

*Please note: This electronic file you are receiving is intended for one-time use only. Reprints may be requested at a charge of \$1 per copy. All materials are copyright protected. No part of these files may be transmitted, distributed or reproduced in any other way without permission from the Wellesley Centers for Women. Please call the publication office at (781) 283-2510 to request additional copies.*

# **Work in Progress**

## **Beyond the Oedipus Complex: Mothers and Daughters**

Irene P. Stiver, Ph.D.



**Wellesley Centers for Women**  
**Wellesley College**  
Wellesley, MA 02481

**No.26**  
1986

### ***Work in Progress***

*Work in Progress* is a publication series based on the work of the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, and it includes papers presented in the Center's Colloquium Series. *Work in Progress* reflects the Center's commitment to sharing information with others who are interested in fostering psychological well-being, preventing emotional problems, and providing appropriate services to persons who suffer from psychological distress. The publication also reflects the Center's belief that it is important to exchange ideas while they are being developed. Many of the papers, therefore, are intended to stimulate discussion and dialogue, while others represent finished research reports.

For those papers which were part of the Colloquium Series, each document includes the substantive material presented by the lecturer, information about the speaker, and, where appropriate, a summary of the subsequent discussion session.

### **Jean Baker Miller Training Institute**

Founded in 1995, the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute bases its work on the Relational-Cultural Model of psychological development, which grew out of a collaborative process of theory building initiated by the scholars at the Stone Center. The Institute offers workshops, courses, professional trainings, publications, and ongoing projects which explore applications of the relational-cultural approach. At the heart of this work is the belief that the Relational-Cultural Model offers new and better ways of understanding the diversity and complexities of human experience.

### **The Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies**

Creation of the Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies resulted from a generous gift to Wellesley College by Robert S. and Grace W. Stone, parents of a Wellesley graduate. The Center was dedicated in the fall of 1981, and its programs reflect the Stone family's interest in preventing psychological distress. With the creation of the Stone Center, Wellesley College has enlarged its long-established search for excellence. At Wellesley, the Center has the unique advantage of immersion in a community of scholars and teachers who can add the broad perspective of the humanities, sciences, and social sciences to the Center's psychological expertise.

The Stone Center is developing programs aimed toward the following goals: research in psychological development of people of all ages; service demonstration and research projects which will enhance psychological development of college students; service, research, and training in the prevention of psychological problems.

**Correspondence and inquiries about the publication series should be addressed to Wellesley Centers for Women Publications, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481-8259.**

© 1986, by Irene P. Stiver, Ph.D.

---

# Beyond the Oedipus Complex: Mothers and Daughters

Irene P. Stiver, Ph.D.

## **About the Author**

*Irene Pierce Stiver, Ph.D., is Director of the Psychology Department at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts, and a Principle Associate in Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School.*

## **Abstract**

*Women are often critical of their mothers and identify with their most negative characteristics. Simultaneously, it has also been noted that strong bonds are often established between mothers and daughters. When traditional Oedipal theory is applied to women, it does not take into account sufficiently either the prevalence of daughters' critical perceptions of their mothers or the strong connections also established between many mothers and daughters. The self-in-relation conceptualization of female development will be used as a context to reconcile these seemingly contradictory observations and to examine women's development within dynamic inter-relationships in the family and the difficulties encountered in the process.*

*This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on May 7, 1986.*

At a recent panel a number of leading psychoanalysts re-examined the Oedipus complex (Modell, 1985). They included representatives from more orthodox Freudian theory, object relations theory, and Kohut's self-psychology. One of the panelists began his discussion of the Oedipus complex by saying that "to challenge its centrality in the function of the neuroses, becomes an act of rebellion equivalent to parricide or its variant, fratricide" (p. 202). That statement captures the essence of what I want to talk about today. That is, the male Oedipus complex, with its dynamics of competitiveness, retaliation, terror of castration, and identification with the aggressor, may be much more germane to the experience of men than the female Oedipus complex is to the experience of women.

Serious questions about the female Oedipus complex have been raised for a long time, but the theory is still dominant in clinical circles. Moreover, the current renewed interest in psychoanalysis has led some modern feminists to accept many of its basic premises. I will examine the theory in the light of recent theoretical research and clinical evidence, and then suggest alternative formulations based on clinical experience with women.

It is probably not too surprising that it has been primarily (but not only) women who have been able to raise serious questions about feminine development in Freudian theory. It is also of interest that these women have not been adequately acknowledged by the psychoanalytic community. In an interesting paper, Fliegel (1973) traces an historical reconstruction of ideas of feminine psychosexual development. She notes that some of the important early contributions by Horney were largely ignored by Freud and other analysts. While Ernest Jones joined Horney in some of her observations, subsequent literature has tended to credit the ideas developed by Horney to Jones and sometimes did not credit either of them.

---

Even more relevant, however, is the absence of acknowledgement in contemporary discussions of early female development in psychoanalytic theory of the significant contributions of Chodorow, Gilligan, and Miller. Chodorow (1978), in particular, examines in considerable detail the extent to which gender difference significantly affects the asymmetrical developmental paths of males and females in the "pre-Oedipal" stage and in the resolution of Oedipal conflicts; Gilligan's 1982 work on moral development empirically addresses and challenges the earlier psychoanalytic notion that the super-egos of females are less developed than those of males. Miller (1976), of course, has offered us a path toward a new psychology of women, but also has brought together some of the classic papers which critically examine female development in psychoanalytic theory, in a separate volume (1973). Yet it is a rare paper in the current psychoanalytic literature on female development that mentions any of these in its list of references.

There has been some decline of psychoanalytic interest in the Oedipus conflict in some quarters. For example, the Kohutians have moved it from the center of classical theory to more peripheral positions, but many other psychoanalysts have long given more attention to "pre-Oedipal" development. Recently, there has been an emphasis on the infant-mother dyad around issues of separation and individuation. Still, I believe it would be safe to say that psychoanalysts and other clinicians remain wedded to the centrality of the Oedipus complex for maturation and sexual development. Schafer (1974) notes that the use of the terms "pre-Oedipal" and "pregenital" to name early phases betrays a bias which "anchors the roots of personality to Oedipal issues." More telling, however, is that when voices have been raised seriously questioning the central components of the female Oedipus complex and other aspects of psychosexual development, one still sees "the need to salvage Freud's formulations even at the expense of their internal logic" (Fliegel 1982, p. 24).

But my purpose here is not to demonstrate that since I am a woman, I have less castration anxiety than do men and thus can brave the authorities by challenging something as central to the theory as the Oedipus complex. This would be foolhardy, I have learned, as the following vignette illustrates. While having lunch with colleagues recently, I brought up this sensitive subject, mainly to check out my sense about the current standing of the female Oedipus complex. A heated discussion followed, and I left after lunch. One of these colleagues is reputed to have

said afterwards to the other, "Well, if they don't get it on the couch, they certainly won't get it over lunch," so I do know the dangers of exposing myself to such unsolicited analyses.

What I hope to accomplish tonight is to demonstrate how the inflexible application to female development of a concept derived from male development, without sufficient attention to the quality and nature of women's experience, leads to a significant misunderstanding of women. While this would be bad enough, it also blinds us from seeing the unique nature of female development in the areas of sexuality, affect, and cognition.

### **Formulation of the Oedipus complex**

As a step toward this goal, I would like first to examine the formulations for the male and, next, the female Oedipus complex. In particular I will be reviewing the theoretical analyses of the female Oedipus complex and the empirical data available in order to illustrate how weak are its underpinnings. I will then offer some alternative ideas to help us think about those features that do seem relevant at some level to female experience. Finally, the implications of these observations for psychotherapy with women will be considered.

