

# Jocasta and the Oedipus Myth: the adoption—reunion context for feelings of sexual attraction

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Literature distributed to birthparents and adoptees prior to reunion refers to the possibility of sexual feelings arising in the context of reunion after closed adoption. Such feelings are also described in articles in the popular press (Kirsta, 2003). This study examines these powerful feelings by considering the psychological antecedents, symbolic meaning and contextual factors involved. Material for this paper was drawn from a study entitled *A psychoanalytic study of the feelings of birthmothers following reunion with their adult children* which was done as the thesis component of a Masters in Psychoanalytic Studies. The aim of the study was to examine birthmothers' feelings in general before, during and after reunion (Goodwach, 1998). The feelings of sexual attraction which emerged from this general exploration for four of the eight birthmothers interviewed are the focus of this article. The analysis involved review of transcripts and process notes from in-depth interviews, using psychoanalytic concepts to explore the meaning of their experience.

*'The problem was that the loving feelings got somehow mixed up with sexual feelings.'*

Sexual feelings between birthmothers and their reunited adult children evoke disbelief, consternation and denial. Literature routinely given to birthparents and adoptees seeking reunion refers to the possibility of sexual attraction between them. There has, however, been little understanding of the intrapsychic, interpersonal and contextual factors involved.

It seemed curious that, despite their own literature, some adoption-reunion counsellors believed that such sexual attraction occurred rarely, if at all. Others worried that such feelings *might be*

incestuous, and what the implications of that would be.

## Introduction

The period in Australia when adoptions were closed was from 1964–1984. This meant that no further contact would be possible between birthmothers and the children they were often forced to relinquish. Thereafter, a change in law meant that reunion became possible if the adopted child agreed, and a mandatory counselling session had taken place.

The one mandatory counselling session could be conducted individually, in a group, or by telephone, any time (up to several years) before reunion. Uniform information could therefore be conveyed, but the opportunity to discuss any individual hopes or fears pertaining to reunion was inevitably limited.

## Method

A qualitative method was used to explore birthmothers' feelings. Subjects were invited to recount as fully as possible both what had happened—from before adoption until after reunion—and their own experience of it.

Qualitative methods represent phenomenological hypotheses that assume multiple causes for behaviour defined in the context of the social milieu (Firestone, 1987). Open-ended responses permit an understanding of the world as seen by the respondents, without predetermining their points of view through prior selection of question categories. The emphasis is on understanding and extrapolation (Patton, 1990). In qualitative research, theory develops inductively (Matthews & Paradise, 1988).

A hypothesis developed that closed adoption, followed by reunion, provided a powerful context for the development of strong, and sometimes overwhelming feelings.

Data consisted of audiotaped and transcribed interviews, and process notes. The material was reviewed with a supervisor, allowing analysis of countertransference feelings (strong feelings communicated unconsciously by the birthmothers) as well as content analysis.

## Subjects

Eight birthmothers were recruited by the Government and Catholic Adoption Information Services (AIS), who sent a letter outlining the nature of the study, along with an AIS letter supporting it. Seven of the eight had relinquished sons.

# Mandatory Counselling

The mandatory counselling session was done over the phone by one birthmother, in a group setting by another; and five years before reunion by a third. No-one had more than one (the mandatory) meeting with A.I.S. Most were unaware that the legislation made provision for counselling *upon request*.

## Literature review

The adoption literature has generally adopted Greenberg and Littlewood's (1995) use of Strickland's term 'Genetic Sexual Attraction' (GSA) to denote feelings described as sexual attraction in adoptees. This terminology has created some confusion, as it seems to imply that the attraction might have a genetic or organic basis. Greenberg and Littlewood characterised these feelings as a romantic search for attachment, followed by a recognition of oneself in the other.

They noted that sexual excitement often acts as an antidepressant, masking profound losses. This feeling of 'falling in love' could also be taken as akin to the general attachment of a mother to her baby (Bowlby, 1982) which becomes eroticised. Condon (1986) noted the complexity of the emotional attachment that expectant mothers develop toward their unborn babies.

