

# **Totem and Taboo: Freud was Right!**

## **Lecture Series**

### **Lecture 1: The Universal Oedipus Complex**

### **Part 2: From the Neo-Freudian Critique to Kroeber's 'Confession'**

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#### **On irony in the Neo-Freudian critique: Freud's instinct theory**

Given Freud's many reiterations of the complementary series from the beginning to the end of his career, it remains an important question for psychoanalysis how Kardiner and others could have so frequently misinterpreted the Oedipus complex as if Freud had "assumed that special institutional conditions had no bearing on its formation." But if Kardiner had overlooked Freud's emphasis on the role of experience and environment in his controversial Lamarckism, only to downplay the significance of it in Freud's many references to the complementary series, he should at least have credited it in Freud's *instinct theory*. The fact that Freud defined the instincts precisely in the context of their relation to environmental determinants can be seen here in his thinking on latency, from footnote added to *An Autobiographical Study* (1925) in 1935:

The period of latency is a physiological phenomenon. It can, however, only give rise to a complete interruption of sexual life in cultural organizations which have made the suppression of infantile sexuality part of their system. (p. 37 fn.1)

Likewise, Freud's definition of the *object* as the most variable attribute of an instinct was central to his understanding of developmental change and adaptation. It specified that the instinctual object is,

...not originally connected with [the instinct], but becomes assigned to it only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible...It may be changed any number of times in the course of the vicissitudes which the instinct undergoes. (1915, SE 14, p. 122-23)

This *mobile* quality of instincts in their relation to objects was a major source of *plasticity* in Freud's theory of individual development and it was fundamental to his explanatory theory of culture and civilization in *Totem and Taboo*. It was the basis for the displacement of affect from the primal father onto the sacred totem that allowed for the creation of totemism. Moreover, it explained the *transmissible* quality of the phenomenon of 'taboo' in Totemic societies, where, like an electrical charge or a contagious agent, this mysterious and dangerous power could be transferred so easily from one object to another. This feature of Freud's instinct theory predicted the endless displacements and sublimations according to influences from the "special institutional conditions" that Kardiner and others accused Freud of neglecting.

### **On biological determinism, racism and eugenics**

Once again, an important question arises as to how Freud's oedipal theory could have been misinterpreted in terms of such a rigid biological determinism. While this problem was most likely multi-determined, I'd like to discuss one particularly important factor that was involved. Certainly, a powerful antipathy had developed especially within American anthropology toward anything resembling 19th century comparative approaches to cultural evolution with simplistic biological and racial assumptions. At the time of Kardiner's critique this was still a powerful obstacle to a fair appraisal of Freud's oedipal theory.

A strident ideological, sometimes political, campaign on behalf of *cultural determinism* arose in American anthropology; this had well-reasoned precedents going back to Franz Boas' quite heroic opposition to any role for science in the popular eugenics movement during the

“progressive” era. By the time *Totem and Taboo* was published in 1913, America was already setting its own precedents, leading the way in forcible sterilizations of so-called ‘racial degenerates’. The attempt to “improve” the genetic lot of humanity had well-funded benefactors like the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation and was rationalized by respected scientists from universities like Yale, Harvard and Princeton. (See Black 2003) Already in 1909, C.B. Davenport, then Secretary of the Committee on Eugenics of the American Breeders Association, and the director of the Carnegie Department of Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor, was invited to present his views before the American Academy of Medicine, at Yale University. The title of the published lecture was “Eugenics: The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding”. Davenport was pushing for legislation to prohibit marriage and mating between such unfit persons as ‘imbeciles’ and alcoholics and he announce that the American Breeders' Association had organized a Committee on Eugenics to investigate, educate and legislate; the august committee was composed of such dignitaries as Alexander Graham Bell, V.L. Kellogg, and Adolf Meyer, the first psychiatrist-in-chief of Johns Hopkins Hospital and a later president of the American Psychiatric Association.

