



Sons and Lovers as Symbols of the Oedipal Complex: The Impact of Mother-Son Relationships on Adult Identity

Dr. A. Catherine Anna Pushpam , Assistant Professor of English, B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science & Technology Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Article information

Received: 6th September 2024

Received in revised form: 9th October 2024

Accepted: 11th November 2024

Available online: 7th January 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14608744>

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the utilization of Freud's theory of the Oedipal Complex in bringing out the mother-son relationship leading to the gradual improvement of adult identity. The significant notion of the psychoanalysis laid down by Freud related to the Oedipal Complex denotes a son's psychological and interpersonal growth is tuned by the secretive passion and hatred towards his father that sprouted up in the early years. The intricate dynamics of the bond of mother and son are understood by analyzing the factors of formation of identity, regulations of emotions, and the patterns of relation in the period of adulthood. Great stress has been given to the resoluteness or persistence of the clashes related to the Oedipal complex and the impact on self-perception, relationships based on interpersonal, and mental peace and calmness. The study incorporates psychological research with age-old psychoanalytic constructs to illustrate how maternal bonds heavily influence our social relationships, attachment styles, and personality characteristics. The subtle but consequential nature of unresolved mother-son interaction with the hope that through understanding we can advance the development of the more civil adult psyche is noted and attention is paid to the complex psychological processes through which identity develops, with no one factor being solely responsible; however, the impact of original family quadrants on later life is demonstrated.

Keywords: - Mother-son relationships , Oedipal Complex, Psychoanalysis, Emotional development, Adult identity formation

Introduction

The mother-son relationship is a primordial bond that fosters a male child's emotional, psychological, and social growth. This bond is notably influential in defining adult identity, as it weaves its way through the intricate patterns of attachment, separation, and individuation.

The mother-son relationship is the Oedipal Complex, first proposed by Sigmund Freud (Freud 320-22). The Oedipal complex which stems from Freudian theory, is a universal, unconscious phenomenon in which a male child experiences desire for, and rivalry with his parents, specifically his opposing sex parent versus his same-sex parent (Freud 321). Specifically, the Oedipus complex is believed to arise during the phallic stage of development and is ultimately resolved through the process of identification with the same-sex parent (Freud 322). This sets up the mother-son relationship and thus the Oedipal Complex. A son loves his mother in a way that can become possessive, and jealous and cause rivalry with his father (Klein 168). How a mother balances these feelings, a nurturing, protective figure with rules and boundaries, greatly impacts her son's emotional and psychological growth. As several studies show, the quality of the mother-son relationship is one of the best predictors of a male child's mental health, relationships, and general well-being (Shaffer 234). For sons, the secure attachment to their mother is a sense of safety, a sense of trust, and a sense of self-worth these will help them develop healthy relationships and a positive identity as an adult (Bowlby 13). Mother-son relationships that are the opposite of secure or harmonious can develop psychological maladies, including narcissism. (Millon 123). An unresolved Oedipal Complex means the male may not be able to form intimate relationships due to his sense of rivalry, possessiveness, and inferiority arrived at because of the famed rivalry between the male and the father figure (Freud 321). In the Oedipal Complex, the mother-son relationship is the most important part of developing an adult identity. Such insight can allow us to understand the complexities of this relationship and how this influences the development of male psychology and adult identity.

Mother-son relationships

In D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, the relationship between Paul Morel and his mother Gertrude Morel appears to be primarily Oedipal and is at the center of the novel. This principle is quite important in forming Paul's adult self and concerns the strong emotional bonds and conflicts that characterize his mental development as well as his interactions with females. Gertrude Morel is frustrated with her marriage to Walter Morel and channels her emotional energy onto her children, especially Paul. This close relationship serves as a rock for Paul, providing shelter and choking his development. This is fired up in complicated ways, as Lawrence demonstrates: "She had a fire of passion for her sons, especially for Paul. She considered them to be her strength, her business, her very whole life" (Lawrence 54). The love Paul receives from Gertrude is both beneficial to him and possesses an element of control such that he is incapable of developing any more interacting relations with women. One can apply Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex to comprehend the conflicts within Paul. He seems to be in a melancholic mode because he craves for his mother and the inherent guilt and struggle because of the many aspects of his life including his relationships with Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes. The reason why Paul vacillates and struggles to completely develop relations with these women appears to be the unsettled tensions with Oedipus: 'He felt he could never give himself to Miriam. She wanted his soul; he wanted to give her, but it seemed like a theft from his mother' (Lawrence 172) Paul's growth and development are best highlighted by his inner conflict related to the love of his mother and self-actualization. A turning point might be described as the part in this novel when Paul decides after his mother's death that he will be able to live without her: "He would not follow her into the darkness." (Lawrence 423)

