

LAIUS COMPLEX AND MOTHER-CHILD SYMBIOSIS¹

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The present paper intends to show through two specific concepts, the Laius complex and mother-child symbiosis, how the new psychoanalytic ego psychology in its present German development is moving, as elsewhere, in the direction of Individual Psychology.

LAIUS COMPLEX

The Laius complex is the father's complex of fear of the son as a potential rival in his own prerogatives. It is considered more fundamental than the Freudian Oedipus complex which describes the son's rivalry with his father, founded on the son's sexual desire for his mother. Laius is the father of Oedipus.

Graber³ holds that the original guilt rests with Laius (12, p. 17f.). Since Laius wanted to kill his son, the son's complex can be regarded as secondary, as reactive (12, p. 18). It is at this point that Graber speaks of the "Laius complex," in 1957. Whether this is the first occurrence of this very striking term I am not able to determine.⁴ Graber points out that Freud, by talking only of an Oedipus complex, spared the more powerful partner in the father-son problem situation.

Ammon⁵ sees the working of the Laius complex within the traditional psychoanalytic organization. Here the complex manifests itself in the stringency of requirements by which the would-be psychoanalyst is kept from independent practicing until the age of 40 or more, which Ammon calls an "infantilizing effect" (5, p. 12). Ammon does not want to do away with the Oedipus complex interpreted as

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³Gustav Hans Graber is a very active psychoanalyst in Berne, Switzerland, and among the co-editors of *Dynamische Psychiatrie* of which journal Ammon is editor (see footnote 5).—Ed. note.

⁴A few years earlier, in 1953, the Italian-born and trained Argentinian psychiatrist Juan Giovanni Dalma had formally proposed the term Laius complex. In a paper in which he listed numerous examples from mythology and history of violence of fathers against their sons, followed by four cases, Dalma proposed "to name this psychological situation the Laius complex" (10).—Ed. note.

⁵Günter Ammon is president of the Germany Academy for Psychoanalysis (DAP) which he founded in 1969 after his resignation from the German Psychoanalytic Association (DPV). He is also editor of *Dynamische Psychiatrie*, the official publication of the DAP. The new organization is critical of traditional psychoanalysis, especially "the mythical death and aggression instinct" and stresses group psychotherapy (see 11, pp. 2, 3, 52-59).—Ed. note.

"aggression of the son against the father," but he holds that aggression of "father against the son, respectively ruler against subject, followed by a revolt of the oppressed against their oppressor" must be regarded as primary (6). If one considers only the Oedipus complex, as does "orthodox" psychoanalysis, "one takes sides with the oppressor, as far as the exploration of psychodynamic development is concerned" (6).

From the viewpoint of Individual Psychology the concept involved here is not new although the term, *Laius complex*, is. The possible rejection by the son of the father as a reaction to his attitude follows quite easily from Adler's theory. It is astonishing that orthodox psychoanalysis could overlook that the "oedipal" event, in real life as in the myth, is only a part within a larger frame. When we examine this we see that the myth includes further parts that are closer to Individual Psychological interpretation than to psychoanalytic interpretation.

Throughout the Oedipus myth the issue is power. I showed this in a small book several years ago (13, p. 46). Although I did not use the term "*Laius complex*," I pointed out that in the myth the misfortune begins with the theft of the son of Pelops by King Laius. When the oracle proclaimed to him that he was to lose his life by the hand of his own son, this was in expiation for this theft. To protect himself from these consequences Laius had his young son exposed in the wilderness with his feet pierced. Beyond this, the adult Oedipus became the victim of violent aggression by Laius and his men, and not knowing each other, Oedipus subsequently slew his father. The Sphinx thus exercised her bloody power. Her turn came when Oedipus had solved her riddle. She considered this such a loss of prestige that she could not survive it; she threw herself from her rock and perished. While Oedipus was King there were some power intrigues, and after his demise power struggles ensued between his brother-in-law and his sons (13, p. 46). "Power, power, and again power is the issue. The incest motive . . . is only a part of this and is of secondary nature. It would never have come to this, had not Laius withdrawn all love from his son in the form of exposing him" (13, p. 46).

