



Opinion

# Freud's Oedipus Complex in the #MeToo Era: A Discussion of the Validity of Psychoanalysis in Light of Contemporary Research

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**Abstract:** The Oedipus complex is a child development construct developed by Sigmund Freud that asserts that all children experience sexual desire towards their opposite sex parent, and failure to accept this “truth” can lead to mental health issues. Freud also asserted that children are not harmed by acts of sexual violence. In contrast, the #MeToo movement is a global incentive aimed at creating an awareness of the harm that sexual violence can cause. In many regards, #MeToo is a reaction against a systemic failure to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place. By contrasting Freudian ideas with #MeToo, I argue that the enduring popularity of Freud and his psychoanalytic ideas is a negative influence on culture. In the light of contemporary research from cognitive psychology, psychosocial considerations, child development, and trauma-informed practices, Freudian ideas can be proven to be fallible. Moreover, dispelling misleading assumptions about sexual desires is a beneficial endeavour towards reducing the likelihood of future sexual violence. Additionally, I explore Freudian interpretations of mythology and propose that he misappropriated ancient belief systems.

**Keywords:** Freud; Oedipus complex; #MeToo; psychoanalysis; child development; symbol interpretations; art appreciation; mythology

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Love him or hate him, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) has had an enduring influence on psychology and society since the turn of the twentieth century [1]. He is acclaimed for developing psychoanalytical practices and providing explanations of unconscious meanings in dreams, art, speech, and human behaviours [2,3]. The Oedipus complex, which is inspired by an Ancient Greek myth with the same name, is a foundational construct for many of Freud's other theories [4]. Allegedly, the Oedipus complex is a universal child development stage in which young children experience unconscious sexual desires toward their opposite-sex parent [5,6]. The construct is unsupported by empirical research [7], nevertheless, it is still taught at universities<sup>1</sup> under the pretence that it has some significance [8]. In the following, I scrutinise the validity of the Oedipus complex by reviewing it in relation to contemporary understandings of cognitive psychology, psychosocial considerations, child development, and trauma-informed practices. By doing so, I challenge the premise that the Oedipus complex is an appropriate framework for therapy; moreover, I suggest that its cultural adoration is harmful. The Oedipus complex as a construct presents misleading assumptions about sexual desires which are important to address, especially in our current era of #MeToo, in which collective efforts around the globe are being made to raise awareness of the negative impacts of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> The teaching of the Oedipus complex in universities can occur across disciplines, e.g., psychology, literature, visual arts, etc.

abuse [9], Additionally, I explore broader issues of psychoanalysis, such as how symbols are interpreted, and I propose that Freud misappropriated ancient belief systems.

## 1. #MeToo

#MeToo is a social movement incentive that was originally organised by Tarana Burke in America in the early 2000s [10]. It began as a means of creating awareness for women of colour who have survived sexual violence; however, it has extended to represent atrocities of sexual exploration amongst men, women, children, adults, and everyone, everywhere [9]. Acts of sexual violence includes rape, use of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual comments or advances, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of children, forced prostitution, and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation; it can occur in any setting and by any person regardless of the relationship status between victim and perpetrator [11]. In many regards, the #MeToo movement is a reaction against cultural and institutional systems that have failed to prevent the occurrence of sexual violence [12].

Psychological research influences how survivors of sexual violence are perceived and the types of therapy available to recover from trauma [13]. Consecutively, psychological research influences culture and institutional systems through a range of activities such as education, politics, law, and the arts [14–17]. For roughly a hundred and twenty years, Freud has played a highly influential role in psychological research [18], thus, he has influenced the development of therapies and sociocultural attitudes and behaviours. Given that Freud's hypotheses largely revolved around sexual themes [1], examining how his influence interrelates with #MeToo survivors' disappointment in a systemic failure to prevent sexual violence is worthy of discussion.

## 2. Freud and Psychoanalysis

Freud categorised psychological functions into three categories: the superego, id, and ego. Thurschwell explains that these titles represent a mapping of the mind as follows: the *superego* is a self-critical part that governs one's conscience and sense of morality [1]. In contrast, the *id* is concerned with sexual drives, otherwise known as the libido, and is driven by pleasure principles. The *ego* is one's image of their conscious self, a combination of conscious and unconscious drives afflicted with the superego and id.

In order to develop a healthy ego state, Freud believed that unconscious drives of the id needed to be acknowledged [1]. He believed this could be achieved by interpreting symbols as expressed through art, i.e., myths, paintings, artefacts, drama, and literature, plus dreams and spoken words [19]. He distinguished between individual and socially construed symbolism [20]; however, he maintained that a primordial system of symbolism existed across time and cultures that differed to cultural uses of metaphor and allegories [21].