Oedipal Complex

The Oedipus complex is a psychoanalytic theory put forth by Sigmund Freud. He suggests that a child's internal instincts of love towards his or her parent of the opposite sex and hatred towards the parent of the same sex play a significant role during his or her

psychosexual development. This complex is named after the character in Greek mythology who killed his father and married his mother without knowing. This theory strains on the mother-son relationship and greatly impacts the understanding of socio-psychological development in general and adult identity formation. Freud believed that at the phallic stage of sexual development boys want their mothers and see their fathers as barriers in this seeking of mother's love. If these feelings are developed positively, an identification with a male parent facilitates the development of a superego and well-rounded male adult personality. (Freud 171). The relationship between the mother and son, as shaped by the Oedipus complex, formed the boy's personality and behavioral tendencies. According to Freud, a boy's relationship with his mother is evident until later in his life when it influences his self-esteem, confidence, and social interactions. With a nurturing and affectionate mother, the man offers a sense of security and self-worth that eventually forms an individual's adult relationships and identity. An over-possessive or overly close mother would give him a problem in forming autonomous relationships; hence, their relationships could later be dysfunctional (Freud 174). Modern psychoanalytic theorists have built upon Freud's elementary notion to include object relations within their approach. Melanie Klein introduced the theory of object relations by giving extreme importance to the way children internalize their early relationships, especially with their mothers; this forms the basis of their future interpersonal dynamics and sense of self (Klein 21). Whichever the internalized image of the mother may be, positive or negative, it serves as a template for all future relationships and self-identity.

For instance, a male individual may have had an emotionally responsive and supportive relationship with his mother; this can testify as to his favorable self-image and healthy relationship patterns. This contrasts with the individual whose maternal relationship was inconsistent or neglectful, leading to problems of self-esteem an issue which later proves problematic within their adult romantic and social relationships (Klein 28). It is a time when the resolution of the Oedipal conflict is believed to be a crucial point within that developmental process, affecting the child's capability to move through and navigate complex feelings and relationships with him. It is also necessary to take into account the cultural factors that shape the mother-son relationship. In many cultures, the mother-son relationship is considered to be very strong and this can lead to the intensification of the Oedipus complex. For example, in some societies where the maternal figures are held in high esteem, sons may develop a stronger bond and feeling of responsibility which will in turn contribute to the elaboration of the Oedipal conflict and impact on the son's identity in adulthood. Thus, it is possible to state that the Oedipus complex proves to help analyze the role of mother-son interactions in the formation of the adult personality. Even though the theory was introduced by Freud and has been modified and criticized by later psychologists, the basic assumption that early interactions with family members shape one's identity and behavior is one of the key concepts of psychoanalytic theory. The relationship between mother and son in the context of the Oedipus complex shows how the first years of one's life and the bonds that are formed during this time can shape one's psychological growth and adulthood.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis glimmers with insight, especially Freud's Oedipal complex which highlights the psychological significance of the mother-son bond in adult life. For Freudians, the Oedipus complex takes place at the phallic stage of psychosexual development, when a boy is said to have an emotional attachment towards his mother and casts his father as a competitor for her love (Freud 219). In the event of this resolution, the defense facilitates the lateral integration of the father. The boy learns and models the standards of society and the required masculine behavior. However, if the Oedipal Complex is not resolved, it remains a conflict in

its own right that would potentially dictate adult relationships, how one views and speaks about oneself, and how emotionally mature one is. The role of the mother during this critical stage seems to be of great significance. It is this combination of maternal care and distance that assists the child to grapple with the conflict of attachment and individuation. This in turn can leave deep psychological scars in the mind of the son. If, for example, there is a strong mother-son bond, then there is a problem in forming relationships with men later in life but if this bond is weak and the mother is rather emotionally cold, then the son struggles to develop appropriate relationships. Other later psychoanalytic theorists, like Jacques Lacan, modified some of Freud's assumptions by accentuating the mother's symbolic function during the adolescent expansion into the world of society. According to Lacan, the mother and son set the rules for the signification of Desire and Identity for this Son in Culture. (Lacan 135). The same theories can be seen in practice today in psychotherapy, particularly with the unresolved Oedipal conflicts that are relied on in the attempt to explain contemporary difficulties in relationships and self-identity issues. The bond between mother and son in the case of the Oedipal Complex also reveals the complex nature of the role of early relationships in adult emotional and psychological life.

Emotional Development

The relationship between a mother and her son is very important in forming a person's adult self, the Oedipal Complex. The Oedipal Complex is defined by Sigmund Freud as "a child's feelings of desire for his or her opposite-sex parent and jealousy and rivalry with his or her same-sex parent." (122) In relationships between mothers and sons, the Oedipal Complex can become evident through matters that shape how the son develops emotionally and creates their adult identity. A good, healthy connection between mother and son creates gender equity, emotional security, trust, empathy, and respect which helps form confidence in future relationships (Chodorow 44). An unhealthy over-involved relationship may spawn issues such as fear of being dependent on someone else causing other potential consequences effects like anxiety, depression, and issues with closeness-building regarding the individual in one view attachment to others (Kernberg 210). Mothers are influential role models for their sons; sons will mimic who they consider to be masculine men when establishing their own beliefs on what masculinity is. A mother's position can assist her son with developing virtues such as kindness, compassion, and feelings of expression, influencing their capability to experience emotional well-being while allowing them to create an adulthood identity.

