# The Oedipal as a Defence Against the Sibling

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### Abstract

Psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and consulting have a long history of the dominance of the oedipal–vertical over the lateral–horizontal. This paper pays attention to the background of this history and the theoretical perspective of the oedipal and adds the theoretical perspective of the lateral dynamics. In a practice vignette the author explores the impact on the consultant when working with lateral issues among participants in a training group. Some areas are mentioned for further studies.

*Key words*: siblings, lateral, oedipal, differentiation, identification, relational approach, loss.

One of the challenging aspects in my own journey of life developments has been my personal background of being the fifth child in a family of nine. On the couch as much as in normal life I came to acknowledge the profound effect my siblings had on me and that it was not all about my parents, parental messages, and the vertical. My peers, my trainees, my trainers, and my therapists, were often, like myself, initially not prepared to think into a horizontal or lateral frame. I recall a feeling of dragging along with my analyst at one stage where we apparently were on a different wavelength, that felt like coming from different planets. The most accepting of the acknowledging of the impact of siblings were those colleagues who came from larger families themselves. It seemed that own life experience played a decisive role in accepting a perspective that included siblings as life agents, who are at least as important as fathers and mothers.

My training as a psychotherapist and consultant has followed the classical route of the vertical paradigm and the centrality of the oedipal conflict, but new attention for horizontal influences on life-scripting (Berne, 1972) has emerged. A breakthrough publication was Juliet Mitchell's book *Siblings* (Mitchell, 2003) in which she, in a scholarly

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and passionate manner, challenged the "near exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and psychological understanding" (p. 1).

In her book review for *Organisational & Social Dynamics* of Mitchell's work, Sirota raised an important question:

> Mitchell is proposing that the lateral dimension has been crucially ignored in the psychoanalytic consulting room, how, then, might we be failing to take sufficient account of it in group relations (GR) thinking and theory, in GR conferences, and in the interpretations offered in the groups, organisations, and institutions we consult to? (Sirota, 2005, p. 146)

Armstrong wrote about the increasing interest in lateral relations at work which he defines as: "A relation between collaborating persons, role holders, groups or teams that is unmediated by an actual or assumed hierarchical authority" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 194). I brought the issue of the lateral forward in an elaborate case study of enacted sibling love in the staff of a group relations (GR) conference with the containing dynamic of the staff as other siblings, and the conference director as the hierarchical authority (Van Beekum, 2008).

As a consultant engaging in studying organisational behaviour, I apply psychoanalytic concepts, insights, and methodology, in conjunction with socio-dynamic and systemic perspectives. It is a mixture that I share with many colleagues, even when we differ in personal style, in pacing, and in the way we reveal our own internal process in our work with clients. I consider people like David Armstrong, Siv Boalt Boetius, and Burkhart Sievers as important early mentors and teachers, who all inspired me, although in quite different ways, in using my own unconscious process and not be restricted to use the client's unconscious process only. I think that in particular the thinking aloud of internal process in a relational manner as often demonstrated by David Armstrong, opened up my interest in what is called the relational psychoanalytic perspective (Aron, 1996; Aron & Starr, 2013; Mitchell, 1988). In consulting, this approach manifests itself in an ongoing process of working with the interaction of the client's impact and the consultant's own countertransference, awareness of enactments and "almost" enactments. Speaking of clients, they come in a variety of whole corporations or organisations, GR-conference participants, training groups, or senior executives in in-depth coaching.

Relational consultants research their client's worlds not only by observing but also by actively engaging and being impacted in their own world, consciously and unconsciously. It marks the transition from a one-person psychology model (Stark, 1999; Tudor, 2011), in

which the consultant's attention is one-dimensionally directed to the client's transference, re-enacted in the here and now of the consulting process, to a two-person relational psychology in which unresolved issues of the consultant, re-enacted in the here and now of the consulting process, play a role as well. I represent a position of promoting the current methodology in GR-consulting to be driven from a two-person psychological perspective. The consultant holding on to an analytic frame as the neutral, distant instance, labelling pathology in the organisation, leaving him- or herself safely out of focus, is in my view reductionistic and questionable in terms of effectiveness and ethics.

Consultants engage with their clients, are impacted by their clients, and may enact unconscious dynamics that occur between themselves and the client. As a result, the consultant's reflection on both their theoretical frame as on their practice, is challenged. That is where the current contrasting and collaboration between vertical and horizontal perspectives seems important and relevant. The central question is here: "What informs your clinical thinking and your clinical practice?"

