

Oedipal Configurations in Same-Sex Families Using the C.A.T.

abstract

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Revision of the Oedipal theory in light of contemporary social changes has been one of the most important psychoanalytic endeavors of our time, yet little progress has been made in understanding the crucial issues concerning child development in alternative familial constellations, such as same-sex families.

The following paper, based on qualitative-psychoanalytic research¹, challenges the heteronormative assumption embedded in the Oedipal model, according to which children need parental figures of both sexes to achieve normal Oedipal development – an assumption which, in turn, draws on the axiom that acknowledgment of the difference between the sexes plays a fundamental role in organizing the child's configurations of desire and identification.

The questions at stake are: Do children raised by same-sex parents construct an Oedipal configuration referring to both their parents? And if so, on what grounds do they make their object-choices, when these are not grounded in the parents' sex? What part do gender and sexuality play in these constructions, if any?

Method:

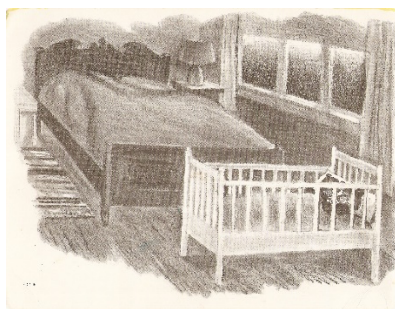
For that purpose, Thirty-three donor-conceived children in the age range associated with the Oedipal stage (4-6), who are living in a shared household with same-sex parents were recruited. This configuration, which most closely approximates the

¹ This research was conducted as part of a PhD dissertation titled "Oedipus in same-sex families", Supervised by Prof. Niza Yanay and Dr. Amalia Ziv, The Gender Studies Program, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, January 2020.

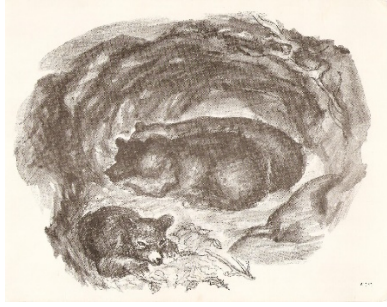
traditional familial model, allows for optimal isolation of the unique characteristics explored. Sessions length ranged between 2-5 hours and were held in each family's home environment. Alongside observations of familial interaction, in-depth interviews were conducted with both parents together (12 pairs of lesbian mothers and 11 pairs of gay fathers) and separate interviews were conducted with the children. These involved projective tasks, such as an apperception test formulated for the purposes of the present study, based on the conventional children's apperception test (CAT). Three of the CAT's original cards were used, all designed to invoke Oedipal and primal scene contents:



Card #2 CAT-A copyright CPS Publishing LLC 2020



Card #5 CAT-A copyright CPS Publishing LLC 2020



Card #6 CAT-A copyright CPS Publishing LLC 2020

These three CAT-A cards, combined with other selected photos presenting specific issues children in same-sex families are likely to face, allowed for an in-depth investigation of Oedipal internalized representations and unconscious phantasies, as they manifest themselves in children raised in same-sex families.

Infantile phantasies proved to be a fascinating interface between the personal and cultural spheres; a locus where a vital "working-through" is performed, laying the foundation for the development of identity, including gender and sexual aspects.

Results:

Based on the classification of the different patterns presented by the children, three distinct oedipal configurations were identified:

1. **A 'full-blown' Oedipal pattern** (15 children): This category refers to the stereotypical Oedipal pattern depicted in classical psychoanalytic literature and popular culture. It includes children who manifest continuous romantic longings towards one of their parents, wish to marry their chosen parent, raise a child together, while the other parent is cast as a rival towards whom attempts at exclusion and various expressions of hostility are directed – either in the child's phantasy life, overt interaction, or both.

2. **A Platonic Oedipal configuration** (9 children): This configuration entails the consistent favouring of one parent, alongside attempts to exclude the other parent, with no apparent romantic quality. The romantic libido will often be directed towards another object, such as one of the siblings or a friend of the opposite sex.
3. **An alternating oedipal configuration** (3 children): This configuration may resemble one of the two preceding ones, that is, the 'full-blown' or the platonic Oedipal configurations, only this time, the parent cast to each role alternates frequently: One day a certain parent serves as a love object and the other parent is viewed as a rival, and the next day they switch roles, according to emerging needs.

In addition to these three Oedipal configurations, two non-Oedipal configurations were identified:

1. **An "anti-competitive" configuration** (4 children): This configuration was manifested by children whose parents go to great lengths to eliminate any competitive element in familial relations, in a manner that undermines the development of an Oedipal dynamic. Children in such families were preoccupied with maintaining the equilibrium and protecting their parents from potential envy, acting as if the two parents are identical or interchangeable.
2. **A multiple configuration** (2 children): An alternative organization to that of the Oedipal one, which draws on the child's relationship with more than two parental figures, with no hierarchy or preference between them. It was manifested only by two participants, twin brothers, in specific familial circumstances where the grandmother de-facto took on the part of a third parental figure alongside the two fathers.

Discussion:

Since the majority of children manifested one of the three Oedipal patterns, despite the absence of sexual difference between their parents, split-based organization of the child's relationship with his parents likely serves a fundamental psychic need which precedes considerations of sex and gender. It might even be the case that due to its cultural centrality, gender dichotomy offers itself as a “ready-made” splitting scheme for children of heterosexual parents; however, it is not an inherent or exclusive foundation for such splitting. It is thus tempting to believe, as some contemporary theories suggest, that the Oedipal configuration exists by virtue of there being two parental figures, regardless of sex. However, as will be demonstrated in the paper, the potential for expressing romantic love towards one's parent is indeed informed by the social taboo on homosexuality. As the social taboo on male homosexuality is stronger than the one on female homosexuality, the relationship between gay fathers and their sons tend to bring about non-oedipal configurations, involving denial mechanisms.

Through elaborate illustrations, comparisons between different familial circumstances, discussion of the findings vis-a-vis various theoretical proposals, as well as sociological contextualization – a comprehensive account of the Oedipal situation in same-sex families is offered for the use of professional therapists and LG family members alike. In addition, by means of deconstruction and reconstruction of psychoanalytic assumptions, this paper contributes to the current psychoanalytic endeavor of revising the Oedipal theory.

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