Adult Identity Formation

Adult identity formation is a complex process that can be influenced by numerous interpersonal factors and intrapsychic processes. Perhaps no relationship has a greater impact on the development of a man's adult identity than the one he develops with his mother. The Oedipal Complex is an indispensable lens that helps to probe these happenings. This theory related to psychoanalysis delves deep into the early evolving stages where boys of younger age develop intense emotional and sexual bonds with their mothers, while also feeling a sense of competitiveness with their fathers. By putting into use the insights from the Oedipal Complex to male relationships with their mothers, it is understood how these dynamics stick on well into adulthood and influence one's identity. Freud identified the Oedipal phase as a crucial time in a child's psychological growth, typically occurring between the ages of three and six.

At this stage, the little boy establishes a deep emotional affection for his mother and may even feel his father is a competitor to her (Freud 21). Overcoming this complex situation is the critical stage of the process of forming a healthy identity for the individual. Once the child has internalized the father and the norms and values of the environment, he or she will be

able to develop the maturity necessary for achieving a healthy identity as a person. When this resolution is not achieved, the unprocessed feelings could later affect our lives severely, influencing relationships as well as self-perception. The mother's role in this phase is also very important. A caring and supportive father figure is the child's primary means of establishing a sense of security and this is the foundation from which the child can work through and eventually resolve the Oedipal Complex. On the other hand, an overbearing or a distant mother can affect this resolution in a negative way thus leading to problems with identity in adulthood. For instance, a mother who is too protective of her son and wants to be everything to him can negatively affect the son's ability to set boundaries and become independent in his adult life which may lead to dependent or conflicting behavior in his relationships (Blos 158). On the other hand, the distant or emotional unavailability of a mother may lead to problems with trust, intimacy, and self-actualization.

The effect of the Oedipal Complex on the son reaches the adult world, particularly affecting his romantic and familial relationships. Freud suggests that the unresolved Oedipal complex can be addressed through the transference and projection of maternal attributes onto a romantic partner, although the therapeutic objective may not always be clear (Freud 34). This scenario illustrates how the early relationship between a mother and son influences adult identity due to the ongoing psychological development. Psychoanalytic thinkers of today have developed a wider perspective by incorporating ideas of not only Freud but also the attachment theory. Bowlby's theory of attachment defines the close connection between the early emotional bonds and the individual's capacity for relational patterns and constructing their self-image (Bowlby 201). The secure attachment bonds, where the parenting is done with a high level of responsiveness and consistency, are the ones that enable a child to become confident and autonomous. On the other hand, insecure attachment, which follows inconsistent or neglectful maternal care can cause complications in self-esteem and emotional regulation subsequently leading to more profound identity formation problems. Cultural and social factors play a significant role in the mother-son dynamic and its impact on adult identity. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations can create unique pressures within these relationships. For example, in patriarchal cultures, mothers might unintentionally uphold gender norms that promote independence and emotional restraint in their sons, which can hinder emotional expression and self-exploration (Chodorow 56). On the other hand, progressive parenting styles that foster emotional openness and mutual respect can support a more comprehensive development of identity.

Conclusion

The mother-son relationship is the vital thing that leads to forming the adult identity. This is said so based on the Oedipal Complex. This is so because the combined attitudes of cravings or desires and the identification that proves the bond at the stage of the Oedipal period have an impact on the development of the formation of adult identity. A strong and sturdy self-image, healthy male traits, and enhancement of emotional traits can be built up with care and affectionate mother-son ties. On the other hand, a stressed bond will sometimes lead to issues related to emotions and unhealthy relationships combined with a low sense of self. The forming of adult identity, developing healthy male traits, expressing feelings, and getting into deep attachments are all grounded in this relationship. A son can grow up to be an adult with the attitudes of care and affection is also connected with the mother-son relationship. It is through the lens of the Oedipal Complex that one can view the impact of the mother-son relationship.

Works Cited

- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by James Strachey, Macmillan, 1913
- Klein, Melanie. "Early Stages of the Oedipus Complex." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1928, pp. 167-180.
- Shaffer, David R. *Social and Personality Development*. Wadsworth, 2000.
- Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books, 1969
- Millon, Theodore. *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond*. Wiley, 1996.
- Lawrence, D.H. *Sons and Lovers*. Penguin Classics, 2006
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, W.W. Norton & Company, 1977
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978
- Kernberg, Otto F. *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. Jason Aronson, 1975
- Blos, Peter. *On Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Free Press, 1962