The proposition of the existence of universal symbols is reminiscent of Plato's theory of forms, and it is possible Plato's philosophies influenced Freud on this matter [22,23]. Comparisons between Plato and Freud have been made by many (see [24]; also [25]), and it is universally accepted that he was inspired by Ancient Greek mythology in several ways from using "Eros", a divine character associated with love, as the basis for his theories of sexual desire [26], to the applying the term "Narcissist", a character in Ancient Greek who fell in love with himself, to define pathological states of self-grandeur [27]. While it is clear that Freud appropriated some Ancient Greek ideas, such alignments do not authenticate psychoanalysis principles, especially if he misinterpreted their original meanings.

Freud created psychoanalysis as a talking-based cure for mental health conditions that operates by reconciling unconscious desires of the id, with conscious thoughts of the ego by having a client lie on a couch and speak automatically in a technique called *free association* [28]. Through the act of talking automatically, the therapist is able to identify unconscious themes via symbols identified in their speech [29]. Thus, by bringing an awareness to the client that they are expressing certain messages, they can become conscious of "hidden" desires [30].

The interpretation of symbols in the psychoanalysis process is underpinned by Freud's hypotheses regarding the psychosexual development of children in the Oedipus complex [31]. The Oedipus complex is tied to theories of the id and, in turn with sexual desire [1]. Sexual desire is commonly considered to be an emotional state that is accompanied by mental representations and body sensations that motivate a person towards sexual activity [32].

### 3. The Oedipus Complex and Its Controversies

The Oedipus complex purports that all children around the ages of three to six experience psychosexual attraction to their opposite-sex parent, however, due to an inability to act upon their feelings, the experience becomes repressed [6]. In boys, the complex is associated with assumptions that their penis gives them superiority, whereas, in girls, it is associated with assumptions of inferiority which leads to penis envy [31]. The naming of the developmental stage as the "Oedipus complex" was inspired by a play called *Oedipus Rex* [33], which was originally written in Ancient Greece by Sophocles [4]. The basic storyline is that of a son who accidentally killed his father and married his mother [34]. Upon reflection of the story, Freud recognised that he had feelings of affection towards his own mother when he was young and extrapolated that the ancient myth was proof of universal Oedipus' traits [35]. He extended his rationale by stipulating that when Oedipus blinds himself with pins from his mother's garments, he is demonstrating symbolic evidence of being blind to his guilty desires [1].

Throughout academia, there are references to incestuous relationships being an unthinkable act, however, Freud re-interpreted evidence of the taboo as hiding a natural instinct [36]. Therefore, regression to the child state was required so as "the sense of guilt would be satisfied" [37] (p. 190). In this context, the aim of therapy is not to heal hysteria, rather, it is to alleviate feelings of shame associated with Oedipus traits so as to improve a client's affect [38]. Freud further asserted that sexual enlightenment of children was normal and that societal suppression of incestuous desires should be acknowledged and accepted [39].

While some people may praise Freud for breaking Victorian era moral constraints regarding the discussion of sexual matters, if he was incorrect about his theories, then the direction in which some of those discussions have steered may be perceived as having had a negative impact on psychological therapies and cultural attitudes. To demonstrate, Freud's belief in the universality of the Oedipus complex was so strong that he was inclined to dismiss clients' claims that they had been genuinely sexually abused as children as fantasy under the pretence that they were lying in order to hide their "guilty" desires [40].

There is a blurred line between Freud's belief in unconscious sexual desires that children have towards their parents and how these may manifest in actual sexual behaviour. Given that sexual desire implies a motivational urge towards wanting to engage in intimate activities with another, the Oedipus complex is clearly stating this is what children fantasise about experiencing. While Freud does not directly discuss children having sexual relations with their parents he does say: 'We do wrong to ignore the sexual life of children entirely; in my experience, children are capable of every physical sexual activity, and many somatic sexual ones as well' [41] (p. 280). Likewise, psychoanalysts trained under Freud, like Carl Jung, were very firm in the belief that if real sexual activity did occur, it was done with a child's cooperation; moreover, it was '*prepared and brought about by the child itself* [italic emphasis given by Jung]' [42] (p. 15).

The above quotes from Freud and Jung imply that children are capable of adult sexual desires and activities. Such attitudes do not correlate with contemporary psychological research focused on cognitive and behavioural development. These factors shall be discussed in more detail later, however, presently, an example to illustrate potential errors in the Oedipus complex is that of a young girl who says she wants to marry her father. Traditional psychoanalytic theory may interpret such a statement as proof of a child demonstrating sexual desire. However, a child between the ages of three and six is not capable of understanding complex implications associated with the word "marriage". While to

an adult, marriage may symbolise sexual behaviour, it is unlikely that a child would consciously or unconsciously view their statement in the same manner. Children within the Oedipus age are generally still learning how to run without falling over, and their cognition skills are at a level of learning how to differentiate between birds and planes [43]. Thus, projecting adult sexual concepts of desire onto children is unrealistic and could be viewed as a perversion of innocence.

