The Oedipus complex is a psychoanalytic concept that refers to psychological conflicts experienced by every individual. The complex was named by Sigmund Freud in 1910 after the Greek tragedy of King Oedipus (Freud, 1910/1957). As a baby, Oedipus narrowly escaped being killed by his father. Later he unknowingly killed his father and inadvertently married his mother. When he came to realize what he had done—that the man he had killed was his father, and that the woman he was having sex with was his mother—he was so horrified that he blinded himself and gave up his kingdom. The story suggests how there may be aggressive competition between fathers and sons. It also shows how powerful is the taboo against incest, and how incestuous feelings may cause intense guilt. Freud held that every boy struggles with such feelings. Later he extended this theory to girls, because they have feelings of rivalry toward their mother figures as a consequence of harboring secret erotic feelings toward their father figures (Freud, 1933/1964). Psychoanalysts view these conflicts as entirely normal, although they are often the source of conflicts in later life (Young, 2001).

As psychoanalysts developed Freud's ideas, this complex has come to have several interrelated meanings. Three main processes are involved. First, the Oedipus complex refers to the fact that children's earliest sensual feelings are directed toward a person, usually a parent, with whom a sexual relationship would be incestuous. In order to disavow incestuous feelings, children have to learn to redirect their erotic interests toward a nonfamilial person. Incestuous feelings are so powerful and forbidden that we repress them from consciousness; this is one major way in which the unconscious mind develops and then influences us throughout our lives.

Second, the Oedipus complex may refer to all of the triangular rivalries that originate in early childhood. For example, a boy wishing to get closer to his mother may treat his father as a rival; when he wishes to get closer to his father, his mother becomes a rival. A girl wishing to get closer to her mother may treat her father as a rival; when she wishes to get closer to her father, her mother becomes a rival. These conflicts do not necessarily involve the persons who are literally the child's mother and father; they may involve a variety of mother-figures or fatherfigures, as well as siblings or other family members. Difficulties with situations in which three persons are in a relationship are very common throughout life. Many of us struggle with feelings of being left out, of comparison and competitiveness (rivalry and jealousy), and the like. These difficulties occur with particular intensity in sexual situations.

Third, the Oedipus complex refers to the way in which children and adolescents mature into their adult identity, especially around sexuality. In one “pre-Oedipal” type of identification process, we become attached to a person and consequently become like that person (in which case we identify with that
person because we like, admire, or even fear the person), or we become attached to a person and consequently become someone that person would like us to be (in which case our identity is formed by our need to have that person become attached to us).

However, Oedipal processes of identification are more complicated than this pre-Oedipal type. For example, a boy may identify with a man's sexual personality, not just because that is his gender, but also because he is attached to his mother (or mother-figures) and knows that she is erotically interested in men. Alternatively, a boy may identify with a woman's sexual personality because he is attached to his father (or father-figures) and knows that he is erotically interested in women. A girl may identify with a woman's sexual personality, not just because that is her gender, but also because she becomes attached to her father (or father-figures) and knows that he is erotically interested in women. Alternatively, a girl may identify with a man's sexual personality because she is attached to her mother (or mother-figures) and knows that she is erotically interested in men.

These are complicated processes that normally occur outside of our conscious awareness. According to classical psychoanalytic theory, every boy and girl struggles with these feelings and identification processes in the course of psychological maturation. These feelings are not only those of sensuality and love (as well as the forbidden eroticism of incestuous fantasies and desires), but also of competition, resentment, and hostility. Thus, the particular details of an individual's Oedipus complex are believed to have a major influence on the formation of personality, which includes one’s gender identity, pattern of adult eroticism, and sexual orientation—including how bisexual feelings within the person's makeup are addressed (Barratt, 2005).

In most versions of psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex is believed to be triggered by the young child's ability to recognize that there is a special relationship—notably, the sexual relationship—that occurs between adult women and men (mothers and fathers) and from which the child is excluded. This recognition occurs in what psychoanalysts call the “primal scene” (which sometimes literally refers to the child's awareness that his or her parents have intercourse). Most psychoanalysts believe that this becomes possible with language acquisition and the cognitive developments that occur around age three or four, although there are some different opinions as to when this complex begins (Britton, 1990). Typically, the Oedipus complex is intense around age five, settles down temporarily in middle childhood, and is re-activated in adolescence, when teenagers struggle with issues of sexuality, maturation, and identity. However, psychoanalysts generally agree that the conflicts associated with the Oedipus complex continue throughout our lives and can be a source of much unhappiness and unnecessary suffering.

Although some aspects of this theory are controversial, the Oedipus complex is an important way of understanding many aspects of an individual's emotional, relational, and sexual development, as well as the origins of adult character and conflicts (Covitz, 1998; Hartocollis, 2001). It has also been used to explain many features of religious belief as well as other aspects of social and cultural phenomena.

See also
Family Development, Theories of.

References

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