Whilst there are references to mother-child incest in the literature (e.g Banning, 1989; McCarty, 1981; Renevoize, 1982; Wahl, 1981), articles exploring mother-child erotic attraction were not found. That nuclear kin who are separated during the early childhood of one appear to be especially vulnerable to incestuous activity (Weinberg, 1976) is a theme that has echoed through Western literature from Oedipus onward (Cory and Masters, 1963). Steele (1991) described themes of incomplete separation-individuation and the corresponding attempt to maintain or recreate some sort of close 'symbiotic' interaction as a factor in incestuous relationships. Similar feelings sometimes occur in families separated by divorce (Fitsell, 1994).

The notion of transference as re-enactment of unconscious phantasy (Klein, 1952) was further developed by Kohut (1977) when he described reunion as symbolic of a phantasy to deal with the narcissistic injury of giving up the child who was experienced as an undifferentiated part of the self, the embodiment of unfulfilled longings. The erotic quality of breastfeeding is documented (Count, 1967).

Feder (1974) described the manifest Oedipus myth as the case history of an adopted child: biological parents attempt to kill the child; the child is spared and then adopted, but returns to his original home a parricide. Adoption is understood as an attempt to sidestep the sexual and aggressive impulses which develop, find expression within, and eventually destroy the triadic relationship of mother-father-child.

Devereux (1953) and Stewart (1961) analyzed Sophocles' plays on which Freud based the Oedipus myth in the light of their basis in actual social practices such as ritual royal incest and child abandonment. They saw the emergence of tragic drama dealing with such matters as a questioning of the meaning and consequences of actual practices on individual experience. This

interpretation underlines the impact of external reality on the growth of the internal world.

Rank (1964) contextualised the Oedipus myth by seeing the origins of the Oedipal tragedy as arising in the disengagement of Laius from his son, with his intention to kill him. According to Rank, emotional disengagement leads to destruction and loss, confusion and tragedy. Steiner (1985) suggested that there was an unconscious collusion between all the players in Sophocles' plays: nobody pursued the enquiries which would have led to the truth, because all were fearful of such knowledge. Steiner (1990) described the society at the time as self-serving and narcissistic, and acting with paranoid grandiosity to destroy its weakest, most vulnerable members.

He explained Oedipus blinding himself when he discovered Jocasta's suicide as being not only in recognition of her complicity, but also because he recognised that he had lost the good mother who would not enact the phantasy, but would help with guilt and disillusion. This again points to the importance of the external object in the process of working through.

Stewart (1961) understood Jocasta in Sophocles' plays as portraying a mother with her own phantasies of killing the husband/father, and of creating a child who would be an extension of herself, and her own special partner. The experience of the 'Jocasta complex' and its successful working through might then be seen as the reciprocally essential step to the Oedipus complex in the painful renunciation of the wish to possess one's son. The 'Jocasta complex' would then represent the psychological development that every mother must go through to enable her son to grow up and grow away.

## Results

Case vignettes are presented to illustrate relevant issues. All identifying data has been excluded.

### *'Fiona'*

Fiona described watching herself give birth as if she were watching someone else. She then got on with her life, with only her stretch marks as a reminder.

She sought reunion after going to a therapist because her marriage was in trouble. The therapist observed that she seemed to have 'lost her spark'. Fiona described her response: 'It was like a bombshell—the baby took it!' Fiona's mandatory meeting was in a group setting. Dylan, a participating adoptee, asked if they could meet for coffee, as he had no-one to talk to. They met fortnightly for months. Over time, she found herself becoming sexually attracted to him; he was the way she'd hoped her son would be: gentle, and a bit 'bohemian'. As she spoke, she realised that he was quite like her.

'When you talk about those emotional feelings, and open yourself up, it's like starting off a new relationship, and a bit like falling in love.'

Her own son sent a photo after a year. She cried: he looked like his father. Their initial meeting three years later was positive, but awkward. As she drove home after their meeting, 'it hit'. She couldn't stop sobbing. She'd lost so much.

She described a desire for ‘intimate physicality’ with her son: to be alone, lie together, touch him and sleep with him. She did not experience this as sexual desire. She said: ‘The reality of him as a person—with his own life and longterm relationship’ helped her see him as her adult son, and recognise that she’d wanted to see, touch and smell him like a mother does her baby.