There are no accurate records of instances of parent–child sexual activity for Freud’s era compared to today. Therefore, to suggest that Freud is a direct influence on #MeToo sexual violence that occurred in this manner cannot be substantiated. It is, however, alarmingly, that the Oedipus complex offers legitimacy to sexual perpetrators who claim their victims are not harmed because they supposedly have sexual desires that are equivalent to adults [44]. Freud’s rationalisations of childhood sexual desires are comparable to cognitive distortions of rapists and child molesters who believe they have done nothing wrong [45]. It is therefore a peculiarity that cultural approval can be given to Freud’s theories that excuse sexual abuse of children, whilst at the same time those acts are culturally condemned.

Freud’s assertion that incestual activity does not harm children, rather it is an absence of acknowledging sexual desire for one’s mother/father, transcribes to therapeutic situations in which clients, mostly women with hysteria, are persuaded into believing they need to acknowledge their so-called natural Oedipus traits [41,46]. In order to facilitate acceptance of this notion, Freudian psychoanalysts proclaim that symbolic associations as presented in dreams, speech, and art, are to be interpreted in accordance to sexual connotations; for example, trains, swords, and snakes are allegedly phallic symbols, and pockets, caves, and boxes are allegedly vaginal symbols [2,47,48]. If clients refuse to accept the “truth” of such matters, then they are understood to be displaying defensive or resistant traits [49]. Predominantly, psychoanalytic processes put clinicians in a position of authority to which clients are expected to submit [50]. This power imbalance raises questions regarding the extent to which clients are truly free to explore their conscious and unconscious thoughts in order to identify the root cause of their issues, or if they are unduly guided by a clinician’s pre-made assumptions that they have unresolved sexual desire for their opposite-sex parent.

Prior to “discovering” childhood sexuality as expressed in the Oedipus complex, Freud suggested that hysteria and neuroses in adults were the results of real childhood sexual trauma, however, this hypothesis was not met well by his peers [40,42]. Hysteria and neuroses were relatively common conditions, especially in women, so rejection of Freud’s suggestion is generally understood to stem from disbelief and horror that so many girls could experience sexual violence [46]. It is an unfortunate turn of events that Freud did not continue this hypothesis and/or explore the possibility that non-sexual trauma may also disturb a person’s wellbeing. Contemporary psychological research now supports the premise that sexual violence towards anyone, of any age or gender can lead to the development of hysteria and neurosis symptoms; albeit, they are now referred to as post-traumatic stress symptoms [13]. Speculatively, if Freud had pursued his original line of research, then our contemporary understandings of sexual violence, and trauma in general, may have been known sooner. Alas, events did not pan out that way. Instead, Freud altered his ideas to emphasise child–parent sexual desires as being universal fantasies [3]. Subsequently, psychoanalysis theories became sensationalised [13] and can be viewed as a factor in the maintenance of clinical and cultural ignorance towards the harmful effects of sexual violence and other forms trauma.

Freud’s Oedipus complex, and accompanying psychoanalytical theories, have been significant influences for over a hundred years [51]. Psychologists are trained to give credence to Freud’s prominence [1,8], and he has influenced culture twofold: firstly, by encouraging retrospective analysis of the arts through the lens of the Oedipus complex, for example cave paintings and literature, such as *Hamlet* [21,30], and secondly, by inspiring filmmakers and artists, thus giving rise to movements like surrealism [14,15]. The promulgation of Freudian theories through artistic mediums has potentially lead to more credible evidence-based psychological theories being culturally recognised.

Over the years, Freudian philosophies have ebbed and flowed in popularity alongside contributions from other psychoanalysis who have diluted the emphasis on sex as an unconscious drive of all human

behaviours [52,53] Nevertheless, Freudian ideas appear to have an endurance [51]. It is difficult to quantify the extent to which the popularisation of the Oedipus complex has contributed to cultural misunderstandings of sexual exploitation of children. However, in recognition of #MeToo claims that there has been a systemic failure to prevent sexual violence in children and adults alike [12], scrutinising Freud's legacy and its inclination to silence sexual abuse survivors is worthy of examination.

Freud's popularity is more pronounced than any other psychologist. He is frequently acknowledged as one of the top three most cited and eminent psychologists of the twentieth century [18]. In a sociocultural capacity, he may be viewed as being number one. A demonstration of his international fame is notable via an online project titled *Small World of Words* in which word associations are gathered in multiple languages as means of gathering scientific data for research purposes [54]. Participants are invited to report associations that they have with a topic and visitors to the site can view the results. In multiple languages (e.g., English and Mandarin<sup>2</sup>) "Freud" is the only psychologist whose name is associated with "psychology". Therefore, it stands within reason that Freud's influence on culture is not only immense, but it is an influence that is thwarted with inaccurate assumptions that could be potentially harmful if it is not clearly understood that many of his theories are fallible.

