the jealousy of the father, but it seems there is some evidence that most young men and women at some stage in their adulthood may fall in love, and what may lie at the core of the Oedipus complex as it emerges in adolescence is the capacity for falling in love and dealing jealousy and competition, whether real or imagined.

Final comments

My paper set out to do a re-reading of the Oedipus complex through the re-reading of Thomas Ogden's reading of Loewald's 'Waning of the Oedipus complex'. This re-reading was used as a springboard to develop some new ideas regarding the Oedipus complex. If one returns to the original Greek myth, which does not reflect the Oedipus complex, it is possible to find different psychoanalytic perspectives regarding the process of 'growing up, growing old, and in between the two. In this paper, using the notion of the adolescent Oedipus, several new ideas have been offered. If one examines the original Oedipus complex, we see that it is typically thought to be a childhood based set of internal and external relationships with the oedipal parents and with an emphasis on internal phantasies which give way to gender identity and superego development. However, as one grows up, grows old and all the lies in between, the set of internal and external relationships change over time. The parents become less internal objects and have less impact on their self-representations, especially during adolescence when the child begins to strive for independence. I have suggested some new ways of viewing the adolescent Oedipus and linked this to 'the Oedipus complex in adolescence'. What I also would like to suggest is that the emergence of new sets of internalizations (such as the capacity for remorse or the experience of falling in love) continues throughout the life cycle and may re-emerge when situations occur that bring into question these earlier internalizations. The implication is that new psychic structures (such as the capacity for remorse) that emerge in adolescence and that have not been experienced before because this is new developmental level may re-emerge later in adulthood and other later phases of development (such as old age). This notion that new structures develop for the first time in adolescence (and are not just a repetition or echo of earlier structures and internalizations of self and other) is a complete revisioning of the Oedipus complex.

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