In 2012 the Australian Centre for Integrative Studies organised a conference in Sydney with the title "Allies & Enemies: the Role of Real and Metaphorical Siblings in Our Psychological World" (ACIS, 2012). Probably one of the most profound insights from that conference was how psychotherapists and consultants move continuously between the vertical and the horizontal dynamic in relationships with their clients. However, while they are all familiar with and well trained in the vertical (oedipal) paradigm, the lateral perspective is sadly missing from their repertoire, theoretically and practically. Consultants and psychotherapists, unfortunately, are not well trained for expansion in this direction.

They often employ a mode of research in which the transference onto the consultant of the client's unresolved issues about authority figures is a central avenue of investigation. As a result of that, consultants have developed a theoretical frame of reference and also skills, insights, and probably a certain resilience for being on the receiving end of the client's vertical transference. Consciously and unconsciously, consultants and clients, act in their roles in this vertical orientation. Consultants take up their role in this well defined and well trained vertical paradigm from early on in the process with their clients. So, it is not a surprise that consultant's interpretations into the vertical oedipal frame come easily and match remarkably well with their own and their client's expectations, thus reinforcing their theoretical frame and practical methodology. In her analysis of Byatt's (1993) tale of intersecting hysterias entitled "The Chinese lobster", Dent (2009) pointed out the difficulty for clinicians of accessing the

horizontal axis and how poorly trained they are for that possibility. Mitchell added, "This, I believe, is because in our training we have rarely met with an understanding of lateral transferences—these are seen to happen only elsewhere, such as in jealousy of those coming after us, siblings in the waiting room" (Mitchell, 2009, p. 170).

However, for most of us, siblings are part of our earliest relational experiences and this has developmental consequences. As a result, sibling relationships manifest themselves in the transference with the consultant as much as parental transference.

## THE CENTRALITY OF THE OEDIPAL FROM FREUD TO MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY

The background for the dominance of the oedipal in Freud's thinking and writing, is extensively described by Coles (2003, 2006), Lamb and Sutton-Smith (1982), Lewin and Sharp (2009), Mitchell (2003), Sanders (2004), and van Beekum (2009). The *personal*, *cultural*, *and political* context in Freud's life in particular, seems to be relevant for understanding this dominance.

Freud had two brothers and five sisters plus two stepbrothers from his father's previous marriage who were the same age as his mother. Born as the eldest son and golden boy (*mein goldener Sigi*) into a Jewish family, the family-focus was very much on him. Freud grew up in a family where his younger siblings were less important than himself. He had special privileges at home: despite the cramped conditions of their family housing, he had an own room, his siblings could not play the piano in order not to disturb him, and as an older brother he was entitled to censor what his younger siblings read. The death of his brother Julius (Freud was four at the time) was wiped from his memory. He was quite close to his much younger brother Alexander before he got married, while in his writing about the relationship with his nephew Johan, brotherly love is evident. His five sisters, however, are hardly mentioned. They lived outside of Freud's area of attention. Four of them died in Nazi camps in 1942, three years after Freud died in London.

Freud has a bad reputation for how he dealt with his professional peers, the siblings he had in his professional life (Roazen, 1979). From the early days of his famous Wednesday Psychological Society, which became the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society until the establishment of the International Association of Psychoanalysis, Freud built many relationships, reflecting growing international status and recognition, both for himself and for psychoanalysis. However, many of these peer relationships, most notably with Kahane, Stekel, Rank, Jung, and

Adler ended in a breakdown by cutting off or defection, often followed by mutual vilification, which can be considered the psychological equivalent of sibling murder. Even Freud's strong friendship with Fliess, sometimes referred to as Freud's "real" sibling (Whelan, 2012), did not survive. Not their extensive correspondence, nor their personal meetings, nor the role Fliess became to play in the development of psychoanalysis, could prevent their friendship disintegrating due to a case of perceived plagiarism. In the process of dissolving their relationship, Freud ordered that his correspondence with Fliess be destroyed. In the same way as Freud censored what his siblings read, he felt entitled to censor what his followers in the emerging psychoanalytic movement wrote and might read. This may also have lead to the culture that psychoanalysis has become pretty much inward looking, which can be observed in the practice that psychoanalytic authors mainly quote from other psychoanalytic authors.