The Oedipus complex as a child development construct lacks empirical support [55] and contradicts contemporary empirical research that reveals devastating effects of childhood sexual abuse [56]. In order to ensure mental health practice and research moves forward in empirical directions and, in turn, sociocultural spheres are influenced by accurate psychological information, reviewing criticisms of Freudian psychology is an appropriate measure to take. To this end, the following discussion focuses on three areas of interest; (1) trauma-informed perspectives, (2) symbolism and psychoanalysis, and (3) the symbolism of the Oedipus myth within a historical and cultural context.

#### 4. Trauma-Informed Perspectives

Contemporary views towards trauma acknowledge that stressful occurrences such as neglect, bullying, verbal abuse, physical assault, and sexual violence, disrupt nervous system regulation and can lead to mental health conditions akin to what was previously known as hysteria [13]. Trauma experts van der Kolk and van der Hart have conducted extensive research into the history of trauma, and their investigations reveal that Pierre Janet was the first psychologist to apply the term "subconscious" alongside clinical observations of the impact that traumatic memories can have on the conscious mind [57]. Whilst Janet's work in the late nineteenth century marks a significant point, it is useful to be aware that his research is built upon previous investigations that recognise mind and body connections to hysteria/trauma that extend back to at least the Renaissance era via scientists such as Thomas Willis and Thomas Sydenham [58,59].

Fitzgerald reports that Janet developed "cathartic psychotherapy", which was a technique involving automatic talking, seven years prior to Freud developing free association [60]. There are several other points in which Janet's and Freud's works are similar; however, Freud is reported to have withheld appropriate acknowledgment of Janet's influence. This is not a one off occurrence; Freud has other critics who have also remarked on his unethical scholarship by not referencing sources of information accurately [25,61].

A key difference between Janet and Freud is that Janet disagreed with the suggestion that all neurosis had sexual origins [60]. Hence, Janet is viewed by some as being the starting point for modern day understandings of trauma [57]. Trauma-informed practices recognise that a variety of adverse

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<sup>2</sup> I am a native English speaker and my knowledge of other languages is limited; however, in my explorations of word associations in other languages on *Small World of Words*, I was able to identify the following: in Dutch, "psychologie" (psychology) has associations with Freud; in Spanish, "psicologia" (psychology) has no association with Freud; and in German, "psychologie" (psychology) also has no association with Freud, but it is associated with "couch" (couch), which may be viewed as an indirect association with psychoanalysis processes. My insight into "Freud" being associated with psychology in Mandarin is informed by qualified translators.

experiences can produce post-traumatic stress symptoms in adults; that said, childhood sexual abuse is prevalent [62]. Forms of child sexual abuse can range from physical touching and completed sex acts to noncontact assaults such as verbal harassment and exposure to pornography; the victim may or may not be aware violations are taking place [63]. Trauma-informed approaches to recovery stipulate that survivors require empathy and validation [64]. Belittling, and/or denying a client's experience is associated with re-traumatisation symptoms such as distress, dissociation, anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic manifestations [65]. The focus of psychoanalysis on getting clients to admit Oedipus traits is invalidating and potentially re-traumatising, subsequently, these may be reasons why clinical trials assessing psychoanalytical approaches indicate that its efficiency is weak [66,67].

In our present era of #MeToo, mammoth amounts of historical sexual violence are being exposed [10,68], and victims are coming forth with clear statements that they did not desire sexual relations with their parents (or anybody else<sup>3</sup>) when they were young and when it did occur, it was severely psychologically damaging [65]. It is becoming very clear that projecting adult sexual attitudes onto children hinders the experience of childhood innocence and is traumatising [56,69]. Further, victims of childhood sexual assault are at risk of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, suicide idealisation, and borderline personality disorder, just to name a few [70].

Contemporary research indicates that child abuse is a widespread, intergenerational problem that is under-reported; further, it impairs healthy physical and emotional development [71]. Once victims reach adulthood, they often try to deal with their anguish with denial and minimisation strategies which can then lead to substance abuse and other unhealthy behaviours [72]. Problems with identity, goal setting, trust, interpersonal relationships, and attachment can also occur [13].

An alternative to Freud's ideas regarding the sexual enlightenment of children [39], is research provided by Jean Piaget that suggests children display attitudes and behaviours to which they are exposed to or, in other words, they imitate [73]. Therefore, if a child displays adult sexual traits at a young age or superior/inferior attitudes towards penises, it is likely to be because they have either directly or indirectly been influenced by those around them: siblings, peers, adults, and the media. A child's ability to imitate adult sexuality, as described by Freud and Jung, does not mean it is a natural part of development.