### **The male Oedipus complex**

The original formulation of the Oedipus complex described a crucial stage of development for boys (Freud, 1924). Around three to four years of age, a little boy's attachment to his mother becomes genitally centered, and he soon sees his father as a rival for his mother's love. In the service of his wish to replace his father, he has fantasies of taking his father's penis, wishing him dead, and murdering him. He also fears retaliation in the form of castration by his father, a notion so terrifying that he gives up his loving attachment to his mother, represses his sexual feelings toward her, and identifies with the aggressor, his father, with the hope that in this way he will ultimately possess the mother exclusively. The parental, that is, father-aggressor, prohibition against his sexual wishes toward his mother is incorporated internally to form his super-ego. The boy then moves forward in his development as a male through identification with his father — which also means moving away from his mother and into latency with further repression of his sexual wishes.

This model does stress the competitive and aggressive qualities of male-to-male relationships. It also seems consistent with clinical observations of men's tendencies to distance from their mothers, as

---

well as of the powerful influence of castration anxiety on the experiences of young boys and adult males.

### **The female Oedipus complex**

Freud's original efforts to apply this paradigm directly to females involved the assumption that little girls, before the Oedipal stage, were undifferentiated from little boys, were, in fact, "masculine" in orientation (1931). Little girls were presumably aware only of the clitoris which was experienced as phallic, to quote: "We are now obliged to realize that the little girl is a little man" (1933, p. 118). Thus, Freud saw a complete identity of the pre-Oedipal phase in boys and girls. Lampl-De Groot (1927), a woman analyst, supported this view with her notion of the negative Oedipus complex in girls; again, little girls were seen as exactly like little boys because they were erotically aroused by their mothers, believed they could actively, phallically, penetrate them with the clitoris, and were rivalrous with their fathers for their mother's attention.

What I believe Lampl-De Groot was observing was the intense connections of both little boys and little girls with their mothers. It is rather amazing that the little girls' passionate attachment to their mothers could be tolerated, acknowledged, only in the guise of a "negative" or "phallic" attachment to them. Ironically, Lampl-De Groot's contribution did draw Freud's attention to the fact that girls remained attached to their mothers longer than he had originally believed. This led him to say that girls had a longer pre-Oedipal period than did boys and entered the Oedipal stage later, at four years of age or more. This was the beginning of recognition of some crucial differences between girls' and boys' sexual development.

Indeed, Freud seriously grappled with the problems he encountered in trying to understand how girls differed from boys in modes of entry and modes of resolution of the Oedipus complex. The resulting struggle to force fit a male paradigm to females has led to rather complicated theoretical acrobatics on Freud's part as well as in other psychoanalytic literature. It is striking that there is so much written on the subject with so many psychoanalysts trying somehow to account for, or hold on to, the various components of the female Oedipus complex even when it doesn't seem to fit together. Nothing similar occurs in the examination of the male Oedipus complex. As Miller (1984) states, the difficulties analysts keep encountering trying to find the female Oedipus complex may be due to the fact that it doesn't exist.

Let us outline now the specifics of Freud's last

version of the female Oedipus complex as formulated in 1931. He noted that while the male child begins to resolve the Oedipus complex because of terror of castration, it is the belief that she has already been castrated that ushers little girls into the Oedipal stage. That is, when the little girl becomes aware of the anatomical differences between her and the little boy, when she discovers that she does not have a penis, the little girl is left feeling that she had one and lost it. Since she now realizes that her mother is also without a penis, she blames her for depriving her of that valued member. The little girl becomes so deeply disappointed in the mother because she is penisless, and so deeply enraged because of what her mother has done to her, that she then turns to father who has the penis. It is the belief in her castration and envy of the penis, then, that accounts for the little girl's rejection of her first love object, her mother, and her turning instead to her father.

The little girl feels competitive and rivalrous with the mother and has murderous wishes toward her. She longs for her father to give her the penis she has lost; since that seems unlikely, she then yearns for a baby from her father as a substitute for the penis. She ultimately gives up this wish because it soon becomes clear that her father will reject her and will not give her a baby. Only if she identifies with her mother will she some day possess her father and get a baby, i.e., a penis, from her father. The threat of retaliation by castration is, however, not an issue for girls. Since they have already been castrated, Freud believed there was not as strong an impetus to leave this stage as was the case for boys, and therefore the dissolution of the Oedipal stage takes longer for girls.

Thus, girls entered latency more gradually; they ceased all masturbation and repressed their sexuality, although they continued to be attached to their fathers. Because there were not the powerful prohibitions and fear of punishment which boys experienced in their competitive struggles with their fathers, girls' super-egos were less well developed than those of boys. One other important point is that Freud believed that true femininity did not develop for girls until adolescence when the shift from the clitoris to the vagina needed to occur. Despite the identification with the mother as the mode of resolution of the Oedipus complex for girls, the dominance of the clitoris in the girl's sexual experience precluded true feminine gender identity. For years women have been taught that true adult femininity required the capacity for vaginal rather than clitoral orgasm, and it has been assumed that only neurotic women were unable to make the shift. The components, then, for the female Oedipus

---

complex include: 1) girls are undifferentiated from boys until the Oedipus complex is resolved; 2) castration anxiety is a central experience for little girls and ushers in the Oedipus complex; 3) penis envy plays a powerful role in female development — for Freud it was the “bedrock of a girl’s neurotic problems;” 4) the mother is seen as defective by the daughter because she has no penis, and punitive because she is presumed responsible for the daughter’s castration; 5) the girl turns away from her mother and is erotically drawn to her father and wishes him to give her a baby which serves as a substitute for the penis; 6) there is a more gradual resolution of the Oedipus complex, continued attachment to father, and the development of a weaker super-ego than the boy’s; 7) latency follows as a period in which female masturbation ceases because it is a reminder of castration and penis envy, and it is the stage at which repression of prohibited sexual aims occurs; 8) a shift from clitoral to vaginal sexuality is necessary to attain mature feminine identity.

### **Components of the female Oedipus complex examined**

While Freud and other psychoanalytic writers have scrutinized and questioned each of the above components to some extent over the years, they have had the greatest difficulties accounting for exactly how or why the girl makes the shift from her mother to her father. For little boys there was no need to explain a moving away from mother because no change of love “object” was involved. But does the girl really turn away from her mother, and what really draws her to her father? Freud’s major explanation rested on the concepts of castration and penis envy. Other kinds of explanations have been offered. Horney (1926), who questioned the function of penis envy in the construction of the Oedipus complex, believed that there was a biological drive of heterosexuality that led the girl to turn naturally to her father as the object of her erotic feelings. Later analysts, interested in the issues of separation and individuation, believed that the turning to the father represented the little girl’s efforts to ward off engulfment by the mother, with whom boundaries were so fluid (Abelin, 1971; Loewald, 1979). Thus, the need to differentiate from the mother through the attachment with someone so different, the father, the one with the penis, presumably accounted also for the girl turning away from mother to father.

A somewhat different version is offered by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1970) who presumes that the little girl longs for a penis and the father defensively,

to counter her sense of helplessness with the mother who seems to be omnipotent and powerful. It is remarkable that despite all the attempts to account for the reasons little girls turn from their mothers to their fathers in the Oedipal stage, the literature repeatedly notes that relationships between mother and daughter nevertheless remain powerful, enduring, and continuous through it all.

This phenomenon is often misunderstood since the psychoanalytic literature has emphasized the potentially pathological implications, while the more positive aspects of the continuity in mother-daughter relationships still need an explanation.

However, before addressing the mother-daughter relationship, I would like to examine the different components of the female Oedipus complex and demonstrate how tenuous they are in the face of recent empirical data. The data are of several types: systematic clinical observations of children, research data on sexuality and gender formation, and the writings of women clinicians. Data from all of these sources have raised central questions about the internal consistency, validity, and usefulness of the concept of a female Oedipus complex. Yet I could find very few instances in the standard literature in which the concept itself is seriously questioned.

### **Gender identity**

The first point, that girls begin life undifferentiated from boys and do not experience themselves as female until they resolve the Oedipus complex, now appears completely untenable. Stoller (1968) has shown unequivocally that by 18 months both girls and boys have developed what he calls a *core gender identity*, largely a function of cognitive development, parental attitudes, and gender labeling of the child. This occurs, then, before girls are presumably aware of the anatomical differences between boys and girls. Other studies (Kleeman, 1977; Kohlberg, 1966) have also reported that boys, although strongly attached to their mothers, experienced themselves as boys; and girls as early as one year of age showed pleasure and pride in being girls.