Freud, for his part, was certainly on the side of Boas regarding the issue of race. As we’ve seen, accusations that his theories reflected a rigid biological or racial determinism are simply incorrect. In *Studies in Hysteria* Breuer and Freud (1895) had already challenged the widely-accepted 19th century hereditarian theories of biological ‘degeneracy’ as the cause of hysteria. And Franz Boas (1920) himself certainly had little doubt about Freud’s views on the issue of race when acknowledged that Freud’s theories “may be fruitfully applied to ethnological problems”, because they highlighted the fact that,

...the social behavior of man depends to a great extent upon the earliest habits which are established before the time when connected memory begins, and that many so-called racial or hereditary traits are to be considered rather as a result of early exposure to a certain form of social conditions. (p. 320)

But eventually the very argument that Freud had made against erroneous racial/biological determinism divorced from environmental considerations was turned upon *Totem and Taboo*. The claim for the Oedipus complex as a universal biological fact of human nature was misrepresented as simple biological determinism and attacked for this reason, among others. This was certainly reflected in Kardiner's critique in 1939.

### **On Irony in the Neo-Freudian Critique: the Comparative Method**

Let's return to Kardiner's statement in order to examine another common misrepresentation of Freud's anthropology as it related to the subject of *cross-cultural comparisons*:

- ... [Freud] never expected that he might be obliged to make comparisons between different types of institutions, because the evolutionary hypothesis precluded the necessity for any such comparisons.

The assertion that Freud's hypotheses precluded "comparisons between different types of institutions" was yet another instance of irony given that those very same hypotheses were under attack already for the opposite charge of relying too heavily on the *comparative method* of 19th century cultural evolutionism already discussed. Much like Freud's admonitions against 'wild analysis', Boas (1896) had charted a course for American anthropology in opposition to this comparative/evolutionary approach precisely because it made too many comparisons, too easily and on the basis of *a priori* assumptions about universal evolutionary laws:

The comparative studies of which I am speaking here attempt to explain customs and ideas of remarkable similarity which are found here and there. But they pursue also the more ambitious scheme of discovering the laws and the history of the evolution of human society. .... It is clear that this theory has for its logical basis the assumption that the same phenomena are always due to the same causes. (p. 904)

Freud had appropriated British anthropologist E. B. Tylor's concept of *survivals*, first introduced in his landmark *Primitive Culture* (1871). This idea of the continuing persistence

into present-day cultures of artifact-like phenomena that have outlived the original conditions in which they had evolved epitomized the older comparative methods that had been disparaged already by the time of *Totem and Taboo*. The concept implied that survivals were like keys to archaic stages in human history and it was central to many of Freud's most essential anthropological conclusions. Wallace (1983) discussed two exemplary quotes that demonstrate the importance of this concept in Freud's thinking. "Indeed, [Freud] said, it is in the 'psychology of neuroses', and not archaeology, that one finds "more of the antiquities of human development than any other source'. (p.243) And in the *Introductory Lectures*, Freud continued the phylogenetic concerns of *Totem and Taboo*. He suggested that with symbolism 'we are faced with...an ancient but extinct mode of expression...' " (quote also in Wallace 1983, p. 243) Freud drew freely from such comparative concepts and was anything but unaware of his obligation to make comparisons between different types of institutions. The subtitle of *Totem and Taboo* – "Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics" - can itself serve as a reminder that anthropologists were critical of him precisely for comparing the idiosyncratic rituals of European neurotics with the collective totemic rituals among non-Western aboriginal tribes. Of course, it was precisely Freud's point in *Totem and Taboo* that such comparisons must be made. I would argue that the real problem for critics about the comparisons Freud made was the conclusions he drew from them, not that he was above making comparisons. Freud read prodigiously from the anthropology of his day; and *Totem and Taboo* drew widely from the ethnographic literature available at the time, especially as it related to the diversity of totemic rituals and marriage customs. What was true was that Freud asserted the conclusions he drew from the comparisons he made as an explicit "assault on ethnology"; anthropology clearly understood them as such and responded to Freud's assault with their own. After all, if the Oedipus complex was universal then it helped to explain much of what anthropology was supposed to explain: the origin and function of culture and civilization, past and present. This was no small challenge to anthropology.

## **On Irony and the so-called “matrilineal Oedipus complex”**

As unlikely as it may seem, perhaps the greatest irony of all occurred when Malinowski's own thesis against the universal Oedipus complex came eventually to be represented by anthropologists and psychoanalysts alike as if it had posited a *matrilineal form of the universal and nuclear Oedipus complex*. Remarkably, something like wishful thinking began to occur regarding what Malinowski had actually meant in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. The most authoritative source for nearly half a century of scorn directed against Freud's universal Oedipus complex would suddenly begin to be framed as though it had been an argument for it all along.