Recalling, interpreting, and coming to terms with childhood abuse are common elements of psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma treatments [1,13]. However, trauma-informed approaches focus on reassuring victims that they are not to blame for what happened and that their feelings of being violated are valid [74], which is a stark contrast to psychoanalysis clients being encouraged to take on responsibility for their abuse experiences by admitting their so-called natural Oedipus traits [75]. In light of contemporary research, if a clinician overlooks child expressions of sexuality (either directly from a child or an adult exploring childhood memories) because they believe Freud's Oedipus complex has some validity, they may overlook indications of abuse and, in turn, do more harm than good by triggering post-traumatic stress symptoms. The possibility that some children may genuinely experience sexual desires needs to be examined with consideration of their cognitive stage of development and life experiences.

Empirical evidence supports individualised treatment goals for survivors of sexual violence such as trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy or eye movement desensitisation [76,77]. Expressive art therapies directed at processing trauma, such as drawing, music, visual arts, drama, dance, writing, and narrative work, are also considered beneficial [13,78]. Ultimately, prevention is better than a cure, which can be achieved by building an awareness of the harmful effects of sexualising children; moreover, informing institutional systems of the need to provide safe, secure environments free of abuse [56]. If, historically, Freudian theories have dominated education, politics, law, the media, and the arts,

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<sup>3</sup> Nor did anyone ever want to experience sexual violence under any circumstances.

then this may explain why sexual exploitation has not been adequately addressed in sociocultural sectors sooner.

## 5. Symbolism and Psychoanalysis

The Oedipus complex forms the basis for psychoanalytic processes and symbol interpretations, therefore, exploring fallacies of Freud's theories is useful for reducing its influence in therapy and broader cultural contexts. Freud's discovery of hidden sexual symbols in the unconscious includes things such as trees [79]. Trees could have cultural and/or personal significance of representing growth, strength, endurance, the life cycle, or perhaps fear if someone has had an adverse experience with a bushfire. Additionally, Freud asserted that all trees (or any elongated object) are phallic symbols, and it is this hidden meaning that psychoanalysts need to focus on [80]. If a female client repeatedly refers to trees in free association, a traditional psychoanalysts may perceive this to be a sign of penis envy. Conversely, if a male client mentions a tree being chopped down, it could be perceived as castration anxiety.

Early psychoanalysis theory purported that hidden meanings have a biological connection to consciousness [81], while later psychoanalytic theories are more inclined to attribute the origins of symbols to a mystical, semi-religious realm, or what Jung called the *collective consciousness* [82]. Either way, symbols are believed to have unchanging, universal meanings that impact the mind [83]. In Freudian tradition, regardless of the symbol, the interpretation almost always leads back to sexual connotations [1]. In Jungian tradition, there is less emphasis on sex, however, symbols continue to reflect misogynistic values such as the Virgin Mary being affiliated with vulture characteristics [84].

Just as Aristotle (and others) disagreed with Plato's theory of forms [85], I disagree with psychoanalytical theories of an unseen dimension of ubiquitous archetypes. Proving the non-existence of an invisible realm of universal symbols has its challenges; however, the premise can be recognised as flawed when research from cognitive psychology is considered.

Research from various sources indicates that symbols are not innately present in new-born children, rather, they are learnt through life experiences [86]. Charles Peirce (1839–1914) investigated the process of perceiving symbols prior to and during Freud's era [87]. Peirce developed a model for explaining symbolic representations in a threefold manner that recognises interactions between language, life experiences, and cognition development [88]. The three categories Peirce defined are (1) *iconic*, in which one thing brings to mind another, for example, a bird represents a bird, (2) *indexical*, in which one thing can co-occur with significance of another, for example, a bird can co-occur with the representation of flying, and (3) *symbolic*, in which a thing can be a reference to multiple representations that are grounded in iconic and indexical interpretations, for example, birds can symbolise animals, tweeting sounds, and movement through the air, and abstract concepts such as freedom.

Peirce's theory is supported by other researchers who have proposed similar frameworks to explain the role of symbols in language development. For example, in Piagetian psychology, the complex process of developing symbolic cognition is referred to in the learning of *schemas* [89]. A schema is a mental representation that can relate to an object, person, situation, or other cues [90]. Like Peirce's iconic, indexical, and symbolic model, schemas can be used as a building block for memory and/or learning processes. As such, a child may learn what a bird is, and, then, when they see a plane in the sky for the first time, they may call it a bird because they associate all things that fly with what they know of birds [43]. Hence, once taught that planes are different to birds, children learn a new word and a new schema; the previous schema of a bird still exists, however, it served as a building block for new knowledge, and it has contributed to building up symbolic cognition. Over time, schemas can become increasingly complex, and the symbolic representation of an item, like a plane, could become associated with excitement, freedom, and adventure, and they can intermingle with other schemas so as their associations include things like recalling a trip to Vanuatu or the money needed to afford a plane trip.