She felt guilty about his adoption, and confused about their relationship: they were connected—and yet he was a total stranger.

*‘Joan’*

Joan first told her daughter about her relinquished baby forty years after the adoption, and then began her search.

After the adoption you didn’t talk about it. You go home and get on with it. Just like appendicitis . He was that baby in my arms in hospital, always till I met him. When I met him, the baby went by the board. He s the mirror image of my family. It is like a love affair. All this love you ve been bottling up, and your heart just leaps when you see him. I wanted him to myself. If only I could take him home so I could mother him. I thought: Why doesn’t he ring me? Let him make a move and I sort of felt embarrassed about it, because in my day the guy usually did all the chasing.

Her relationship with her husband, which hadn’t been good, deteriorated once she met her son. Soon,

I fell in a heap, lost weight quickly, couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep at night, thinking of him. Make believe and dreams. Tears whenever his name was mentioned. I was trying to clutch onto him and devour him in the first twelve months. It would be more like being with a lover (than a baby) because ... I just wanted ... to hang on and on. So it was the touching I suppose, and the looking I guess it s still there. Not like a lover now.

Her daughter took her to the doctor. He prescribed antidepressants, and the symptoms—and longings—started to settle. ‘I’m full of love for him ... and it’s not being reciprocated. I’m a stranger to him.’

*‘Isobel’*

Isobel’s son, Jason, left home at fifteen to escape his adoptive father’s violent temper.

When they met, her husband was away on business, and her daughter Julie was at school camp. Instead of spending a few hours together, as planned, she took him home, because they wanted more time together.

They talked late into the night until, exhausted, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

That was probably the first mistake.

I got pregnant six weeks after I gave him up, and was forced to have an abortion. I felt a great hole inside, and now I wanted to take him back in. I had this full feeling, contented for the first time. I d been binge eating for years. It was a dramatic feeling of not wanting to stuff myself any more. For a while I didn’t feel hungry at all. I lost five kilos.

We both said we felt just like one. It was a very strong physical thing. Sometimes I d have my girls (as babies) sleep on my chest, but it wasn’t as strong.

I wanted to breastfeed him. It was awful. His smell was really important All his mannerisms were the same as mine ... There must be a certain amount of that with your kids: it must be part of bonding. In every sense, he was incredibly attuned.

He stayed till Julie got back from camp—four days and nights.

That was the honeymoon It was maternal but then sometimes it shifted. I think he felt that way too. The problem was that the loving feelings got somehow mixed up with sexual feelings. I felt terrible about these feelings, but also enjoyed them. After a few weeks, I started having fantasies. I could stop them and I d tell myself to, but I didn t want to.

She started taking time off work when she knew they could be alone. When they'd part, she'd 'go down into the depths'. She found it difficult to keep her normal life going.

When she was young, her uncle had sexually abused her. She commented: 'To think I was feeling these feelings was totally awful. It was a forgetting of who I was.'

Reunion had taken five years. Before they met, she was already on an emotional roller-coaster: often in tears, getting sick all the time, and arguing a lot with her husband, who was fed-up with her preoccupation.

She would have loved to take off with Jason, but 'Something inside stopped me: I knew that he was my son, and that it might send him over the edge'. She felt as if she was going mad. 'I knew I needed some help. I got too frightened to meet up with him without doing something about it'. She went to the doctor, who prescribed antidepressants, and sent her to a psychologist. Soon after, her older daughter had a baby. It was a godsend. She delighted in giving him a bottle: it satisfied her maternal instincts. She'd hated herself for those other feelings'—which started to subside.

## Discussion

*... It's such a hornet's nest that gets stirred up*

Mid-twentieth century Western society was moralistic, sexually prurient and powerfully controlling. Whilst the family was central, only a certain kind of family was acceptable. Following Rank's (1964) version, the society at the time (read Laius) forced unmarried birthmothers (read Jocasta) to sign the adoption papers ('kill' Oedipus) and sever the blood ties, because an extra-nuptial pregnancy 'threatened the very fabric of society' (Shawyer, 1979). This was an anal world that sought to control—rather than look after—its fertile daughters, and the anger when they got pregnant translated into the decision not only to force them to have their babies adopted, but also to rewrite the birth certificates with adoptive parents named as the baby's parents, and no further contact possible for birth families.