Freud lived in Vienna in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the capital of the Austrian-Hungarian Danube-monarchy, whose ruling Habsburger culture was highly patriarchal, despite Queen Sissy. This meant that in society and in the family there was only one parent that counted, the father. The mother was not seen as important, let alone children among themselves. It was a cultural context with fear for sibling relationships, in particular incestuous sibling love. In the Judeo-Christian tradition one is not allowed to have sex with someone in a sibling relationship. As a result brother–sister relationships were tabooed, while affectionate relationships to parents, especially the father, were socially endorsed. Children and siblings were only seen in the context of adults, on whom they depended or were made dependent. Children were not in the picture unless in the presence of adults.

In that context it is actually not too surprising that the oedipal complex became the centre of Freud's theory. It focuses on the young boy's triangular relationship with the parents, that comes to an end in a painful separation. The outcome of the oedipal conflict is that sexual and aggressive feelings are repressed and transformed into more socially acceptable forms as competition, guilt, and other defensive reactions. Guilt replaces the fear of the father.

With his emphasis on the oedipal, which was actually radical in his time, Freud got a bit lost in boys and fathers and stuck in promoting the sexual fixations as central in his theories. However, the politics in his scientific community and his role as the founding authority of psychoanalysis gave him little space to move. It is rather tragic that Freud, a well-read man with a love for exploring, experienced how the pressure from the scientific community and the political manoeuvring as a result, minimised his space for widening his scientific scope. He

simply could not allow his main theoretical underpinnings (such as the oedipal or the origin of sexual repression) to be rejected by the academic world in which he operated and sought recognition.

The vertical orientation between child and parent became the template for many analysts and psychotherapists after Freud, also for therapists in other modalities and in mainstream psychological developmental theory and research. "Generations of therapists have followed suit, with the result that parent/child relationships have been examined in depth for a century, while sibling studies have barely scratched the surface" (Safer, 2012, p. 50). Loving or murderous feelings between siblings are in Freudian theory defensive mechanisms, deflections from the competitive feelings experienced for one's parents' love. Siblings represent a displacement from the oedipal conflict. Sibling strife or even murder, so present in mythology, literature, art, and movies, is interpreted as deflection from anger at the father.

The primacy of the oedipal is also visible in the landmark "born-to-rebel" studies on birth order and family dynamics by Sulloway (1997). He sees families as ecosystems, and focuses on the children competing for the parents' attention, not for their mutual differentiation and identity. Going through thousands of biographies in science, politics, and religion, Sulloway makes the case that firstborn children are more likely to identify with authority, whereas the younger siblings are disposed to rise against it.

Like Sulloway, much current research is focusing on findings about birth order and parent favouritism. Older siblings are said to be strivers; younger ones are rebels; middle kids are lost souls. These stereotypes are broad and carry some truth, but here the discussion mostly ends. However, when eldest identify with authority and youngest rebel against it, while middle ones are lost, even these stereotypes only express a relation to the vertical, oedipal dynamic. Middle ones are described as lost because parents do not see them; they mainly see those who comply (the oldest) and those who deviate (the youngest). Of course, middle ones then end with the label: to be lost. But most middle ones have a very active life among their siblings, that may not be noticed from a parental perspective.

## THE ADDED VALUE OF THE LATERAL: DIFFERENTIATION AND IDENTIFICATION

The consequence of Freud's obsession with the oedipal was that sibling relationships have languished in virtual oblivion (Coles, 2006). Emotional development, power games, sexuality, aggression, and

erotic transference are often unconsciously played out in families, in teams, and in organisations. Dynamics occurring between members of a team or colleagues at work may often be based on early sibling relationships. We can think of the question of whether vice-presidents of departments in a highly decentralised organisation deal with each other using skills developed in the schoolyard. Finding answers for this type of question needs the inclusion of thinking into lateral relationships. When we keep the onus on the parental relationship, we will be mainly researching the repetitions of early vertical relationship. As a result we may become reductionists.