The learning of symbolic representations is a psychosocial process connected to the learning of language (spoken and artistic) via social interactions with others [91]. It is a constructive process based on the idea that meaning is given to symbols in accordance with collective acceptance and stereotypical inferences [42,90]. In accordance with Peirce or Piagetian symbol theories, an object like a pumpkin pie does not necessarily have any innate symbolic meaning, however, if a child is taught that pumpkin pies represent sexual desire, then they will add this meaning to their existing knowledge of pumpkin pies. Likewise, if every culture agreed that pumpkin pies have this hidden meaning, then that idea will become part of a global collective consciousness.

Contemporary research on word associations, like the previously mentioned *Small World of Words*, supports the premise that symbolic significance of things are influenced by sociocultural influences, i.e., while “Freud” is associated with “psychology” in many languages, it is not universal [54]. A further example is the word “dog” which has an extensive semantic network that includes bone, collar, love, and walk; however, these English associations are not affiliated with the German equivalent of “Hund” (dog). Moreover, German associations with Hund includes words not identified in English, such as maus (mouse) and wolf (wolf)<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the premise of Freud’s psychoanalytical process of getting clients to free associate so as analysts can identify unconscious desires via so-called universal symbols [38,50] is not supported by language development research which suggests that cultural influences play a significant role the forming of mental representations.

In contrast to psychoanalytic theories of symbolism, disciplines like expressive arts therapies offer a broader understanding of how symbols, as expressed in artistic objects or spoken ideas, can be interpreted. A jewellery box, for example, is not automatically presumed to be a reference to a vagina like it is in traditional psychoanalysis [1]. Instead, it could be a container for precious thoughts, emotions, memories, identity, and so forth. If it is closed, then it does not automatically signify sexual frigidity (like it may be in psychoanalysis), rather, it could indicate protection, self-care, defining personal boundaries; any mark, line, symbol, or gesture is open to meaning whatever the creator wants it to mean [92].

The use of symbols and their potential associations with unconscious thoughts and desires can be useful in addressing wellbeing issues [78]. Metaphors, allegories, and signs are capable of intertwining with personal experiences, which may be reflective of myths, cultural innuendos, and social norms [93,94]; however, they are not necessarily part of an invisible realm of universal symbols. In accordance with research that dates back to Peirce through to today, people are the creators of the symbols, opposed to psychoanalysis conjecture that symbols have deterministic qualities. The logic behind constructive attitudes towards symbols is that it recognises creativity and the capacity for symbolic meanings to change and vary between individuals and groups. For example, a pearl can be a symbol of a special occasion to one person, while to drug users, it could be a symbolic code for cocaine [95].

Psychoanalytic interpretations of symbols is a narrow-minded practice that can lead to misunderstandings between individuals and groups. Symbols are complex mental representations that develop over time [43,90,91]. Returning to the example of a young girl saying she wants to marry her father, it is likely she is giving an expression of affection, and her use of the word “marriage” is as distorted as a child who calls a plane a bird; young children simply do not have enough life experiences to develop a complex understanding of sexual desire in association with marriage. Feelings of love and affection can be experienced with or without sexual desire [96,97]. Theoretically, a child can only have fantasies about incestuous relationships if they have learned how to mentally represent sexual desire through language, life experience, and symbolic cognition. The Freudian suggestion that sexuality begins at infancy is a bit like saying that learning how to drive a car begins at infancy.

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<sup>4</sup> The comparison of dog and Hund word associations is accurate as of the 30 September 2020. Further differences or similarities may be notable over time via the collection of data from more participants and/or changes in sociocultural attitudes towards dogs/Hunde.

The capacity to learn the skills required for the adult embodiment of sexuality or car driving are present at birth, however, development of mental, emotional, and physical attributes needs to occur. During the Oedipus stage, a child is learning about language, feelings, and their body, which forms the basis for sexual desire and the ability to engage in intercourse later in life. Likewise, a child between the ages of three and six is learning about basic road rules, spatial awareness, and how to operate simple tools like levers which form the basis for advanced driving skills later in life. Whilst children in the Oedipus stage could have sexual desire, perform sexual intercourse, desire to drive a car, and actually operate a vehicle, this does not mean they should be encouraged to do so nor that these traits are universally experienced. Essentially, children need to be nurtured and guided by adults and their broader community in age-appropriate ways so as to build the capacity to have appropriate sexual relationships when they are old enough to do so, in much the same way as they need to develop appropriate skills before they are allowed driving freedoms. Timing variations as to when individuals are ready to partake in adult activities like sex and driving are to be expected in accordance with personal circumstances.