Young birthmothers' families were complicit, sending their daughters to homes for unmarried mothers when the pregnancy was visible. The society controlled by promoting shame. The birthmothers themselves were complicit, because they signed the adoption papers.

The rewriting of the birth certificates constituted a distortion and misrepresentation of reality (Money-Kyrle, 1968 in Steiner, 1985). However, following Sophocles' script, with records closed, but not destroyed, the grown babies could later be recognised as kin by their mothers (like Oedipus, because of the hole in his foot).

There was no counselling offered to birthmothers as part of the adoption process to deal with their feelings of guilt, loss and shame (Goodwach, 2001).

The lack of resolution at the time of adoption was most poignantly evidenced by two of the eight birthmothers interviewed becoming pregnant again within weeks of adoption. This may have represented an attempt to deny the painful separation from the baby, and the difficult psychic loss (Deutsch, 1947). These were the most traumatised birthmothers. One had been physically abused, and she suffered postnatal depression after the birth of her second baby (whom she was allowed to keep after repeatedly refusing abortion). In a way which mirrored the rapidity with which the second baby had replaced the first after she was forced to adopt her out, his suicide precipitated her search. She felt suddenly compelled to make sure this firstborn daughter was alive, and to let her know that she was wanted, suggesting a psychic link between the two babies in the mother's mind.

Isobel had been sexually abused. Her subsequent forced abortion intensified her feelings of emptiness and longing.

After the change in law, the hope for reunion was that it would repair the many losses related to the adoption experience: most still felt traumatised by the way they were treated by family, church and the medical profession during the pregnancy, birth and adoption.

Whilst this article focuses on sexual feelings, other strong feelings at reunion included excitement at meeting their children and relief at knowing they were alive; and intense and unexpected guilt, anger, and especially grief (Goodwach, 2001).

Whilst mothers and babies had shared a profound loss, this loss had very different meanings for them. Whereas on reunion the birthmothers wanted to re-establish a *relationship* with their children, the children were often mainly interested in learning about *themselves* in terms of their origins (Goodwach, 2001).

'Sexual feelings' were confusing feelings: they began as maternal feelings, but were later experienced as 'more like being with a lover than a baby'. They arose in the context of prolonged time spent alone with their sons. This may have represented an unconscious attempt to replicate the conditions under which mother-infant bonding occurs. It may also have represented a reluctance to set any ordinary limits, so as not to evoke the feelings of rejection in their sons inherent in the original adoption.

Whilst Freud viewed adoption as a *phantasy*, and described the Oedipus complex and Oedipal longings from the point of view of the infant male, the desires of women, especially mothers, have largely been ignored. Olivier (1989) suggested considering Jocasta as the eternal myth of the woman, in the same way as Oedipus is thought of as the eternal myth of the man.

Closed adoption followed by reunion with adult sons provides a modern day setting to revisit this ancient and powerful myth. Birthmothers who experienced feelings of sexual attraction on

reunion epitomized Jocasta in the Oedipal myth, both as a universal *phantasy* for women, and as participants in a tragic *reality*.

Closed adoption followed by reunion highlights society's role in the mode of resolution to the 'Jocasta' complex. Following Rank's (1964) interpretation, the disengagement of the powerful society (Laius) from the vulnerable birthfather/mother/baby unit, followed by the cover-up and distortion of the fundamental truth (Money-Kyrle, 1968 in Steiner, 1985) regarding parentage represent a breakdown in the moral fibre of society, because in Western culture the 'blood bond' between parents and offspring has long been considered the primary and most significant bond that a person may have (Kraft, 1985).

Following the ancient script, because the original birth certificates were not destroyed, following a change in legislation (in the context of a more open society), the birthmothers could once more 'know' their children.

Unfortunately, there was little understanding of the psychic reality of these birthmothers whose contact with their babies was severed at a time of profoundly loving feelings, when physicality of relationship between mother and baby is intense.

There was therefore no counselling process offered to deal with any powerful feelings which might arise—even those described as sexual attraction in the pamphlets which were routinely distributed. The reunions were largely unsupervised, with no safe setting provided to process the fear and excitement that was evoked.