The lateral dimension is part of a distinct developmental challenge, which is to find one's unique place in a world of others, who are *similar* and *different* at the same time. Armstrong elaborates in a case study on how the lateral dynamic demands to reconcile the sense of sameness with the acknowledgement of differences (Armstrong, 2007). Sociology and social psychology make valuable contributions in this area. Festinger's social comparison theory, as old as it is (1954), focuses on the comparisons siblings seek with others with whom they have no direct social interaction, groups that are out there but influence their sense of self in relations. This moves into the fields of idealisation or rejection of comparable others in fashion, sexual behaviour, and music. Current media feed this with gusto: project runway, gossip girl, the idol programmes, survivor, next top model as follow ups for the increasingly disgraced big brother houses.

In contrast to Festinger, Leventhal (1970) argues that siblings become oppositional to prevent comparison and Schachter (1982) confirms this with a rivalry-defence hypothesis, which includes the fact that siblings develop *de-identification* as a defence against sibling rivalry. Rivalry seems to consist in a continuum with two basis components: "competition, looking outward to winning a desired object or goal . and comparison, looking inward toward subjective satisfaction, ego-enhancement or self esteem" (Schachter, 1982, p. 132). The process of differentiation and identification takes place within that continuum. Vivona (2007) gives an account of the operation of sibling differentiation and its costs, particularly in terms of constricted identity and transformed relationships with siblings and peers. It seems that in an unconscious process of seeking identity, the individual operates on a continuum from amplifying differences with siblings/peers to maximising similarities. Differentiation from, identifying with, submission to, fusion with, or cutting off from siblings, can all serve to mellow interpersonal rivalry and to ease inter-sibling conflict.

Consultants who have the lateral in mind and work in a relational consulting frame, using their clients transference dynamics in

conjunction with their own countertransferences, need to expand their understanding of these dynamics in two directions.

The first is about the client. Consultants need to include and inquire about those transferences that stem from their client's sibling relationships. The client may project a brother or sister on to the consultant, not just a parent. As professional consultants in our role, however, we may have difficulty accepting and researching sibling transference from our clients. Not only are we not prepared and trained for it, we also may unconsciously resist the experience of the narcissistic injury of being demoted from a parent to a sibling in the client's transference.

The second is about the consultants themselves. The consultant's challenge is to expand into reflections on whether their countertransference comes from their own sibling background and is not, a priori, a figment of a parent–child relationship. This may be particularly hard for consultants when they fear that sibling-related countertransference is forbidden ground or seen as unprofessional.

Consultants are groomed to interpret the dynamic in the GR-consulting rooms in terms of the vertical paradigm and it suits them: the vertical feeds their hidden wishes to be important. When the potential of horizontal sibling transference is experienced, shown, or even named by group participants, consultants quickly bring it back to the safe and known territory of the vertical, labelling the client's interpretation as defensive resistance or a game. But, perhaps the client is right, and it is not a form of resistance or an invitation to a power game when the client does not recognise parent transference or is angry with the consultant as a reflection of transference related to a sibling, not a parent. Some thirty years ago I attended my first Leicester conference where consultants were still smoking in sessions. In a small study group, a member, in an act of rage smashed the consultant's ashtray against the wall. Interesting was what followed when he screamed: "You're like my fucking brother, who just does as he likes." As the fragments of the ashtray were spread over the room, the consultant interpreted this act as an attack on his authority. He used, as I wrote in the title of this paper, the oedipal as a defence against the sibling. This was not beneficial for the process of this small study group, nor for the conference as a whole, which got stuck for days in this vertical uproar, that was enacted later in the total chaos of the institutional event. The sibling was not heard.

### Practice vignette

Over many years I have offered training for consultants using a combination of group relations and transactional analysis theory and

methodology. Those who entered these training courses were inter-
ested to learn experientially first, and conceptually second, about
unconscious process in groups and organisations and appreciate the
integration between relational transactional analysis and relational
psychoanalysis. The trainees were a mixture of senior managers,
human relations executives, learning and development staff, team
leaders, and free-floating consultants, coaches, and psychotherapists.

In each of the annual twenty days of training, one full hour was spent
on the study of the unconscious elements of process in the training
group itself, in a here-and-now event. While trainees took a role as
participants in this experience, I operated as a consultant to the process.
After the hour, we spent about thirty minutes reflecting on the process
from a theoretical perspective, in which I operated as a facilitator. This
is where experience was connected and integrated with theory.

In the past ten years, I found my way of consulting to the group
process sessions changing. I started to pick up more lateral issues in
the group, issues among the group members themselves, instead of
focusing on vertical issues related to me as the consultant.