### **Castration anxiety**

The next point is that castration anxiety is a central experience of little girls and ushers in the Oedipus complex. The data here are either absent or confusing. In an intriguing paper, Roiphe and Galenson (1972) report finding castration anxiety in girls as early as during the second year of life. While recognizing that this is much earlier than Freud’s observation, they conclude that there must therefore

---

be two stages of castration anxiety: one very early, reflecting fear of object and anal loss, and a later stage connected with the Oedipal constellation.

While there has been much criticism of their research on the differences between boys and girls concerning the time of onset and the quality of early genital play, the criteria they report for castration anxiety include: increased negativism, increased dependency on the mother, nightmares, fear of being bitten by animals, and questions asked by little girls about why they do not have a penis. In addition, the authors note that their sample was, in fact, limited to children who had early experiences which tended to produce unstable body images. Apparently, later a new level of castration anxiety surfaces, ushering in the Oedipus phase for girls.

Still, it is puzzling how to make sense of such early putative signs of castration anxiety. The theory states that castration anxiety arises at the time that anatomical differences between the sexes are noted by the little girl, thus propelling her into the Oedipal phase, with fixation on the father, etc. But, if girls move into the Oedipal stage later than boys, after four years of age, and castration anxiety is already evident by 16-17 months, how can we then account for a girl's ultimate need to turn from her mother to her father; or why doesn't she enter the Oedipal phase much earlier? It is another example of holding onto a concept even when the internal logic of the theory cannot be sustained.

Another study (Parens et al., 1977) reported such observations as little girls' distress with broken crackers and broken toys as an index of castration anxiety. In the enthusiasm for the concepts upholding the theory, the authors omit alternative considerations, such as the possibility that young children of both sexes might feel some tenuousness of their body integrity and become anxious in the face of any symbolic or actual bodily threat. Horney (1926) very early noted that "castration is a male, not a female, fantasy." I believe that is absolutely correct. In my clinical experience with women, issues around castration are neither as central nor as pervasive as they are with men, for whom concerns about castration are often a powerful and repetitive theme.

### **Penis envy**

Now let me address the role that penis envy is presumed to play in the female Oedipus complex. This concept has been the most hotly challenged of all the ideas about female sexuality. Horney and Thompson early took issue with both Freud's formulation of the concept itself and his notion that it

was "the bedrock of neurotic problems." Horney (1924) attempted to distinguish primary penis envy, which she saw as early narcissistic mortification of girls possessing less than boys, and secondary penis envy which was a complex and defensive formation against the girls' hostility to men. Horney (1926) also made a strong case for male envy of motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, envy of the breast, etc., which she felt was more enduring into adulthood than penis envy was for females. Thompson (1943) also challenged the concept of penis envy and introduced a broader cultural orientation. For example, she noted the general competitive tendencies in our culture which stimulate envy, and the tendency to place an inferior evaluation on women. Ruth Moulton (1973), a more contemporary critic of penis envy, believed that it simply reflects one aspect of universal childhood curiosity and interest in anything new; penis envy, then, she saw as quite transitory if the girl is encouraged and valued. She believed that the notion of penis envy ought not to be taken literally and instead needed to be understood in the context of how little girls experience the ways their mothers are treated by their fathers, how much they feel valued as females, and the like.

Irene Fast (1978) offered a somewhat different understanding of behaviors previously identified as penis envy. She noted that both boys and girls begin with the assumption that they have the characteristics of both sexes and both feel a sense of loss as they discover certain attributes which they must give up as not belonging to them. As an example she quotes Little Hans' assertion that boys could have babies and other clinical data which show that male children insist that their fathers have the capacity to bear children. Bettelheim (1954) also reported on boys obsessed with the wish to possess both male and female genitalia, with corresponding wishes to become a girl. Greenson, in a paper, "Disidentifying From the Mother: A Special Problem for the Boy" (1968), talks about males' intense envy of women and makes the point that transvestism is a male disease, an extreme statement of men's not infrequent dissatisfaction with maleness, and wish to be female.

### **Equation of penis with baby**

We can now explore the notion that the girl looks to the father to give her a baby as a substitute for the valued penis. Again, the data are skimpy at best. Internal logic of the theory would dictate that the wish for the baby from the father should follow the discovery of differences between boys and girls and turning away from the mother out of disappointment

---

in her defectiveness. Yet the clinical data suggest that the girl's wish for a baby precedes awareness that the boy has a penis, and seems to be primarily a function of identification with the mother (Parens et al., 1977). As early as 1940, Brunswick wrote, "Contrary to our earlier ideas, the penis wish is not exchanged for the baby wish which has indeed long preceded it" (p. 311). In fact, it is reported that both boys and girls as early as one year express interest in having babies (Parens et al., 1977). It is again quite remarkable to note that such complicated explanations are necessary to understand little girls' wishes "to mother" and to have a child.

### **Super-ego development**

The next component, which we can address briefly, is the notion about how the super-ego develops differently for girls than boys. Freud believed that the super-ego in girls was weaker because there was a less abrupt ending of the Oedipal conflict than occurs for boys. Yet observations of latency-age girls have shown no lack of super-ego development (Blum, 1977); they are, in fact, less aggressive than boys, more socially conforming, and demonstrate more self-control. Even more far reaching in its implications, however, is the work of Gilligan (1982) which finally laid to rest the often repeated observation of women's weaker super-egos. For Gilligan, the psychology of women is distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationships and interdependence which implies a more contextual mode of judgment and a different, rather than lesser, moral understanding than men.

### **Latency and sexuality**

It is worth making some comments about latency here, too, because part of the theory does suggest that as girls emerge from the Oedipal phase and move into latency, their masturbation essentially ceases and their sexuality is repressed. Again the data are not supportive. Clower (1977), a child analyst, makes some telling comments, such as: "All analysts today realize that girls in latency age do masturbate" (p.109), and later, "It is interesting to speculate whether repression, formally thought of as normal, was as common as believed" (p. 111). In fact, in another paper, Fraiberg (1972) speculates that adult women who experience frigidity are those who did more completely repress their sexuality in latency and were very afraid about being unable to contain the excitement of genital stimulation. So the notion that little girls, as they emerge from the Oedipal stage, continue to feel castrated and cannot tolerate to touch

themselves and repress their sexuality remains unsubstantiated. In a classic paper by Scherfey (1973) some of the myths of female sexuality have been finally dismissed. Based on the empirical work of Masters and Johnson, she rightly concludes that there is no such thing as "a psychological clitoral fixation" and that the vaginal orgasm as distinct from the clitoral orgasm does not exist.

### **Turning away from mother**

We now come to the most central feature of the Oedipus complex — that for girls to develop normally they must reach a point where they move away from their mothers, erotically fixate on their fathers, and then give up sexual wishes for their fathers, long for a baby from them, and return to identify with their mothers.

The core of the complex assumes that somehow or other girls turn away from their mothers and turn to their fathers. The dynamics of castration complex and penis envy, which require that little girls see their mothers as defective and inferior, were offered to account for this phenomenon. However, as Lester (1976) notes, quite the opposite has been reported in normally developing girls who show continuous identification with their mothers; only when mothers have been grossly inadequate do fathers become the main love object for girls, around the ages of three to five years.

In reviewing the literature I could not find any systematic studies which supported the notion that little girls turn away from their mothers and instead become intensely attached to their fathers at this stage of development. As more interest in fathers emerged, however, new studies observing young infants and children have raised some new questions about how children relate to both parents. For example, in one study Schaffer and Emerson (1964) found that infants with a strong tie to their mothers were likely to be responsive to other specific people as well, and by 18 months most infants of both sexes were attached to both their fathers and mothers. Girls were noted to attach very early and positively to their fathers.