The birthmothers who experienced sexual feelings spoke at length and in detail about their sons' strong physical and/or emotional likeness to themselves ('attraction to the mirror image'). This confirmed Greenberg & Littlewood (1995). They found it difficult to think of their sons as adult and separate, with their own lives, identities, and aspirations. They thought of them as their babies. This contrasted with other birthmothers who spoke of grieving each year around their children's birthdays, wondering what they were like as they grew up.

The feelings of desire shocked them. The mutual attractiveness of physical similarity, and the fact that the last time they were in contact they had just given birth meant there had been no opportunity for the sensual qualities of holding, close skin contact, breastfeeding and smelling, the physical substrates of mother-infant bonding. That closed adoptions included a specific ban on mothers seeing or touching their babies after delivery bespoke an unconscious recognition by authorities of the power of the physical, preverbal level of connection. The belief that 'out of sight' meant 'out of mind' resulted in legislation being drafted as if the profoundly human attributes of thinking and feeling had been eliminated along with the prohibition on contact, which in itself heightened the longings.

Maternal love, the desire to bond, and sexuality were confused. They were meeting a man, not the baby they had relinquished. Erotic sentiments became confused with maternal feelings as they had no other way to understand a desire for physical intimacy with another adult (Erickson, 1989).

Fiona's feelings at reunion were split into sexual feelings for the adoptee she met at the mandatory (group) counselling session, and unexpected grief evoked by reunion with her own son. This echoed her earlier dissociation during childbirth. More significantly, it highlighted the



problematic nature of a reunion process which was largely unsupervised, especially when the mandatory group sessions contained mixed groups of birthmothers and adoptees, and there was no professional follow-up.

Fiona and Isobel experienced themselves as responding to a sense of neediness in the young men. They may have had a phantasy of rescuing them.

Joan and Isobel had an intense desire to nurture, with its emphasis on physicality. Both also described an 'oral' connection, with Joan wanting to 'devour' her son, and Isobel describing feelings of emptiness and resultant binge eating before reunion, and after reunion feeling full for the first time. Isobel also had a desire to breastfeed. There may have been a phantasy of taking her son back into the womb and undoing the separation as mother set no limits: states of fusion were eroticised, whilst separateness was fiercely resisted (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1976).

The sons were idealised, and relations were unreal and narcissistically intense (Main, 1989). The idealisation of the baby presupposed a corresponding idealisation of the mother as an 'ideal breast' which never frustrates, as if the mother and child could be in a purely loving relationship (Klein, 1945).

Kohut (1966) described idealisation as an aspect of narcissism, the idealised person being the carrier of the projected perfection and bliss of the primary narcissistic states.

Projective identification is a concept that can provide a way of interpreting and cognitively organising some of these strong feelings. Meissner (1980) viewed it as involving a blurring of ego boundaries between self and object with idealisation, merger and symbiotic fantasies, allowing the mother to experience herself as the all-empathic mother who did not abandon her child. She might also have been responding to her son's projected oedipal wishes. The feelings of love, closeness and joy were intoxicating and addictive. The more painful and shameful feelings were obscured. The danger was of the mother becoming like Jocasta, the son, like Oedipus: physically a grown man with his mother, but emotionally still a child with mummy (Symington, 1986).

Joan and Isobel were both treated with antidepressants. Their doctors interpreted their agitation, loss of weight, inability to sleep and labile moods as evidence of depression. They had both experienced these same manifestations as romantic excitement, although clearly they were having difficulty functioning. Isobel was referred to a psychologist. The agitation and longings subsided.

Intoxicating sexual feelings may have arisen in part as a manic defence against depressive feelings—an unconscious attempt to ward off the terrible feelings of loss (Greenberg and Littlewood, 1995).

Both had also become angry toward, and distant from their husbands, so that it was as if there was a missing link, mother to father: as if mother and son could form an intimate couple, to the exclusion of the mother's partner, who then functioned as a receptacle for all the negative elements (Klein, 1945). This confirmed Stewart (1961). Years of disappointment as part of the search, and partners who themselves felt rejected during the process, when their wives were pre-occupied, contributed to this.