MOTHER-CHILD SYMBIOSIS

Among the numerous reasons for aggression on the part of the father we want to mention here only the mistaken mother-child re-

lationship that Adler has described. When the mother pampers the child, exaggerates her contact with the child, so that it cannot establish any further social relationships, "the father often notices this faulty development and wants to correct it, for example by introducing a more severe upbringing. What happens? The child moves still closer toward the mother and eliminates the father still further" (2, p. 27).

It is one of Adler's well-known theses that a mutual dependency may develop between the pampering mother and the children which represents an obstacle for the child's psychological development. Adler speaks of "a mother-child life circle (*Lebenskreis*) by which everything else is excluded" (2, p. 26). From this formulation it was but a small step to the metaphor of symbiosis. Ferdinand Birnbaum, an educator and prominent coworker of Adler, used the term as in the following passage: "The close contact with the mother must not lead to an isolated symbiosis. It is the mother's responsibility to break the narrow frame of the mother-child symbiosis and to help the child gain contact with other persons. The first person to be considered for this widening of interest is the father" (9, p. 48).

Now, psychoanalytic ego psychology has newly discovered this concept and situation, which is presently the topic of much discussion. Biermann (8) believes that the symbiotic mother-child relationship was first described by Margaret S. Mahler (15).⁶ Psychoanalysis has undeniably gained by the exploration of this phenomenon. But, as we have shown, it is actually only continuing the thinking of Individual Psychology—without admitting it, and often probably without knowing it.

According to Ammon (4, 5) the roots of psychological difficulties are found more often in the "symbiosis complex" than in the Oedipus complex, especially among young men. If we consider the role into which the father may be cast in Adler's view through the mother-child symbiosis, a possible connection between the symbiosis complex and the Llaus complex may be assumed from the viewpoint of Individual Psychology.

⁶Margaret S. Mahler who introduced the concept of mother-infant symbiosis into psychoanalytic ego psychology was recently celebrated by an impressive *Festschrift* of 25 original essays by former pupils or close associates. As "symptomatic developments in symbiosis—overprotection, oversolicitude, dominance, the wish to keep the child passive and dependent" are mentioned (16, p. 271), all attitudes familiar to Adlerian psychology.—Ed. note.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

How much Ammon is altogether moving in the direction of Adler can be seen by his recent wholehearted rejection of Freud's dualistic instinct theory of libido versus destrudo, which he feels leaves one in a dead-end street of stagnation and hopelessness. Instead he proposes the concept of "constructive aggression" (3). By this he comes in fact close to reviving Adler's original concept, presented in his important 1908 paper on the "aggression drive" (1). In a paper on creativity Ammon presents the thesis that "creativity is not based on repressed sexuality and aggression, is not reduceable to a drive inhibition or a sublimation of drives, but develops in the context of a free development of sexuality and constructive aggression." He explains further that he means by aggression "not an innate drive of destruction but an ego-function . . . which depending on the reaction of the environment may be destructive or constructive" (7, p. 269).

Adler wrote in an introductory paragraph to his 1908 paper which he added in a later edition:

After various groping attempts I arrived at the view that the most decisive factor in the life of the child and the adult is his attitude toward the tasks before him. One can know a person from the way he tackles these tasks. This includes always a kind of attack. Only in further development can traits of patiently waiting and of avoiding enter in. I called the sum of these phenomena the "aggression drive," to denote that the attempt of an overcoming, of a coming to terms with, thereby became the issue (*um zu bezeichnen, dass der Versuch einer Bemächtigung, einer Auseinandersetzung, damit zur Sprache käme*) (1, p. 33).

Whether the aggression drive will take a constructive or a destructive direction will depend on the development of the child's social interest, as Adler also added, at the end of his paper in the later edition (1, p. 42).

This presentation has been a further development from a letter (14) discussing a report of Ammon's thoughts on the Laius complex (5). Ammon criticized the psychoanalytic societies for "preserving of monuments" and "hero worship" and debasing the work of Freud to a dogma, thus manifesting a Laius complex towards innovative ideas. We compared Freud himself with Laius for repudiating Adler so emphatically that to this day most Freudians hardly dare to mention Adler's name. To this Ammon replied very graciously (6), comparing the silence that was pronounced over Adler with his own situation, and welcoming our suggestion for an objective discussion between Individual Psychology and his own orientation.

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