An illustration of the cross-disciplinary and authoritative reach of this curious revision in the fate of Malinowski's very non-oedipal matrilineal complex can be seen in Otto Fenichel's influential *Psychoanalytic Theory of Neuroses* (1945). Fenichel claimed that Malinowski had argued "...that societies with family configurations different from our own actually have different Oedipus complexes." (p. 97) Fenichel was describing here what he claimed to be Malinowski's own conclusion. This was remarkable, as we'll see, given that *as far as Malinowski was concerned* the "different Oedipus complexes" that Fenichel was referring to bore little resemblance to Freud's oedipal theory.

From anthropology, Kroeber (1939) had already confused matters six years earlier in his reappraisal of Totem and Taboo published two months after Freud's death. Curiously, he began by saying, "I see no reason to waver over my critical analysis of Freud's book. There is no indication that the consensus of anthropologists during these twenty years has moved even an inch nearer acceptance of Freud's central thesis". (p. 446) Then, in an extraordinary turn-around, he went on to suggest that Malinowski had set out to vindicate Freud's theory by demonstrating what Kroeber considered to be the "kernel of the Oedipus situation", which consisted of "the incest drive and incest repression, filial ambivalence, and the like" . (p. 447) Actually, it's possible that if Malinowski's own interpretation of his data had found at least these to be true for the Trobriand child between three-to-five years of age then at least some of the controversy could have been avoided. But, as we'll see, wish as Kroeber might, Malinowski

had not interpreted his own data in this manner; instead he convinced two generations of anthropologists, and many Neo-Freudian psychoanalysts, that Trobriand boys at this age had no triangular filial ambivalence and no incest drive toward the mother whatsoever, least of all any that could cause murderous fantasies toward the father, unconscious or otherwise.

### **On Malinowski's "nuclear complex"**

In *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927) what Malinowski claimed to have discovered was a different type of a more generally defined nuclear complex, the nature of which had to be determined for each particular society: "I have established a deep correlation between the type of society and the nuclear complex found there." (p. 82) For Malinowski, this could be an Oedipus complex, a matrilineal complex, and, at least theoretically, any number of other possible versions of the nuclear complex. In a remarkable passage in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, Malinowski even appears to have engaged in something of a symbolic patricide of his own when he prophesied the end of British and American patriarchy and, along with it, the extinction of an already endangered Oedipus complex:

Psychoanalysis cannot hope I think, to preserve its 'Oedipus complex' for future generations, who will only know a weak and henpecked father. For him the children will feel indulgent pity rather than hatred and fear! (p.27)

It's tempting to imagine something of Malinowski's own oedipal ambivalence operating in this conjecture of his. But more relevant to our present point, this passage underscores that Malinowski never considered the matrilineal complex to be simply "another version of the Oedipus complex" based on different customs.

### **On the positions in the Malinowski-Jones debate**

A "matrilineal form of the Oedipus complex" would have been in complete agreement with Freud and is what oedipal theory would predict. But this was not Malinowski's thesis in the debate with Jones. In fact, he could not have been much clearer:

The complex exclusively known to the Freudian School, and assumed by them to be universal, I mean the Oedipus complex, corresponds essentially to our patrilineal Aryan Family with the developed *patria potestas*, buttressed by Roman law and Christian morals, and accentuated by the modern economic conditions of the well-to-do bourgeoisie. Yet this complex is assumed to exist in every savage or barbarous society. This certainly cannot be correct, and a detailed discussion of the first problem will show us how far this assumption is untrue. (1927, p. 5)

Simply put, there would have been no debate with Jones if Malinowski's thesis had been that the Oedipus complex varies in form according to different social structures. How could there been, when this was Jones' position in the debate? Not surprisingly, Jones (1924) was just as clear about Malinowski's position as Malinowski was:

[Malinowski] attempts to modify Freud's theory of the nuclear family complex. As is well known, the latter regards the relationship between father, mother, and son as the prototype from which other more complicated relationships are derived. Malinowski, on the contrary, puts forward the idea that the nuclear family complex varies according to the particular family structure existing in any community (p.169)

