

MORE ON THE LAIUS COMPLEX

A year ago we published a paper by Rudolf Kausen (9) showing that the concept of the Laius complex—which is presently often stressed in German ego-psychology, especially by Ammon (1, 2)—is another incident of ego psychology moving in the direction of Adler's Individual Psychology.

The concept refers to the hatred by the father for his son and that this is more fundamental than the Oedipus complex, the son's hatred for the father. In the myth it was the father, Laius, who earlier had his son Oedipus exposed as an infant for fear that the son would become a threat to him. Such thinking regards the entire myth as a power struggle rather than a kind of metaphor for incestual desires, and the Oedipus complex is considered in the light of power as well. This interpretation is therefore in the direction of Adlerian value psychology and away from Freudian drive psychology.

Since the publication of Kausen's paper a new first publication of the term Laius complex has become known; the unpublished use of the concept has been found to go back several decades further; and the concept has been independently "created" once more. The following is a brief account of these three events.

THE FIRST PUBLICATION

Kausen received a letter and reprint from G. H. Graber (6) documenting that credit for the original publication of the term Laius complex goes by one year to him rather than J. G. Dalma (3) who had been credited as having published the term the first time. Thus Kausen has asked us to print the following correction.

CORRECTION

In my attempt to clarify the origin of the concept of "Laius complex" (9) I was not able to commit myself definitively. I met the new term for the first time in the book by Graber (7) published in 1957, but learned later that Dalma (3) had used the term in a paper as early as 1953, which I gave as the earliest known source. Since the appearance of my article I learned that Graber (6) had published the term as early as 1952, a year earlier than Dalma.

While establishing the priority of Graber, I should like to reaffirm the extraordinary significance of his finding. He has not only extracted much more meaning from the Oedipus myth than did Freud. He has also shown with the support of comprehensive documentation from mythology that the "son complex of the fathers," the fear of being dethroned by one's sons, is a fundamental problem of man.

—RUDOLF KAUSEN

Dr. Dalma, to whom we sent a copy of Graber's original paper, replied: "Undeniably the priority goes to Graber! But I swear that the thought and the cases which I reported in support of the Laius complex had been in my awareness for a long time."¹

AN UNPUBLISHED ANTICIPATION

Henri F. Ellenberger, author of *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (4) became interested in Kausen's paper and informed us that the Reverend Oskar Pfister, the early Swiss psychoanalyst, had spoken of a Laius attitude of the father many years ago. Ellenberger wrote: "Dalma's substantial account was well known to me, but I had always believed that the Reverend Oskar Pfister was the originator of that concept. Since I had a didactic analysis with him, I am quite sure that he talked about it and considered it as one of his contributions to psychoanalysis. . . . So far as I remember, he did not use the term 'Laius complex,' but taught that the 'Oedipus attitude' of the son was often a response to a 'Laius attitude' of the father. I am unable to remember where and when he published his observations on that matter."²

"I have the definite feeling that he claimed to have discovered the fact before 1914, but I would not swear it at the witness stand. It seems to me that many psychoanalysts must have become aware of the 'Laius complex,' at least in certain cases. But none of them, apparently, went so far as to systematize this concept as Dalma did later. (I cannot speak of Graber, not having read his paper.)"³

A RECENT "NEW" DISCOVERY

It is always interesting to observe that new ideas do not become generally known by themselves, or become known only within limited

¹Personal communication, February 9, 1973.

²Personal communication, August 31, 1972.

³Personal communication, November 2, 1972.

circles. Thus it is possible that they occur again and again as "new." In the above we have made no attempt to give a complete account of the many-sided origin of the Laius complex. But we wish to add the most recent occurrence.

Thomas S. Vernon, Department of Philosophy, University of Arkansas, recently commented on the often observed "virulent hostility of parents toward their children or, more generally, of the older toward the younger generation." He decided to designate this phenomenon as "Laius complex," "giving it the same extended sense that I have given to 'Oedipus complex'" (10). Vernon used the term Oedipus complex in the more general sense of "the more or less latent hostility of children toward their parents," an important cause for which would be "the painful struggle of the young to establish identities distinct from those of their parents" (11).

Vernon gives the following interesting account of how the idea of the "Laius complex" occurred to him. "It was in the summer of 1970, following the episodes at Kent State and Jackson State Universities. Observing the violent hostility displayed by many adults toward the young . . . I began to wonder if this did not have some deep-rooted cause. I had just finished reading Lewis Feuer's *Conflict of Generations* (5), with its heavy emphasis on the Oedipus complex, and . . . started to wonder why Freud had been so one-sided in this matter. I began to form the idea of a 'complex' that would complement the Oedipal theory. . . . I thought at first of calling it the Abraham complex. Then . . . I looked up the Oedipus story and was delighted to find that Oedipus' father, Laius, . . . had tried to kill Oedipus when the latter was an infant. It then seemed to me that 'Laius complex' was the perfect name for my hypothesis."⁴

Upon being informed by us that unfortunately he did not originate the term, Professor Vernon very graciously wrote to *The Humanist*, where his second paper on the subject had appeared, that "although it was my independent creation," it seems that others "have for some time been familiar with the Laius complex, both the term and the concept."⁵

CONCLUSION

Aside from the interest of the history of a concept, what is important to us here is, to recapitulate, that through the Laius complex

⁴Personal Communication, December 8, 1972.

⁵Personal communication, January 9, 1973.

and a corresponding understanding of the Oedipus complex, the entire Oedipus myth has come to be a metaphor for power struggle (an Adlerian dynamic), whereas the original isolated Oedipus complex was a metaphor for unconscious instinctual phenomena including psychosexual stages of development (the Freudian dynamic). As Kausen has so well expressed it, "Power, power, and again power is the issue. The incest motive . . . is only a part of this and is of secondary nature" (8, p. 46). The fact that through the Laius complex this Adlerian idea originates again and again attests to its viability, while the Freudian formulations still cast their spell.

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