

Psychoanalysis – Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy.

Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 8, Case Histories I (1977).

Freud, S. (1909)

Introduction / Background

Freud's theory of **personality** development is called 'psychodynamic'. 'Psychodynamic' refers to any approach which emphasises the role of unconscious processes in development

The case study of Little Hans (the 5 year old boy), Freud's only analysis of a child, enabled Freud to test his hypotheses about child sexuality. Freud suggested that a young child went through several key psychosexual stages during early development and at around the age of three the child enters the phallic stage, when they become interested in their genitals. During the phallic stage the child's interest also focuses on their opposite sex parent. A boy loves his mother and, at this time, comes to have sexual desires for her. This places him in conflict with his father who now becomes his rival. As a result the boy wishes his father dead, which arouses guilt feelings. The boy fears that his father will find out his feelings and punish him by castrating him. Freud called this the **Oedipus complex** after a Greek legend where Oedipus killed his father and married his mother.

The successful outcome of all this loving and rivalry is that the boy comes to identify with his father and cease desiring his mother. Identification means he takes on his father's attitudes and ideas. Identification is crucial for gender identity and moral development. The boy cannot develop a conscience until he has identified with his punishing parent (Freud called this the process of identification with the aggressor).

Little Hans was going through this stage of development, and the details of this case study (Hans' feelings and behaviour) provide support for Freud's theory. The study also shows how psychoanalytic theory can be used to successfully treat an anxiety disorder – in this case a phobia of horses.

Research Method: A case study:

Participant is a 5-year-old boy called Little Hans. His father was Max Graf, a music critic and early supporter of Freud and member of the psychoanalytic society.

Procedure: Hans' father wrote to Freud when the boy was five years old, describing the main problem: 'He is afraid a horse will bite him in the street, and this fear seems somehow connected with his having been frightened by a large penis'.

Little Hans and his 'widdler': Hans had an interest in that part of his body he called his 'widdler'. Hans observed that animals had big ones, especially an animal like a horse.

Hans' mother and sister: During his summer holiday Hans spent much time alone with his mother. This led Hans to realise that he liked to be on his own with his mother and wished his father to be permanently away. When Hans was 3½ his baby sister was born. This was a further cause for separation between him and his mother and he expressed hostility towards his new sister Hannah. Hans had previously liked having a bath but now said he was afraid that his mother would drop him when she was bathing him. When his father talked to him about this Hans admitted that he had watched his sister having a bath and wished his mother would let *her* go. This unconscious desire became translated into a fear that his mother might equally let Hans go.

The links between horses and anxiety

Hans' fear was that a white horse would bite him. Freud felt that Hans' real fear was that he would lose his mother. *Freud traced the link between these two.* Hans had overheard a man in the street saying to a child 'Don't put your finger to the white horse or it'll bite you'. On another occasion, when Hans' mother was drying him after a bath, Hans had asked her if she would like to put her finger on his widdler. His mother told him this would not be proper. *This forged the link:* if you put your finger on a white horse it will bite you, if someone put their finger on your widdler this was not proper.

Hans' castration fear

Like normal children Hans enjoyed playing with his widdler but when his mother found him doing this she threatened that she would arrange for it to be cut off. On another occasion Hans' father told him that women have no widdlers! Freud reasoned that this would lead Hans to think – 'Mother had a widdler before and now she hasn't. It must have been cut off. She said mine might be cut off if I touched it. She obviously wasn't joking because it happened to her'. This would serve to confirm his fears of castration.

Hans' dreams and fantasies

Hans told his father a dream about two giraffes – a big one and a crumpled one. Hans took away the crumpled one and this made the big one cry out. Hans sat down on the crumpled one. Hans' father thought that this was a representation of what happened in the mornings between Hans and his parents. Hans liked to get into his parents' bed but his father (the big giraffe) often objected. Hans took away his mother (the crumpled one) which caused his father to cry out. Hans sat on top of his mother to claim her for himself. Freud wondered if the giraffe's long neck represented the large adult penis.



The link between fear of horses and fear of father

Freud suggested that Hans' fear of horses was actually a fear of his father. The black around the horses' mouths and the blinkers in front of their eyes were symbols for his father's moustaches and glasses.

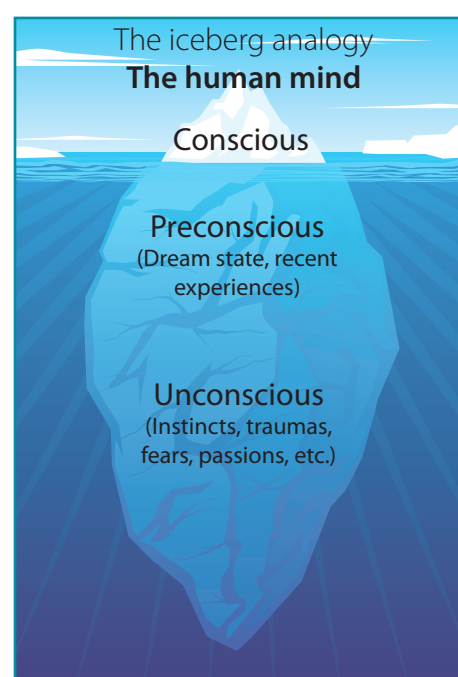
Hans recalled a key memory. He was walking with his mother when they saw a horse pulling a bus fall down and kick its legs about. This terrified Hans because he thought the horse was dead and from then on feared that all horses would fall down. *What was the link with his father?* Hans secretly wished his father would fall down dead, a desire that would have made him feel guilty and therefore anxious at the same time. Seeing the horse falling over increased his anxiety about the death wish that he had towards his father.

The resolution

At this time Hans' fear of horses began to subside and Hans developed two final fantasies which showed that he had now resolved his feelings about his father.

'The plumber came and first he took away my behind with a pair of pincers, and then he gave me another, and then the same with my widdler.' This is taken to mean that Hans was given a bigger backside and widdler, like Daddy's.

Hans had always had a fantasy about his own children. One day he was playing a game with these imaginary children and his father asked 'are your children still alive?' *Hans replied that boys couldn't have children, he had been their mummy but now he was their daddy.* This led Freud to conclude that Hans had at last overcome his Oedipus complex and was now able to identify with his father.



The conclusion

Freud felt that the case study of Hans provided support for his ideas about infant sexuality. First, there was clear evidence of Hans' interest in sexual matters. Second, there was also evidence to support the idea of the Oedipus complex. Hans had a wish to be close to his mother and to engage in sexual relations with her. This set Hans up as a rival to his father and he wished him gone (dead). But he could not express this rivalry directly. Instead he projected it onto a fear of horses. Successful resolution of the Oedipus conflict came when Hans was able to express his feelings about his father and finally able to transfer his identification from his mother to his father.