In their paper, "The Development of the Self," Stechler and Kaplan (1980) note that the young infant learns to relate to more than one person right from the beginning. In one case in which the father actively participated, the little girl showed a clear capacity to discriminate between, and to attach to, both mother and father, but she developed different modes of relating to each. In particular they note that the child developed a series of dyadic relationships with each person, and each offered a different kind of

---

stimulation. Chodorow (1978) stressed the continued importance of this girl's external and internal relationships to her mother, and the way her relationship to her father is added on to this. Thus, it is not a turning away from mother so much as a new relationship added on to the existing one.

As it becomes more apparent that fathers are important figures to little girls much earlier than the Oedipal stage, a different level of observation about little girls' sexual development emerges in the analytic literature. For example, they are described as being seductive very early indeed (Abelin, 1971). In one paper (Galenson & Roiphe, 1982) a little girl of six months was described as coy and flirtatious, and she was presumed to look out with lowered eyelids; this look, we are told, was experienced as attractive and appealing to various men and her father. A 15-month-old girl was described as flirtatious with male staff.

This brings us to another possible hypothesis to explain the girl's turning erotically to her father; that is, the father's seductiveness toward the little girl and his projection of sexual wishes onto her, may stir up the little girl's sexuality and direct it to him. While there has been some recognition of the seductiveness of the father in the literature on counter-Oedipal attitudes (Benedek, 1959; Leonard, 1966; Moulton, 1973), it is quite limited. This discrepancy is striking when compared to the frequency with which it is assumed that it is the little girl who is sexual and flirtatious toward the father because he is not defective and, therefore, more desirable than her mother.

### **Summary of analyses of female Oedipus complex**

Let us now review quickly this lengthy analysis. I have raised serious questions about the viability of the Oedipus complex in women because it seems as if each of the components represents rather forced and unsubstantiated attempts to fit a male model to female experience. The development of gender identity seems more related to parental attitudes and cognitive development. Castration anxiety and penis envy may describe something about some little girls' experience, but these ideas hardly seem central to female development and adult experience; girls do not appear to turn away from their mothers, and girls become attached to their fathers in different ways—starting very early indeed. Gilligan (1982) and others (Blum, 1977) have described the nature of women's different, but not weaker, super-egos compared to men's; latency continues to be a period of some passionate feelings for many little girls; vaginal sexuality is not consistent with our current knowledge of female sexuality.

When all is said, I believe two pieces of observation — not Oedipal theory — need our attention. To address them in a way which has any value, however, requires that they be taken out of their previous context of the female Oedipus complex and examined freshly. I am talking about two important observations about women — one, that their relationships with their mothers, although intense, are often quite conflictual; and two, that there is frequently an intense, and sometimes passionate, attachment to their fathers which may continue well into adulthood. To reduce these observations to castration anxiety and the search for the penis reflects a model in which fear and envy are the propelling forces underlying normal growth and development.

The self-in-relation conceptualization offers another perspective in which forces enabling growth are considered in terms of relational models with mutual empathy and mutual empowerment playing central roles (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 1984; Surrey, 1984). That is the concept I would like to use to explore daughters' relationships with their mothers and fathers, beginning at the age in life when cognitive development and maturation allow for movement from more limited to more complicated relational connections.

### **Alternative views to Oedipal explanation**

One of the most common observations in the process of psychotherapy is that while men may express the wish to be like their fathers, women more often express the wish to be the opposite of their mothers. There are women in other social and cultural settings who may not share these attitudes, yet the women I know in my practice and among friends and colleagues are often quite critical of their mothers. They focus on those qualities in their mothers they most dislike, and struggle against showing any sign of such qualities in themselves. Even those women who have identified themselves with feminist causes are often quite unforgiving of what they see as their mothers' offenses against them, and they resist modification of such attitudes in therapy. Paradoxically, as noted above, it is also evident that strong bonds are often established between mothers and daughters which continue throughout life. I believe these observations can be examined more fruitfully by exploring the specific features in women's progression from more limited to more complex inter-relationships in the family.

As the recent developmental research has demonstrated, infants are highly responsive to environmental stimuli from birth and are very much

---

attuned to their fathers and siblings, as well as to their mothers, at an earlier age than had been previously considered (Lamb, 1981; Abelin, 1971). We know that rapid growth in all areas occurs during the early years. For example, the significant cognitive changes identified at 18 months contribute to the young child's greater capacity to imagine significant people even when they are not present and, thus, to tolerate better interruptions in relational contact. In the same way, the maturation of perceptual and motor skills and of language stimulates the child's curiosity to look out into the world and thus helps children make more sense out of what they see and experience. Changes in bodily sensations and awareness of sexual excitement contribute further to the complexity of the child's relational experiences. The most rapid changes in both mental and physical development seem to occur in the first five years of life. Indeed, one sees considerable awareness in very young children of rather complicated interactions among family members.

Freud, as everyone knows, and as reviewed above, believed that the little girl as early as three years of age was profoundly shocked when she became aware that she did not have a penis ... and, furthermore, was devastated to learn that her mother did not have one either. I would suggest that both little girls and little boys experience shock and devastation when they confront indications that their beloved and highly valued mothers are devalued and are often treated with contempt, harshness, and sometimes cruelty.

A woman in therapy reported a powerful memory which she felt had haunted her all her life. The memory is of herself around three years of age, walking hand in hand with her adored father while they were on vacation, exploring the hotel at which they were staying. This was an unusual treat since her father was rarely around and was perceived as quite wonderful and powerful. During their exploration, her father opened a door which led into a room in which a rehearsal was going on for that evening's entertainment. The irascible director was very annoyed by the interruption, and in an angry and insulting way told her father, in effect, "to get the hell out." The little girl was very shocked that anyone would talk to her father like that. She even recalls the look on her father's face which she knew somehow reflected this embarrassment and great discomfort, although she did not label it as such at the time. But she remembers his "taking it," smiling back at that awful man, and even apologizing as they sheepishly left and closed the door. She felt she could never look

up to her father in the same way again, and she reported this with great sadness. This was a particularly interesting memory because in her family her mother was very much devalued by her father. She realized in our work together that she probably had seen or heard her mother insulted by her father many times. But that had become so much a part of her experience, repeated so often, that she could not as keenly identify the moment of disillusionment as she had with her father.

### **Mother-daughter relationships**

Lewis and Herman (1986) believe that the major source of anger in the mother-daughter relationship is the mother's "fall from grace" in the family. They feel girls suffer a double blow, that is, "the denigration of the person to whom she had been so deeply attached, and the awareness that becoming an adult like her has no future reward or superior power" (p. 150). The daughter feels outrage and fury as a consequence and accuses her mother, "Why didn't you fight harder?" That is, indeed, a frequent lament of my women patients. While reporting with some feeling the ways in which their fathers demeaned their mothers, they express anger at their mothers, saying, "Why did she take it? Why didn't she leave him? It's her own fault."

We need to wonder about the absence of compassion for the mother while reporting such observations, and the resistance to truly perceive her in context. Here it is necessary to begin to explore the relationship of the daughter to the father, for I believe she has very much identified with and taken on some of the father's perceptions and attitudes toward the mother. As a consequence, the daughter is very much caught between the strong emotional-relational connections with each parent as well as between parents.

### **The role of the father**

As noted earlier, we now recognize that fathers become very important to both male and female infants very early. Abelin (1971) reports that the recognition of the father with happy smiles occurs before six months, and that by nine months most of the infants observed were strongly attached to their fathers. Interestingly, girls attached themselves earlier and more intensely to their fathers than did boys; yet fathers are said to prefer their sons and to be more responsive earlier to their male children. (Margolin & Patterson, 1975). This observation may account in part for little girls' yearnings and struggles to capture the interest and attention of their fathers in order to feel loved by them.

