

Outline your understanding of the Oedipus complex and its significance for psychoanalysis

The Oedipus complex is felt to be one of Freud's most well-known and controversial theories. This essay will analyse Freud's definition of the Oedipus complex and will attempt to explain why it is so controversial. Freud's theory of infantile sexual development will be discussed, as the Oedipus complex is an important stage in this development and finally, the importance of the theory to psychoanalysis will be examined.

To understand the Oedipus complex, the origins of Oedipus must be explained. The term stems from the Greek myth of Oedipus who unknowingly killed his father and unwittingly married his mother. This was his fate and in trying to avoid it, both Oedipus and his parents enabled him to fulfil the prophecy (Bettelheim, 1983). Freud used this story to illustrate his theory that there is a stage in psychosexual development when male children start to develop sexual interests in their mother and see their father as a rival resulting in a wish to do their father harm (Storr, 2001, p.33). There is a difference in this stage between male and female children. This will be discussed later.

The Oedipus complex emerges during infantile sexual development. The theory of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex developed after Freud's self-analysis and abandonment of the seduction theory (Storr, 2001, p.29 /33). Freud believed that sexuality began at birth and its onset came in two phases, the first

phase from age 1-5 and the second stage being in puberty when sexuality re-emerges from the latency period. This development was seen to be normative and was key to the formation of personality. Sexuality according to Freud was about taking pleasure in the body and so the development of infantile sexuality was focused on a major biological function, which was assumed to be the focus of pleasure. This also met his need that 'psychological processes should, wherever possible, be formulated in terms of their indispensable organic foundation' (Storr, 2001, p.29).

The first phase of sexuality from 1-5 has several stages, the first being the 'oral' stage. This is usually from birth to 12 – 18 months when the focus of pleasure is on the baby's mouth. At this age children will suck, bite and chew anything that will fit into their mouths. Freud considered this behaviour to be sexual and that the mouth was a site of sexual pleasure. He believed that if children were overly indulged or deprived of oral gratification then they could become fixated at this stage in adulthood and have an influence on their character. Fixation at the oral stage would mean that an adult could show an interest in 'oral habits' (Storr, 2001, p.32). These could be thumb sucking and overindulgence in eating and drinking.

The second stage is the 'anal' phase, which is usually from 12-18 months to 3 years. The focus of pleasure changes from the mouth to the anal region and the child derives pleasure from the retention and expulsion of faeces. At this stage in the child's life the emphasis is on toilet –training. It is believed that if toilet-training is too demanding then fixation could occur at this stage resulting in an adult who could be particularly orderly and obsessed with cleanliness.

The child progresses from the 'anal' stage to the 'phallic' stage at the age of 3 lasting to the age of 5-6. The focus for pleasure is now on the genitals and pleasure comes from fondling them. It is at this 'phallic' stage that the Oedipus complex emerges. Freud believed it was at this time that the male child starts to develop an unconscious sexual interest in his mother and hostility towards his father whom he sees as more powerful as himself. He begins to fear that his father will learn of his feelings and castrate him. This castration anxiety stems from adults telling him they will cut it off when they see him fondling himself and his 'assumption that, because girls are without a penis, they must have suffered castration' (Storr, 2001, p.33). The fear of castration and the guilt that he is experiencing for having 'patricidal and incestuous wishes' (Bettelheim, 1983, p.22) leads to the boy repressing his desire for his mother and beginning to identify with his father. The castration complex brings an end to the Oedipus complex for the child as he has rejected his thoughts about his mother.

The female version of the Oedipus complex differs from that of the male. The little girl grows to resent her mother after discovering she has no penis. She believes her mother is to blame for this. The female believes that she has been castrated and is envious of boys, leading to the term 'penis envy'. In resenting her mother she turns to 'her father as a love object' (Storr, 2002, p.34). She believes that if her father impregnates her, the baby will make up for the lack of a penis. The end of the Oedipus complex occurs when the female when she discovers that there are men other than her father, who can impregnate her which in turn helps to overcome her inferiority to males (Storr, 2001, p.34).

The super-ego; the part of the 'model of the mind' which represents parental authority and social pressures, is said to develop as a result of the Oedipus complex. Frosh (1987) states that the super-ego appears when the boy internalises the 'prohibitions and symbolic violence of the father' (Frosh, 1987, p.50) in order to identify with his father. This identification occurs as a result of the castration complex. The girl's super-ego is said to develop later as they 'remain in the Oedipus situation for a relatively long time' (Frosh, 1987, p.57) and have difficulty ending it, which results in them having 'weaker super-egos' (Frosh, 1987, p.57). This represents the rather patriarchal nature of the Oedipus complex.

Storr (2001, p.34 – 35) argues that the Oedipus complex is taken literally rather than metaphorically. It is felt that this is the reason why many people find the Oedipus complex so controversial. The idea of a boy fearing castration from his father, and a girl wanting a penis of her own can seem far-fetched. However, if evaluated from a metaphorical point of view, the theory of the Oedipus complex could be argued as being valid. As an example, 'penis envy' was an expression to illustrate the inferiority women felt, given that men were privy to most of the power in the world that Freud inhabited (Storr, 2001, p.35). The penis is merely a symbol of everything that is male. The castration complex that boys suffer from could be argued not to be a purely physical fear, but an expression of the feelings that they have if someone points out their 'size, weakness, incapacity, and lack of experience' (Storr, 2001, p.34).

The Oedipus complex is significant within the realm of psychoanalysis, as Freud believed that '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' (Freud, 1905 cited in Young, 1993). To master the Oedipus complex requires one to 'know thyself' (Bettelheim, 1983, p.23). It is felt that to know oneself means 'knowing one's unconscious' (Bettelheim, 1983, p.24). Freud believed that the unconscious is a component of the mind that the individual is unaware of, although it has an effect on one's behaviour. The unconscious contains 'infantile wishes, desires, demands and needs that are hidden from consciousness awareness because of the conflicts and pain they would cause if they were part of everyday life' (Feldman, 1993, p.381). An element of the material that the unconscious contains includes the repressed desires and guilt that are a remainder of the Oedipus complex. As Bettelheim argues, one is still 'unconsciously motivated by them and we unconsciously feel guilty for them' (Bettelheim, 1983, p.22). Freud suggested that this could have a negative impact on an individual's life leading to neurosis. It could be the case that to prevent neurosis from occurring requires self-discovery and the awareness of one's unconscious. This could prevent the Oedipus complex continuing to be a destructive force in a person's life.

Psychoanalysis may provide the individual the opportunity to resolve the conflicts and to make what is unconscious conscious. Uncovering the unconscious as Bettelheim states 'is the best protection against an Oedipal catastrophe' (Bettelheim, 1983, p.25) as it could be argued that to know and face the Oedipal complex is to free oneself of negative consequences it is causing.

In conclusion, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex is a stage in psychosexual development that every individual must pass through to achieve a stable life. Failure to resolve it may lead to neurosis as detailed above. It is felt the Oedipus complex is an important stage in defining sexuality, as children identify with the same sex parent leading to a heterosexual identity in adults. To evaluate the Oedipus complex in a literal sense may not take into the account the metaphorical and symbolic meanings. It is felt that the Oedipus complex, which Freud believes to be the centre of neuroses, is significant to psychoanalysis. The process of psychoanalysis can aid an individual to come to terms with the effect of the Oedipus complex and remove the negative impact it is having.

1556 words including references