Jones' position in the debate remained true to Freud's designation of the Oedipus complex as the universal nuclear complex. And Jones correctly showed that Freud's oedipal theory predicted that the oedipal dynamics stemming from the nuclear triangle would be displaced onto any variety of objects according to the given social structures. Jones' argued that,

.... the matrilineal system with its avunculate complex arose...as a mode of defense against the primordial Oedipus tendencies....The forbidden and unconsciously loved sister is only a substitute for the mother, as the uncle plainly is for the father...(p.170)

It wasn't just Jones who clarified the terms of the debate. Roheim also took the same theoretical position against Malinowski's matrilineal complex. In his brilliant *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), Marvin Harris would point out:

Contrary to popular impression, in the argument between Roheim and Malinowski over the effect of the Trobriand matrilineal organization on the Oedipal situation, it is Roheim who holds the trump card. By Malinowski's own admission, the Trobriand child is brought up largely under the influence of the usual nuclear pairs. Mother's brother enters the picture only when the child is seven or eight years old, an age by which the Oedipal constellation is firmly entrenched. (pp. 428-9)

Once again, there was no confusion about the sides taken in the debate: the Oedipus complex, as Freud had defined it, was the universal nuclear complex – yes or no.

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that Malinowski's argument was never that the nuclear Oedipus complex could manifest in diverse forms according to different customs. Not once in three-hundred pages of *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927) did he refer to anything slightly resembling the reinterpretations that others, like Fenichel and Kroeber, applied to his thesis, such as "different Oedipus complexes" or "matrilineal form of the Oedipus complex". Instead, he refers to "...the matrilineal complex, so entirely different in its genesis and its character from the Oedipus complex..." (p. 83); he exhorts psychoanalysts "...not to assume the universal existence of the Oedipus complex..." (p. 81); he claims that with the assumption that the "...Oedipus complex exists in all types of society, certain errors have crept into the anthropological work of psychoanalysts." (p. 6)

### **On Kroeber's caustic reappraisal of 1939**

I stressed earlier that only some of the disagreement would have been avoided if Malinowski had interpreted his own data as Kroeber did. In fact, Kroeber's influential reappraisal and redoubled defense of Malinowski following the death of Freud remained "negatively inclined" toward essential concepts of oedipal theory such as the superego; he regarded them as 'incidental' to the oedipal 'kernel' that he claimed Malinowski had argued for.

He suggested that insisting upon such concepts represented ‘fantasy’ on the part of Freud and psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly, this certainly made it difficult for Jones and others to agree with Kroeber that Malinowski had vindicated Freud’s oedipal theory. Kroeber (1939) went on to rebuke the Freudians for their “all or nothing” attitude, of “partaking of the nature of a religion - a system of mysticism [and possessing] the qualities of a delusional system” (p. 451) - all this for insisting that concepts like the super-ego and the Oedipus complex were defined systematically and could not be theoretically divorced from each other. Nonetheless, Kroeber still maintained that “Malinowski had really vindicated the mechanism of the Oedipus relation. He showed that the mechanism remained operative even in a changed family situation.” (p. 449) And following Kroeber, subsequent generations of pre-eminent anthropologists, such as University of Chicago’s Milton Singer (1961) would refer (without questioning the validity of it) to this revisionist idea that Malinowski had argued for “...a matrilineal form of the Oedipus complex among the Trobriand islanders”. (p.10)

### **On the vindication of the universal Oedipus complex**

In retrospect, it seems fair to say that the claim that Malinowski’s thesis (as opposed to his data) had actually been an argument for a ‘matrilineal form of the *Oedipus complex*’ amounted to at least a partial concession that Freud’s claim for the universality of the *Oedipus complex* had been right all along. With ever more cross-cultural evidence anthropology did not have much of a choice but to acknowledge this; as Spiro’s (1982) analysis showed, “the only appropriate response to the question, ‘Is the Oedipus complex universal?’ is ‘How could it possibly not be?’” (p.162). He continued:

If there were a human society where mothers did not have male consorts – so that the son had no adult rival for the love of the mother – in such a society the Oedipus complex (by definition) would not exist. So far as we know, however, no human society of that type exists, or has ever existed. (ibid)