---

It is important to note how these new data about early response to the father are assimilated into psychoanalytic theory. While previously fathers did not enter significantly into developmental interpretations before the Oedipal phase, now they are seen as absolutely essential to protect the child from the “engulfing mother,” to quote: “the infant seems to be ready for the relationship with the non-maternal parent long before the phallic Oedipal phase” (Abelin, 1971, p. 229). Mahler and Gosliner (1955) write, for example, “The father is a powerful and perhaps necessary support against the threat of engulfment of the ego into the whirlpool of the primary undifferentiated symbiotic stage” (p. 209). The father is seen as “an uncontaminated mother substitute” (Abelin, 1971).

### **The engulfing mother**

This is a very common theme in the literature which stresses separation-individuation as the major goal of mature development. The need for both male and female children to move out of the relationship with their mothers, who are said to be experienced as overwhelming and powerful, is emphasized repeatedly. Even Chodorow (1978) talks of the need for the girl to defend against potential engulfment by the mother. On the one hand, she recognizes that there may be more permeable boundaries between mothers and daughters, which in turn contribute to girls developing more relational selves; and, on the other hand, she concludes that mothers cannot adequately differentiate themselves from their daughters and that daughters, as a result, cannot readily differentiate themselves from their mothers. The father, then, is presumed to play a significant role in helping the daughter to differentiate from her mother by attaching to him as someone different and “the other.”

There are a number of problems inherent in these views. They suggest that in normal development mothers are naturally engulfing and cannot differentiate themselves from their children, especially their female children. It assumes that normal mothers must somehow be so primitive that they cannot have more permeable self-boundaries and know the differences between themselves and their daughters. Jordan’s 1983 paper on empathy nicely demonstrates how empathic a mother or therapist can be without losing her experience of self in the process. We are well aware that boundary confusion can occur with our more disturbed patients, and that they are often caught in very intense and destructive relationships with one or the other or both parents. However, this clearly does not represent the norm.

How do we understand why this point of view is so prevalent in the current literature? It is, of course, not too different from a long history in our field in which the mother has been blamed for all developmental failures. She is seen as powerful in this respect, and yet so unimportant compared to the father in every other respect.

Let me suggest that this attitude has at least two sources. First, if men need “to disidentify” (Greenson, 1968) from their mothers in order to gain acceptance, value and prestige in the eyes of men — namely their fathers — this may lead to attributing excess power to their mothers. Defensively, we know, this may lead to the need to devalue women in order to deny their power. Secondly, women do sometimes hold onto their relationships with their children in order to feel connected with someone, when other adult relationships fail them. This theme is particularly developed by Miller (1972) who indicates that mothers may become over-involved with their male children because they cannot fully engage with a male adult.

If the analytic community displays such a bias against the mother who is seen in normal development as engulfing, it is not surprising that fathers may communicate to their daughters their perception of their wives in a similar way. Daughters then may adopt their father’s views as their own.

### **Fathers and daughters**

There are other observations about fathers and daughters which can help us to understand both the intensity of their relationships and the nature of the conflicts between mothers and daughters. In a paper exploring father-daughter relationships, Contratto (1986) notes that the daughter’s observations of the father-mother interaction contribute significantly to the daughter’s psychological development. In particular, early recognition in many families that men have more power and authority than do women may lead daughters to over-value and idealize their fathers from a young age.

Contratto reports also that many of her women patients’ earliest memories of their fathers were that they were fun, clever, and more exciting than their mothers who were seen instead as familiar, reliably present, and less interesting. These women patients also saw their fathers as controlling and often belittling of their mothers which led them to try to earn their father’s respect by being different from their mothers. Contratto believes, too, that since the mother is more familiar and more present, there is less need and less motivation for the daughter to figure out the relationship to the mother; the father, on the other hand, because he is unfamiliar, becomes a more

---

intriguing figure of excitement and delight. Surrey (1983) has noted that little girls' needs to understand as well as to be understood are apparent very early. Thus, in fact, they do inquire about the mother's feeling states, etc. Mothers are more likely, however, to respond and become, therefore, far less mysterious figures than fathers.

In the literature on the role of the father in early childhood development, there are additional observations which may help us understand further the father-daughter relationship (Lamb, 1981; Machlinger, 1981). We now know that fathers become important figures very early for both boys and girls. Still, in most families mothers spend much more time with their children than do fathers. When fathers do interact, they have significantly different styles from mothers. While mothers engage in more conventional play and assume primary responsibility for caretaking, fathers engage in more physical and often more stimulating interactions (Lamb, 1981). They are quite action-oriented with their daughters, though less rough and tumble than they are with their sons (Biller & Meredith, 1974). Very early, then, fathers become associated with play and adventure.

Other data suggest that fathers also put more pressure on their children to conform to sex-role stereotypes (Biller, 1981). For example, fathers focus on achievement and dominance in their expectations for their sons (Aberle & Naegele, 1952). Thus, little girls may face a dilemma in attempting to gain the respect of their fathers who are so valued in the family. To be like their brothers would perhaps gain more of their fathers' attention, but, as girls, they learn early that they are expected to be "feminine" to please them.

### **Sexual component of the father-daughter relationship**

This brings us to the sexual component of the father-daughter relationship. As noted earlier, there has been some awareness that the father's seductiveness and projection of his sexual wishes onto his daughter contribute significantly to the girl's passionate attachment to him. Still this observation has not been given central importance in current theory. Recent data on father-daughter incest are, however, impressive and disturbing (Herman, 1981): for example, over 5% of all girls are incestuously involved with their fathers or stepfathers; and women who have become sufficiently disturbed to require hospitalization show an alarming history of sexual abuse (54%) (Bryer, Nelson, Miller, & Krol, 1986), more often than not occurring in the family.

However, let us consider much more subtle expressions of the father's seductiveness or the mode of interaction between fathers and their daughters which may help us understand the ways little girls establish relationships with both parents.

In talking to fathers, it becomes apparent that they often get great pleasure from what they see as their daughter's adoration of them and presumed "flirtatiousness." Recently, one male psychiatrist remarked that he believed girls who felt they could titillate their fathers grew up to feel good about their femininity, while another psychiatrist added, "How else do little girls learn how to be flirtatious with men when they grow up?" Both of these comments were given with a kind of pleasure and pride in contemplating the early father-daughter relationship in this way. A woman colleague recalled that when she was fifteen her father, a highly respected figure in the community, took her to lunch at a glamorous restaurant and introduced her to the maitre d' as "my mistress," which warranted a big laugh all around. Yet if mothers should talk with such apparent pleasure about their son's sexuality or so-called flirtatiousness with them, I suspect a horrified reaction would follow. These more subtle expressions of the father's sexualization of the relationship with his daughters are quite prevalent. Yet it is notable that they are addressed only minimally in the literature. It is a kind of "given" for men, and the implications for growing girls are not taken seriously. Instead, as we have seen, little girls are labeled repeatedly as being sexy and seductive.

How do we understand this propensity of many fathers to see so readily expressions of their daughters' excitement, glee, and love as seductive, and what are the implications for their daughters' experience? We know that fathers' play with their daughters is often physical and can be quite stimulating. During the early years of such rapid growth, the little girl's intense physical sensations will often accompany her interactions with both her father and mother — although those with the latter are not as regularly "noted." Tessman (1982), in describing father-daughter interactions, reports, too, that there are often rapid shifts from peaks of involvement to valleys of minimal attention, which may be quite confusing and disturbing to the little girl.

I believe that men have difficulty learning how to relate to their daughters, who behave differently from their sons in important ways. From an early age, little girls reflect more relational qualities than do little boys. They are certainly less aggressive, are noted to smile earlier, to show more sensitivity to the affective

---

states of other children, and are generally seen as more affiliative and sociable than little boys (Oetzel, 1966; Moss, 1974). The identification with mother as “mother” contributes to their developing more nurturant, empathic capacities (Chodorow, 1978; Surrey, 1984). Both Miller (1976, 1984) and Surrey (1984) have addressed the ways little girls very early show the need to take care of the important relationships in their lives — which involves an attentiveness to the feeling states in both parents. It has also been suggested that little girls take care of their mothers by helping them feel better — less sad, depressed, or angry — and take care of their fathers by helping them feel more important, adored.