> This came, however, with a sense of loss. Although I had expected
> it, I was not prepared for the intensity of the feeling. Vertical issues
> are inclusive of me as a consultant in projected positions of power
> and authority, which goes with a sense of importance that poten-
> tially feeds into my narcissism. Vertical issues are also familiar to
> me, being exposed to group dynamics related to projections on the
> authority in my role: good or bad, present or absent, supportive or
> abusive. When the training group works with those themes, I am
> part of the picture, or perhaps it is better to say that I am part of their
> picture. I am central in their search for understanding, in their rejec-
> tion of me, in their loving of me, and in their struggle to work with
> me in my consultant role.

In contrast, horizontal issues often do not actively include me as the
consultant. The work is, first of all, between group members, with me
as a containing consultant in the background. To leave the dynamic
with the group, supporting them in working with it, and not taking it
back to myself as the consultant, forced me into an inescapable and
painful learning curve. In one of my latest training groups there were
eight participants representing large- and small-size family back-
grounds and carrying eldest, middle, youngest, and single children
narratives. In the early stages of their year of training, the dynamic
started with peer issues related to professional competency, envy, and
rivalry and turned increasingly into sibling strife and sibling love. On
a personal level, it represented awareness of growing curves for all

involved; on a group level it showed how group members could take responsibility for part of the collective group dynamic by joining in emotions and actions that were carried by one or two members of the group. The work was often painful and triggered a sense of shame about the exposure. Because this was not a counselling group but a group learning about group process, the depth of learning was not in terms of counselling individuals through their pain but in taking personal and collective responsibility for what was expressed by any group member who acted as a mouthpiece for the group. As a consultant, my role was mainly to contain that process and keep it on track where it belonged: among them.

Using myself as an instrument for experiencing in the here and now, was actually very painful and humbling, increasing during the year. My contributions were more about them and not so much about them and me. The loss I experienced was the loss of being on top of the vertical and being projected onto as the central father figure who could be either hated, fought and killed off, or loved, admired, and embraced. Instead, my presence was often taken for granted and forgotten or neglected. At some time, I had a visualisation of a grand-parent sitting in the corner, knitting or doing a crossword puzzle, while the kids worked out their issues. It was a loss of status, a loss of importance, and a loss of self-indulgence in that dynamic. I was regis-tering envy coming up in me, they had such a good time, without me, I wanted to be part of them, I wanted to share their dynamic but I was left out. All this created painful feelings for me in a consulting role, my tendency was to avoid those feelings and go back to interventions in the vertical frame. But it felt like an enactment to use the vertical as a defence against the horizontal.

However, I realised that I was still engaging with the same uncon-scious universe; independent of the sort of lens I was looking through. Focusing on the lateral, did not mean that the vertical was not in the room. There were moments when I experienced besides envy also admiration, parental pride, and sometimes gratitude for witnessing the work among the trainees. When they got stuck it irritated me and I wanted to push them and give lectures. While my sense of pride to see them work was growing, I realised that there was still a good deal of vertical dynamic in the room, picked up and experienced by me through my silent internal parental reactions about how they were doing. And also this process was mutual, since I made many observa-tions of non-verbal checks on me from the participants, if I was still there and fine, or maybe even with the hope to be rescued by me from the burden of their own lateral dynamics, before they dived back in their sibling squabble.

## EPILOGUE

Promoting more attention in consulting for lateral dynamics in our client-systems is not meant to create a split from the vertical. Mitchell (2003) highlights the constant dynamic and reciprocal relationship between vertical and lateral relations and how our area of interest should not exclude one or the other but rather focus at the points where they overlap.

However, the transition for consultants to include lateral dynamics in their way of working, may be challenging. I see three areas for further attention.

1.  The area of personal issues of narcissism and self-importance. As I argued, the lateral may represent a threat to consultant's sense of being important, that may clarify why over a century the vertical orientation is remaining to be dominant.
2.  The area of understanding early relational patterns among siblings from the upbringing and place in their families of origin. Trainers of consultants and staff at GR conferences may need to reflect on their unconsciously held sibling history, starting from the role they took up in their families of origin, later reinforced and fine tuned through kindergarten and schoolyard experience.
3.  The area of theory. Relational analytic theory should expand its theoretical base and methodology to include the horizontal axis.

Each of these areas raises new issues and directions for future research.

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