Given that psychoanalysis interpretations of the id and its unconscious desires, as revealed in symbolism and gestures, have a cultural reputation as being potentially valid, there is cause to correct that perception so as to prevent further sociocultural misunderstandings, especially in regard to sexual issues. Reports from sexual abuse survivors reveal notorious difficulties within the legal systems in regard to their experiences being belittled and/or disbelieved [98]. From professionals in positions of power to armchair-experts who believe psychoanalysis has some validity, there are dangers in interpreting the unconscious desires of others without applying critical thinking skills. In the context of the Oedipus complex, this presents the potential to inspire some people to behave sexually inappropriately, like sexually grooming young children, or worse, sexually violating them because it supposedly does them no harm.

## 6. The Symbolism of the Oedipus Myth within a Historical and Cultural

Given that Freudian influence has disseminated beyond academic psychological research and into culture via the arts, literature, and media, it is useful to explore how the Oedipus complex could be detrimental to understanding symbolic communication in these contexts. Art appreciation strategies emphasise the importance of taking into consideration sources of inspiration when analysing creative products [92,99]; however, this consideration is not detectable in Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth. As previously mentioned, upon viewing the play *Oedipus Rex*, he projected his subjective experience of the creative drama, i.e., it triggered reminiscence of his love for his mother [33] onto everyone, including the Ancient Greeks, under the pretence that it was an objective interpretation [1,35].

Freud's interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* is curious in that his conclusions do not match the themes presented in the actual play. For example, there are no indications of Oedipus having sexual fantasies towards his mother as a child, and the overt response to realising an incestual connection had occurred is one of disgust and anguish [34]. By solely focusing on hidden sexual symbols of the drama, Freud overlooks the possibility that the Ancient Greeks were using condensed social and cultural influences in their symbolic representations [48]. A review of the context in which the original Oedipus tale as told by Homer, in approximately 800bce, provides the basis for a thought-provoking alternative to psychoanalysis interpretations.

The following is Homer's verse from the poetic epic *The Odyssey* that inspired Sophocles' drama four hundred years later:

"I saw the mother of Oidipous [Oedipus], Epikastê [Jocaster],  
 whose great unwitting deed it was  
 to marry her own son. He took that prize  
 from a slain father; presently the gods  
 brought all to light that made the famous story.

But by their fearsome wills he kept his throne  
 in dearest Thebes, all through his evil days,  
 while she descended to the place of Death,  
 god of the locked and iron door. Steep down  
 from a high rafter, throttled in her noose,  
 she swung, carried away by pain, and left him  
 endless agony from a mother's Furies."  
 (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Ch 11, v300 [100])

Both Homer and Sophocles were affiliated with the Ancient Greek Eleusinian mystery school [101–103]. Little is known about the underlying belief system of the cult because initiates were sworn to secrecy; moreover, revealing secrets was punishable by death [104]. Henceforth, it stands to reason that while the Oedipus story is known to have an association with sacred rituals [105], its exact meaning is encoded with symbolism which few are privy to [106]. By applying research about the culture and belief systems of Eleusinian mysteries from the writings initiates, such as Iamblichus, Porphyry, and Emperor Julian, it is possible to interpret the Oedipus myth as being symbolic of a trinity, which is consistent with many mystery school beliefs [107–109]. The three core principles of the trinity can be described as follows: nous<sup>5</sup> (mind/intellect), psyche<sup>6</sup> (soul/emotion), and logos<sup>7</sup> (product/order/reason/word). In ancient Greek grammar, nous is masculine and is referred to as the father or universal spirit, psyche is feminine and is referred to as the mother or universal soul, and logos is masculine and represents the son of nous and psyche. Intricate details of beliefs that extend from the concept of the trinity are complex, suffice to say for the purpose of this paper, all humans (whether male, female, or other) were believed to have the psychological components of nous, psyche, and logos. Symbolically, the interaction of the energies of father and mother needs to be in harmony in order to achieve a perfected child.

If the allegorical concept of a trinity is applied to Oedipus, then the poem may be interpreted as describing a person who is unbalanced. The death of Oedipus' father represents the absence of intellectual thought (nous), and the marriage to his mother represents living in accordance with emotional drives (psyche); thus, the results are an "evil" child (logos). The overall moral of the story may be interpreted as the spirit (nous) needs to be in a harmonious union with the soul (psyche) to produce a healthy ego state (logos).

Ironically, Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth suggests emotional, sexual drives, in other words, the id, naturally take precedence over moral, intellectual reasoning or the superego. The end result of which, according to the myth itself and contemporary understandings of sexual trauma, is disastrous for the ego.

Freud had an avid interest in ancient cultures, and, in addition to being interested in mythology, he is reported to have collected at least 2500 artefacts from ancient Egypt, Asia, Rome, and Greece [113]. It is therefore within reason to propose that Freud may have appropriated some of the spiritual beliefs

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<sup>5</sup> The ancient Greek term "nous" differs from contemporary usage, i.e., in contemporary English, nous is a philosophical term that means '[t]he mind or intellect, reason, both rational and emotional. Common sense; practical intelligence. In Neoplatonism [nous means], the divine reason, regarded as first divine emanation' [110].