The tendency to misinterpret these relational behaviors as seductive and flirtatious represents a significant misunderstanding of what little girls may be looking for when they try to engage with their fathers. Tessman (1982) sees in the daughter’s relationship with her father an excitement which includes the wish to adapt to a new kind of mutuality with him; and she notes, too, how much the daughter’s need to give love actively has been underestimated — and, I would add, misunderstood when observed.

Fathers more typically interact with their sons in task-oriented, aggressive activities and may feel at a loss about how to connect with their daughters’ more personal, relational styles. A man I saw in therapy returned to see me after his daughter was born; he had a three-year-old son. While he had great pleasure and pride about both children, he reported that only recently had he been able to start to relate to his son ... now that he was old enough “to do things with,” with his daughter he felt uneasy, saw her as too fragile, and was afraid he would not know how to be with her.

This uneasiness in fathers becomes even more marked in adolescence when their daughters’ sexuality does begin to develop more clearly. We know some fathers become overly involved with their daughters at this stage, either by being openly sexual or overly possessive and restrictive, stating the need to protect them from the sexual dangers in the world. Another common response is for fathers to withdraw and distance from their daughters to ward off their own sexual impulses.

A fifteen-year-old girl who was admitted to the hospital after a suicide attempt reported that she had become increasingly depressed because she felt completely ignored by her father who attended instead to her two brothers. Her mother was chronically depressed, and she felt very protective of her. The family history revealed that the father had

had a series of affairs, was very much involved in body building in an open, exhibitionistic way at home, and had persuaded his wife to engage in some unusual sexual activities. At the same time, this father seemed to care sincerely about his daughter and wanted to be involved in her treatment. It became clear that as his daughter moved into adolescence, he was quite threatened by his sexual feelings toward her and, thus, needed to ignore her and focus his attention elsewhere. At the same time, the daughter was very aware of his sexual activities and did often sexualize her relationship with him, for example, by staying up late to “catch him” after he was out with another woman. She was alternatively enraged with him and despairing about ever gaining his love and attention.

Not only do fathers need to see little girls’ behaviors as flirtatious, sexy, and coy; mothers also may encourage their daughters in such interactions by labeling their behaviors in such a way. This, I might add, is in sharp contrast to the propensity of fathers to be deeply resentful and jealous of their son’s strong connections with their wives. The mother’s encouragement of her daughter’s development of “feminine wiles” with her father may also reflect the mother’s efforts to help her daughter get on in the world and to learn how “to get a man” who will ultimately presumably take care of her, etc. Even more to the point is that this behavior probably also speaks to the mother’s yearnings for a father’s attention and love, which she can play out through the relationship between her daughter and her husband.

At the same time, if she feels devalued and abandoned by her husband, she will also be deeply resentful of her daughter; and she may express these feelings in critical and hostile attitudes. Daughters, of course, in such instances, recognize that their mothers seem to value men more than women, through their perceptions of how their mothers relate to husbands and sons, and in the ways they encourage the daughters’ relationships with their fathers. Lewis and Herman (1986) observe that daughters can experience their mother’s apparent preference for their husbands, sons, and other males as a deep betrayal of their close connections, which contributes to the underlying anger in mother-daughter relationships.

### **Competence and mastery**

Another facet of the father-daughter relationship that requires attention is what Tessman (1982) calls “endeavor excitement.” This term refers to the ways in which fathers can help daughters achieve a sense of competence and mastery in the world. This can occur, she believed, only if the father can both acknowledge

---

his daughter's wish to bestow her love freely and seriously on him and also integrate her growing competencies into his view of femininity. Fathers have more traditionally represented links to the outside world, and an important piece of their relationships with their daughters is to help them master tasks and feel competent and effective. We might expect that over time, as women move out of the home into the work arena, mothers will also become associated with the development of competency and achievement. In those many families where the mother is still devalued, however, the daughter's sense of accomplishment may lead to significant inhibitions in the work arena in later years (Stiver, 1983). Instead, if positive relational connections between parents are apparent to the child, learning to become competent occurs within a relational context and contributes to further growth and development.

Let me share an example of watching my nephew help his three-year-old daughter learn to cut her food with a knife. This father and daughter are deeply connected, and since a sister was recently born they are together even more than previously. He was sitting with her while she was eating and apparently decided in the middle of this process to show her how to cut her own food. She was intensely interested and completely focused on the task as he guided her hand with the knife several times until she finally did it herself. It was a rather glorious experience to see the marvelous enthusiasm they both expressed at this event, both smiling from ear to ear, and then rushing in together to the other room to share this great accomplishment with the mother who, though nursing her baby, had full opportunity to show and share her delight and great pleasure.

### **Birth of sibling**

I would like to address now the enormous significance of the birth of a sibling to a little girl's development and her relationships within the family. While it is probably the first new relational challenge for a young child, it has not been given much attention compared to the centrality of the Oedipus complex. In fact, some of the powerful, highly varied feelings children do have toward their siblings are often dismissed by interpreting them simply as displacements from their parents in the Oedipal drama. Yet the entry of a new person into the household significantly alters the family equilibrium and changes the exclusive experience a child has with her parents, particularly the mother, as the primary caretaker. While this can be painful for the child, it

also offers an opportunity to enlarge her relational capacities, and it may help her move forward into more complicated interactions.

Obviously, the age of the child when a sibling is born, the family constellation at the time, and other features offer many variations which cannot be addressed now. Still, it is important to note that the little girl is often torn among many feelings: her own identification with her mother in the mothering of the new baby, rage at being displaced, enthusiasm about the opportunity to spend more time with her beloved father which sometimes occurs, and empathic interactions with a mother who often feels quite burdened and torn herself.

A woman I was seeing in therapy who had a three-year-old daughter was pregnant and struggling with what it would be like for her daughter to have a sibling. This struggle replayed in part some significant events between her and her brother, but it was also a reflection of how deeply tied she felt to her daughter, how much she felt what she imagined would be her daughter's pain, and how much she also resented her daughter for interfering with her simultaneous wish to bond with her new baby. All of these issues I believe contribute to the power of the mother-daughter connection and the underlying conflict which is also present.

In the above discussion I have tried to address the ways in which conflict-ridden relationships between mothers and daughters do not seem to arise out of penis envy, castration anxiety, and rivalry between them, but from other sources. The mother's "fall from grace" when she is seen as less valued than the father, the sense of betrayal by the mother for her apparent preference for men, and the fury at being replaced by her mother's relationships with others, are some of the relevant factors.

Also, the passionate attachment to the father is seen as having its source in part in the style of the father-daughter interactions, often physical and stimulating. At a stage of rapid growth and development of the little girl, such intense physical sensations may inform experiences of love with intense excitement, joy, and other feelings. Also, it seems likely that fathers, being men, project their own sexual interests onto their daughters and need to see them as adoring and flirtatious as a way of understanding their own loving feelings (as men often interpret any loving and close feelings as sexual [Stiver, 1983]). Fathers, as more mysterious figures who are not as present as mothers, are perceived to be more in the world and more valued than mothers; this perception, in turn, leads to an over-idealization of the

---

father in contrast to the mother who is seen as more familiar and real, and whose flaws are more visible in day-to-day interactions.

I would like to add that this lack of full, day-to-day interchange accounts, in part, for the continuation of the idealization of the father into adulthood; that is, because the father is often not very present with his daughter in her growing-up years, she does not have the opportunity to resolve, and come to terms with, a real relationship with him. This tendency is exacerbated by the father's difficulties in knowing how to relate to his daughter in a non-sexual way. In an analogous fashion, sons may have a difficult time resolving their relationships with their mothers when the culture puts such pressure on boys to move away from their mothers in early development, thus depriving them of more opportunity to truly work through this relationship over time — even though their mothers are physically present in this case. Unhappily, boys, like girls, have little opportunity to work out their relationships with their fathers who are relatively absent to boys as well. This prevalent situation often leaves the boy quite alone, and with much unfinished business. It is important to note that while girls do have major conflicts with their mothers, they are also able to work out much more positive relationships over the years.