In fact, significant voices in anthropology were contributing to this shift of opinion on the universality of the Oedipus complex by mid-century. Clyde Kluckhohn, one of the more

influential American anthropologists of the 20th century, published a powerful "confession" in his contribution to the 1951 tribute publication to the work of Roheim. Kluckhohn described his earlier belief that "...psychoanalysis was strongly culture-bound. I was persuaded, for example, that Malinowski's interpretation of the oedipal situation in the Trobriands was substantially correct." (in Singer, 1961, pp.19-20) But even in the earliest years of his career he acknowledged the powerful influence on his thinking of Roheim and psychoanalysis, which would only become more important to him later on. Here is a passage from Kluckhohn's 'confession' of 1951, which, given his influence as a major figure in American anthropology in general, and in culture and personality studies, in particular, deserves to be quoted at length:

... the facts uncovered in my own field work and that of my collaborators have forced me to the conclusion that Freud and other psychoanalysts have depicted with astonishing correctness many central themes in motivational life which are universal. .... the underlying psychologic drama transcends cultural difference. This should not be too surprising except to an anthropologist over-indoctrinated with the theory of cultural relativism for many of the inescapable givens of human life are also universal. Human anatomy and human physiology are, in the large, about the same the world over. There are two sexes with palpably visible differences in external genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics. All human infants, regardless of culture, know the psychological experience of helplessness and dependency. Situations making for competition for the affection of one or both parents, for sibling rivalry, can be to some extent channeled this way or that way by a culture but they cannot be eliminated, given the universality of family life. The trouble has been because of a series of accidents of intellectual and political history that the anthropologist for two generations has been obsessed with the differences between peoples, neglecting the equally real similarities upon which the "universal culture pattern" as well as the psychological uniformities are clearly built. (quote in Singer, 1961, pp.19-20)

Kroeber's 'confession' amounted to a powerful indictment of anti-evolutionary and anti-psychological models, and extreme versions of *cultural relativism*. His Freudian convictions

only strengthened in the last decade of his life following his announcement. Singer (p.20) observed that Kluckhohn only became more explicit in his conviction that the *Oedipus complex*, in particular, was among the many identifiable cross-cultural "universals." As we'll see in greater detail in Lecture 2, Kluckhohn was followed in the 1950s and 60s by many of the most prominent American anthropologists in reaffirming the theoretical importance of *universals* and *human nature* as valid anthropological concepts. These voices included Franz Boas' most famous students – among them, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead - who had so effectively implemented Boas' dogmatic emphasis on cultural determinism and "*historical particularism*". (see Harris, Rise of Ant. Theory 1989)

In concluding this part of the present Lecture 1 on the universal *Oedipus complex*, it may be helpful to underscore here an essential theoretical point: namely, the conceptual difference between a *general type* of phenomenon (i.e., the 'universal *Oedipus complex*') as a valid cross-cultural concept, on the one hand, and individual instances or cases, which can vary in actuality from the general type. Language, for example, is universal at the societal level and this fact is not contradicted by the fact that particular individuals do for any number of reasons lack the capacity to speak or understand language, or that particular societies may possess more or less differentiated vocabularies, grammatical structures or means of expressing and vocalizing. The refinement of a general conceptual type in scientific theory is essential for the building and testing of hypotheses about why particular cases vary from that type. Of course, this is the essence of science in general and cross-cultural research in particular. In his affirmation of the universality of the *Oedipus complex*, Spiro (1982) was particularly clear about this distinction:

Since at the societal level, ...it is the biological mother who is the child's central (if not exclusive) early mothering figure, and the biological father its most salient rival for her love **in all known societies**, it is understandable that the structure of the Oedipus complex, although cross-culturally variable in principle (and certainly in particular cases) is most probably invariant [in its structure] in fact. (p.174; bold added)

I would argue that Spiro's clarification here of what it means to say that the Oedipus complex is universal is perfectly consistent with Freudian oedipal theory in its most 'classical' sense.

*[In the next 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the present lecture, it will be helpful to take a closer look at some specifics of Malinowski's critique in order to adequately address the contemporary context of debate over the claim for a universal Oedipus complex.]*

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