<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the word "psyche" has transformed many times throughout history; however, its use as a reference to soul, breath, and life force [111] makes it suitable to be used in the context of this discussion. The word "pneuma" is also an Ancient Greek reference to the breath of life and the soul [112], and it is acknowledged that this term could also be used in reference to the second principle.

<sup>7</sup> Like psyche, the third principle can vary in the manner in which it is described throughout texts, however, for simplicity's sake, the term logos has been selected for use in this discussion to represent the overall concept.

of our ancestors<sup>8</sup> without clearly crediting his sources, just like he did to others [25,60,61]. Therefore, the superego, id, and ego may be representative of nous, psyche, and logos. Ancient Greek texts describe nous as having elements of morality; likewise, psyche has elements of desire, and logos elements of ego [107].

If it is correct that Freud appropriated these Greek concepts, his representations are obscured adaptations of their original symbolic meanings. Thus, I further propose that Freud's interpretations of Ancient Greek philosophies are misappropriations; moreover, they are misappropriations that do not provide any value to the interpretation of art and literature, child development, or psychological constructs. In the context of contrasting Freud's theories with #MeToo, the essence of the Oedipus myth could be perceived as there is no excuse for sexual violence because sexual desires should always be mediated with moral, ethical-based thinking.

## 7. Limitations

The Oedipus complex is credited as being one of Freud's most significant discoveries, and it is the cornerstone of all of his other psychoanalytic hypotheses [42,115,116]. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that both the Oedipus complex and psychoanalytical theories in general can be proved to be fallible, and it is inappropriate to continue giving credence to their claims. Contemporary psychoanalysis principles and practices may have advanced and differ from Freud's original work; however, ultimately, these are still based upon flawed premises.

A limitation of the current discussion is that it has not fully explored differences in types of sexual desires, for example, unconscious desires, desires that are yet to be learned or experienced, and the acting upon desires with appropriate moral conduct such as respecting another person's free will. Likewise, the distinction between sexual desire and feelings of affection has not been fully explored. Another limitation is the examination of the evolution of instincts from childhood to adulthood, i.e., a child's instincts are not necessarily the same as adults. Additionally, topics not covered include the white male supremacist culture of Freud's era [117], psychoanalysis roots in hypnotherapy [118], issues of memory and repression [1], transference and personality biases [119] and Freudian rape fantasy theories [120].

## 8. Future Directions

The practice of symbolically representing spirit qualities as masculine and soul qualities as feminine that has been mentioned in this paper can be identified in several ancient religious contexts [121–124], however, this is yet to be extensively researched in relation to Ancient Greek mystery schools and the communication of concepts within their myths. Further exploratory research directed at understanding the Ancient Greek's use of symbolism may shed light on more errors in psychoanalytic interpretations of ancient artworks, literature, myths, and archetypes.

Additionally, investigations directed at exploring Freudian attitudes towards adult sexuality and its potential influence on behaviour in relation to #MeToo issues could be conducted. Studies focused on examining cultural attitudes could include reviewing the influence that psychological constructs have on societies and individual's sense of identity by contrasting Freudian inspired constructs, such as womb envy and the Joseph–Gigolo complex with traditional Freudian constructs of penis envy and the Madonna–Whore complex.

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<sup>8</sup> Many ancient belief systems have distinctions between "spirit", "soul", and "body" qualities, for example, the Ancient Egyptians referred to "anh", "ka", and "ba" [114]; therefore, to say with certainty that Freud's appropriations were solely based on Greek mythology may be inaccurate.

## 9. Conclusions

When viewed from multiple angles, the Oedipus complex can be identified as fallible. As a treatment methodology, it runs the risk of re-traumatising sexual abuse victims and provides child molesters with excuses for inappropriate behaviour, thus causing more harm than good. As a means of understanding personal expression, it conflicts with contemporary evidence that suggests symbolic communication is based upon language, word associations, life experiences, and schema formations. As a means of understanding literature, it perverts historical and cultural contexts. As a framework for understanding child development, its premises are at odds with research from cognitive psychology, and it lacks trauma-informed considerations of children needing to be nurtured in a safe environment. With our present understandings of the effects of child abuse and the global significance of the #MeToo movement, continuing to give credence to the Oedipus complex is unethical.

Putting it simply, psychoanalysis is a therapeutic approach based upon misunderstandings of symbolic communication. On one hand, Freud's errors may be viewed as being of little consequence because psychology has developed beyond his ideas, and trauma-informed practices are increasingly influencing education, policing, and communities [125–127]. However, on the other hand, if the errors of the Freudian theories are not duly recognised, there is a risk that the plights of sexual violence survivors may continue to be inappropriately recognised. Above all, dispelling Freudian theories and thus reducing his influence on culture has the potential to prevent some future acts of sexual violence.

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