Of course, in adolescence, many of these issues come to the forefront again, and with more power. This period has been addressed elsewhere along with the suggestion that mother-daughter relationships may become more intense and problematic at this stage for many reasons (Lewis & Herman, 1986). However, despite such intensification, the data are still impressive that mothers and daughters continue to maintain close, if complex, ties. Gleason (1985), in a survey of Wellesley College students, reported that the majority identified with their mothers as the most important person in their lives.

All of these issues need to be addressed in our therapeutic work with women, but we lose sight of them easily if we allow a theoretical formulation to guide our observations. It can blind us to what is truly going on in the lives of women. I hope I have shown how the components of the female Oedipus complex do not hold up when empirical data and clinical work with women are considered, nor does this formulation help us understand women's development.

The conceptualization of the self-in-relation as a model of female development helps us in a more powerful way to understand the meanings of the different relational connections which evolve over

time. Surrey (1984), in discussing women's capacity and pleasure in relatedness, notes that these involve the ability to identify with the other, the sense of connectedness through feeling states and empowerment based on the complex awareness of the needs and realities of another person.

### **A case example**

Let me close with a clinical example which illustrates these qualities in lieu of an explanation based on the dynamics of the female Oedipus complex. A young woman was referred for treatment after developing a hypomanic reaction of psychotic proportions. This reaction was triggered apparently by her stepfather's close brush with death after a stroke. During his recuperation, this woman became increasingly excited, domineering, and bossy; she called herself Scarlett O'Hara, predicted the date of her father's death, and repeatedly talked of wanting to sleep with her father. By the time I saw her, she was no longer acutely psychotic, although she was rather overactive and talked with glee and pleasure about wanting to be Scarlett O'Hara.

As I pursued her history, I learned of several significant events. Her biological father died when she was only one-and-a-half years old. She had no memory of him, but she did remember that a year later, when her mother remarried, her stepfather was very kind to her, brought her a Bugs Bunny doll, etc., but then he "disappeared." What that meant was that he was a very successful businessman who travelled all over the world and was at home less and less. She saw her mother as quite inadequate, and her mother was often called "stupid" by the stepfather. When I asked what was so terrific about Scarlett O'Hara, she said that Scarlett was a strong woman who knew what she wanted. She then talked about how weak she saw her mother to be and how upsetting this was to her. Still, she remained high, often rather giddy and grandiose.

When she spoke again about wanting to sleep with her father, I asked her what that meant ... and as she answered, her demeanor began to change. In a much more subdued fashion she explained that this powerful stepfather became quite terrified after his stroke. He believed he was going to die. He was afraid of the night and thought if he closed his eyes and slept, he would die. She was quite shocked and upset to see such vulnerability in someone who had such contempt for any sign of weakness in others, but she could not bear his pain. "I thought," she said, "if I slept with him, if I put my arms around him, comforted him, he would be less afraid, that he would

---

sleep, and he would stay alive." As she told me this, tears were streaming down her face, and she was able to feel deep sadness about losing this beloved stepfather, and her real father many years before.

## Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here. At this session Drs. Jean Baker Miller and Janet Surrey joined Dr. Irene Stiver in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** Why do women whose mothers are devalued by their fathers have trouble in work in later years?

**Stiver:** It has a lot to do with the daughter's desire to stay connected to her mother. She fears losing the connection by moving away — that is, "ahead" — creating more distance between her and her "devalued" mother. The daughter often feels very torn as a consequence. I think many women struggle with this problem. Also, some mothers give their daughters many complicated messages; for example, a mother may tell her daughter to go out and do what she herself was not able to do, and yet the mother may be afraid of losing her daughter if the daughter is successful.

**Question:** I am doing some research with women in mid-life whose mothers have died in that period, and it is fascinating to see the various phases that women go through in dealing with their mother's death. One of the interesting points that intersects with your discussion is the women's resistance to seeing their mothers in context. With some of the women, I think that the resolution came when they were actually able to see their mothers in their mothers' own psycho-historical realms, that is, why they were devalued, what internal image of the self they have internalized, and how that is passed on. It helps to resolve some of the anger toward their mother. But that's the developmental step needed to be able to have that kind of thinking, to have a systems perspective and to stand outside of it. I wondered if you could comment about that resistance.

**Stiver:** Well, again the question of a woman's resistance to changing her view of her mother is something many of us can talk about as a central issue. But I think that once you get rid of all the jargon, that's really what we hope to do in our therapeutic work. That is, helping the woman who says, "I don't want to be like my mother," to look at her mother over time and develop a different perspective of how and why she is how she is. That is really what the therapeutic work is about, helping daughters to arrive at more compassion for their mothers. One needs constantly

to raise the question as to why it is so hard to see their mothers differently, why they hold onto these negative attitudes toward their mothers. Now, I think that there are several reasons for this resistance. One I suggested in the body of the paper was that I think that there is an identification with the father's attitudes, but I think it also has a lot to do with the daughter wanting to stay in connection with her mother. And this can be one way of staying in connection, that is, by holding onto grievances; at the same time she somehow feels that she can perhaps have a better life than her mother and wants to disengage from that negative connection, too.

**Surrey:** Also, I think it's important to think about what the mother's self-image was and how the daughter is so vulnerable to the mother's own self-perceptions. In addition to the father's influence, there is also the mother's denigrating self-perception and the wish for her daughter to "not be like me."

**Question:** I think in Black families the daughters are often more aware and responsive to their mother's strengths and struggles. They are aware of all she has to do in raising her children, etc.

**Stiver:** I very much agree, but I think we know less of the father's role around this issue in Black families. I do think we have to look at all the vicissitudes in families in different settings. Maybe someone more knowledgeable than I would like to address this question.

**Miller:** To follow on that, I think I can comment on class differences. I can't speak for Black women. Working class women may have different experiences. I think they are surrounded by a different context and, often, they've seen their mothers struggle. It's easier to see your mother's position if you have seen her scrubbing floors or working in a factory. If you've seen your mother going to the theater or to dinner parties, or having what seems like an easier life, I think it's harder to see the forces affecting her and to have that kind of empathy or perspective. It takes longer to get there. Still, I don't mean to romanticize the working class falsely. Working class mothers and daughters have complex feelings based on their particular individual experiences.

**Stiver:** Yes, but you're suggesting they can't just buy into the kind of attitudes of our culture so easily because they are confronted with stark realities. And I think, too, that in many families there is more need to help their mothers in family tasks, to actually become more involved with each other in the tasks of living, because you can't do it alone in families where there are more obvious basic reality struggles.

---

**Question:** Do you think there is any reason to hold on to the male Oedipus complex?

**Stiver:** That is an interesting question. I do think if you go through components 1, 2, 3, and 4, they describe many aspects of male experience. That is, the competition with the father, the preoccupation with castration, the cultural emphasis on distancing from the mother, etc. You might say, empirically, it fits better. But on the other hand, my hunch is that basically you run into the same problem: that is, as soon as you label something as “the male Oedipus,” you stop looking and you stop exploring and finding out what is really going on in the family inter-relationships. It’s a bit too pat. Further, I don’t think that normal development can be seen as progressing out of fear and envy—for men or women.

**Question:** Why so much emphasis on the Oedipus complex?

**Stiver:** Primarily because of the importance that it is given in many clinical settings. It is considered so central to an understanding of the developmental process. It is given enormous importance. I think the notion of using a label to cut off inquiry can occur with other concepts as well — especially diagnoses. In labeling someone as an hysteric, borderline, etc., one often cuts off further inquiry. But I do think the Oedipus complex is quite central to personality theories still governing much of clinical work today — as if it explains something, which I don’t believe it does.