Britton's (1989) idea of the Oedipal triangle as an internal structure described an internal space

being created in which insight and awareness of separateness and differences could grow. He captured the importance of parents being seen as together and separate from the child, and at the same time the parents seeing the child as separate. This seeing and being seen, while full of disillusion, is also the foundation of insight, which allows for the distinction between the phantasy of oneness between mother and child and recognition of reality.

Isobel had been sexually abused as a child, leaving her vulnerable to confusion about loving feelings. She identified with her son, and may have been searching for a re-awakened sense of closeness with him that she didn't experience around the time of his birth. There may also have been a tendency to repeat her abusive experience (Groth, 1982): not only the sexual abuse, but also the forced relinquishment and subsequent abortion. A sexual union would have marked an end to the possibility of a reparative inclusion of her son into her family.

Isobel recognised, however, that crossing the sexual boundary would prove destructive (Bachmann and Bossi, 1993): the universal theme of parental aggression toward the child would be re-enacted (Atkins, 1970), as her son would be prevented from growing up and growing away. She recognised that it would also have destroyed her marriage.

The breakdown of all boundaries represented by mother-son incest, if completed, would have constituted a tragic acting out predicated, at least in part, on the legislated perversion of the truth inherent in the rewriting of the birth certificates. The confusion between legal status and biological reality pervaded the system. The difficulty that some birthmothers had in coming to grips with the idea that these were their children to whom they were attracted ('he's mine, yet he's a stranger') paralleled some Adoption Information counsellors' concern about whether this type of relationship was incestuous, as if it was unclear whether the birthmothers should be thought of as mothers in this situation or not.

Social workers who said these feelings rarely occurred (despite their own pamphlets to the contrary), may not only have found them too painful to acknowledge, but may also have unconsciously realised that there might be repercussions for their agencies if these disturbing feelings were taken seriously. It was easier to 'turn a blind eye' (Steiner, 1985). This reflects a general propensity to misrepresent aspects of reality which we find too difficult to bear (Money-Kyrle, 1968).

## **Conclusion**

That four of eight birthmothers interviewed had sexual feelings is evidence that these feelings occur. The frequency of their occurrence is not assessable from this small pilot study.

Unresolved feelings, dating back at least to the original adoption, were further confused through the process of reunion. Whilst other birthmothers also experienced loving feelings, they were in touch with a profound sense of loss, and recognised the young men as adult, separate and autonomous.

Those who experienced sexual feelings were unable to see their sons as grown-up and separate from themselves: they experienced them as their babies; as part of themselves, as needy. At the time of experiencing the attraction, their grieving had not begun.

Themes of incomplete separation-individuation and the resulting attempt to recreate a close symbiotic interaction were striking. Closed adoption had denied the natural development of the mother-infant bond, with its associated intense physicality, and an attempt was being made to resolve the disturbed attachment relationship.

The birthmothers were disturbed by these feelings. The feelings changed for Joan and Isobel after treatment with antidepressants, along with a limited opportunity to talk about their feelings. They then felt physically better (able to sleep and eat, less tearful and less pre-occupied), the erotic sentiments subsided, and they began, belatedly, to grieve for all they had lost.

Intrapsychic and interpersonal factors, as well as the nature of the adoption-reunion process, were relevant to both genesis and outcome of these feelings.

A birthmother with a past history of sexual abuse meeting a needy child who had been physically abused proved a most vulnerable combination. A strained marital relationship provided a context for idealisation of the son, with all negative feelings projected onto the spouse. The mandatory group counselling session inadvertently provided a context for the pairing of birthmother with unrelated adoptee. A single mandatory 'counselling' session continued the absence of an external supportive relationship, so that, once more, birthmothers were not helped to process their confusing feelings.

The heroic stature of these women lies in their grappling with *knowing*—ie *reality* ('he's my son') whilst feeling overwhelmed by their loving *feelings* ('it's more like being with a lover'). Unlike Sophocles' Jocasta, they struggled to think about the consequences of their actions. Instead of acting on the strong feelings named 'sexual attraction', based on long-buried maternal phantasies, they engaged in the difficult psychological journey which involved grieving their losses: the ordinary losses for all mothers as their children grow up and grow away, as well as the losses due to the cut-off of a profoundly important relationship.

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