#### References

- Abelin, E. L. 1971. The role of the father in the separation-individuation process. In J. B. McDevitt & C. F. Settlege (Eds.), *Essays in honor of Margaret Mahler* (229-252). New York: International Universities Press.
- Aberle, D. F. & Naegele, F. D. 1952. Middle class fathers’ occupational roles and attitude toward children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 22, 336-378.
- Benedek, T. 1959. Parenthood as developmental phase: A contribution to the libido theory. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 7, 339-417.
- Bettelheim, B. 1954. *Symbolic wounds*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Biller, H. B. 1981. The father and sex role development. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (2nd edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Biller, H. B. & Meredith, D. L. 1974. *Father power*. New York: David McKay.
- Blum, H. P. 1977. Masochism, the ego ideal and the psychology of women. In H. Blum (Ed.), *Female psychology: Contemporary psychoanalytic views* (157-192). New York: International Universities Press.
- Brunswick, R. M. 1940. The pre-Oedipal phase of the libidinal development. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 9, 293-319.
- Bryer, J., Nelson, B., Miller, J. B., & Krol, P. 1986. *Childhood sexual and physical abuse as factors in adult psychiatric illness*. (Under review).
- Burlingham, D. 1973. The pre-Oedipal infant-father relationship. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 28, 23-47.
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. 1970. Feminine guilt and the Oedipus complex. In J. Chasseguet-Smirgel (Ed.), *Female sexuality* (94-134). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Chodorow, N. 1978. *The reproduction of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clower, V. 1977. Theoretical implications in current views of masturbation in latency girls. In H. R. Blum (Ed.), *Female psychology: Contemporary psychoanalytic views* (109-125). New York: International Universities Press.
- Contratto, S. 1983. Father’s presence in women’s psychological development. To be published in J. Robow, M. Goldman, & G. Platt, (Eds.), *Studies in psychoanalytic sociology*. Melbourne, FL: Krieger & Co.
- Fast, I. 1978. Developments in gender identity: The original matrix. *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 5, 265-273.
- Fliegel, Z. O. 1973. Feminine psychosexual development in Freudian theory: A historical reconstruction. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 42, 385-408.
- Fliegel, Z. O. 1982. Half a century later: Current status of Freud’s controversial views on women. *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 69, 7-28.
- Fraiberg, S. 1972. Some characteristics of general arousal and discharge in latency age girls. *Psychoanalytic Study of The Child*, 27, 439-475.
- Freud, S. 1924. The dissolution of the Oedipus complex. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 19, 173-179. London: Hogarth.

- Freud, S. 1925. Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 19, 243-258. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, S. 1931. Female sexuality. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 21, 223-243. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, S. 1933. New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 21, 7-182. London: Hogarth.
- Galenson E. & Roiphe, H. 1977. Some suggested revisions concerning early female development. In H. Blum (Ed.), *Female psychology: Contemporary psychoanalytic views* (29-59). NY: International Universities Press.
- Galenson, E. & Roiphe, H. 1982. The pre-Oedipal relationship of a father, mother and daughter. In S. Cath & A. R. Gurwitt (Eds.), *Father, child development and clinical perspectives* (151-162). Boston: Little Brown & Co.
- Gilligan, C. 1982. *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gleason, N. 1985. Women's self-development in late adolescence. *Work in Progress*, No. 17. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Greenson, R. R. 1968. Dis-identifying from the mother: Its special importance for the boy. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 49, 370-374.
- Herman, J. L. 1981. *Father-daughter incest*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Horney, K. 1924. On the genesis of the castration complex in women. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 5, 50-65.
- Horney, K. 1926. The flight from womanhood: The masculinity complex in women as viewed by men and by women. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 7, 324-339.
- Jordan, J. 1984. Empathy and self-boundaries. *Work in Progress*, No. 16. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Jordan, J. 1986. The meaning of mutuality. *Work in Progress*, No. 23. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Kleeman, J. 1977. Freud's views on early female sexuality in the light of direct child observation. In H. P. Blum (Ed.), *Female psychology: Contemporary psychoanalytic views* (3-17). NY: International Universities Press.
- Kohlberg, L. 1966. A cognitive-developmental analysis of children's sex role concepts and attitudes. In E. Maccoby, (Ed.), *The development of sex differences* (82-173). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lamb, M. 1981. Fathers and child development: An integrated overview. In M. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (1-70). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lampl-De Groot, J. 1927. The evolution of the Oedipus complex in women. In R. Fleiss (Ed.), *The psychoanalytic reader* (180-194). New York: International Universities Press.
- Leonard, M. 1966. Fathers and daughters: The significance of "fathering" in the psychosexual development of the girl. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 47, 325-334.
- Lester, E. P. 1976. On the psychosexual development of the female child. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 4, 515-527.
- Lewis, H. B. & Herman, J. L. 1986. Anger in the mother-daughter relationship. In T. Bernay & D. W. Cantor (Eds.), *The psychology of today's woman: New psychoanalytic visions*. Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Loewald, H. 1979. The waning of the Oedipus complex. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 27, 751-775.
- Machlinger, V. J. 1981. The father in psychoanalytic theory. In M. E. Lamb, (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (113-153). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mahler, M. S. & Goslinger, B. J. 1955. On symbiotic child psychosis: Genetic, dynamic, and restitutive aspects. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 10, 195-212.
- Margolin, G. & Patterson, G. 1975. Differential consequences provided by mothers and fathers for their sons and daughters. *Developmental Psychology*, 11, 537-538.
- Miller, J. B. 1972. Sexuality and inequality: Men's dilemma (A note on the Oedipus complex, paranoia and other psychological concepts). *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 32, 147-155.
- Miller, J. B. (Ed.). 1973. *Psychoanalysis and women*. NY: Bruner/Mazel
- Miller, J. B. 1976. *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- 
- Miller, J. B. 1984. The development of women's sense of self. *Work in Progress, No. 12*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B. 1986. What do we mean by relationships? *Work in Progress, No. 22*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Modell, A. 1985. The Oedipus complex: A re-evaluation. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 33*, 201-206. (Report from chairman of panel presentation at May 1983 Annual Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association.)
- Moss, H. 1974. Early sex differences in mother infant interaction. In K. Friedman, R. Reichert, & R. Vandewile (Eds.), *Sex differences in behavior*. NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Moulton, R. 1973. A survey and re-evaluation of the concept of penis envy. In J. B. Miller (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis and women* (207-230). NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Oetzel, R. 1966. Annotated bibliography and classified summary of research in sex differences. In E. Maccoby (Ed.), *The development of sex differences* (223-321; 323-351). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Parens, H., Pollack, L., Stern, J., & Kramer, S. 1977. On the girl's entry into the Oedipus complex. In H. P. Blum (Ed.), *Female psychology: Contemporary psychoanalytic views* (79-107). NY: International Universities Press.
- Pederson, F. A. & Robson, K. S. 1969. Father participation in infancy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 39*, 466-472.
- Roiphe, H. & Galenson, E. 1972. Early genital activity and the castration complex. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 41*, 334-347.
- Schafer, R. 1974. Problems in Freud's psychology of women. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 22*, 459-485.
- Schaffer, H. R. & Emerson, P. E. 1964. The development of social attachments in infancy. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 29*, 3.
- Scherfey, M. J. 1973. On the nature and evolution of female sexuality. In J. B. Miller (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis and women* (115-129). NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Stechler, G. & Kaplan, S. 1980. The development of self: A psychoanalytic perspective. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 35*, 85-106.
- Stiver, I. 1983. Work inhibitions in women: Clinical considerations. *Work in Progress, No. 3*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Stoller, R. J. 1968. The sense of femaleness. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 37*, 42-55.
- Surrey, J. 1984. Self-in-relation: A theory of women's development. *Work in Progress, No. 13*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Surrey, J. 1987. Relationship and empowerment. *Work in Progress, No. 28*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Tessman, L. 1982. A note on the father's contribution to the daughter's ways of loving and working. In S. Cath & A. R. Gurwitt (Eds.), *Father-Child development and clinical perspectives*. Boston: Little Brown & Co.
- Thompson, C. 1943. "Penis envy" in women. *Psychiatry, 6*, 123-129.