

Melford E. Spiro, *Oedipus in the Trobriands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Pp. 224. \$26.00. Paper \$12.95.

From its inception, psychoanalysis has fostered an intimate relationship with anthropological inquiry. At times, this relationship has seemed to be mutually satisfying. Close work with human beings, the willingness to suspend and question the observer's judgments, and the belief in underlying dynamics have, after all, been the hallmarks of both fields. The borrowing of concepts and cooperative investigation have characterized this relationship at its best. At other moments, however, intimacy has given way to strife. Like contending siblings, the two disciplines have vied for theoretical supremacy.

One of the first illustrations of this latter pattern occurred in the debate of the 1920s between Malinowski and Jones over the nature of the Oedipus complex. Based on his research in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski posited a pattern of psychosexual development for children that was substantially different than its Western counterpart. At the age when Western boys were struggling to repress their incestuous desires for their mother, Trobriand boys were engaging in unrestrained sexual play with other children that gradually and “naturally” dissipated the sexual aspect of their maternal ties. The Trobriand father was portrayed as a friendly and nurturant figure who played no role in the child’s conception, rather than as a sexual rival whom the son wished to eliminate. Feelings focused on the mother and father in the familiar Oedipal triangle were, in the Trobriands, directed toward a boy’s sister and mother’s brother. Malinowski attributed these differences to the matrilineal family structure of Trobriand society.

In his response to Malinowski’s limited assertion of cultural relativism, Ernest Jones (1924) vigorously upheld the tenets of classical psychoanalysis. He characterized the Trobriand “ignorance” of physiological paternity as an attempt to “deflect the hostility felt by the growing boy for his father.” Mirroring the evolutionary perspective of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, Jones saw matrilineal society itself as an attempt to displace these feelings. The development of patriarchal society enabled man to “face his real father and live with him.” Malinowski’s rejoinder to Jones in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* extended his more general critique of social evolutionism and reaffirmed his view of the relativity of psychoanalytic constructs.

In his recent book, Spiro returns to this debate. His stated aim is to throw doubt on what he sees as a general acceptance among anthropologists of Malinowski’s claims. Unlike earlier attempts to bridge these perspectives (e.g. Parsons 1964), Spiro’s account does not represent a theoretical compromise. He sees the Oedipus complex as a universal phenomenon in which cultural variation plays an extremely limited role. From beginning to end, Spiro’s argument is structured in a clear and logical form that is easily followed by the reader. The content of his argument, however, reflects many of the difficulties encountered when theories are transposed in entirety from one culture to another.

Spiro is at his most convincing when criticizing Malinowski’s findings. His careful review of the evidence points out some contradictions, but much more frequently finds the data to be irrelevant or ambiguous. Often these examples underline Malinowski’s misunderstandings about the nature of the unconscious, repression, and Oedipal theory in general. Thus,

Spiro notes that data on children aged three or four for whom Oedipal dynamics are most relevant is all but absent from Malinowski's account. Instead of concentrating on this period when the father is still the main authority in the nuclear family, Malinowski focused on the mother's brother who does not become important until adolescence. Similarly, Malinowski underestimates the role of repression when he accepts the vigorous denial of his adult informants as evidence for a lack of fantasies dealing with maternal incest. As Spiro observes, we would expect no less in any society. If Freud's patients had walked in discussing these things, there would have been no need for psychoanalysis.

In successive chapters, Spiro presents evidence that the Oedipus complex not only exists in the Trobriands, but is in fact "unusually strong." The initial support for this contention is taken primarily from myths and cultural beliefs. He then attempts to validate his hypothesis by locating developmental processes and psychological repercussions that are predictable from Oedipal theory.

The major impediment to judging the arguments of either Spiro or Malinowski is the absence of pertinent data. Ultimately, the proof of either contention lies in the fantasies of young children as they are expressed, dreamt, or performed in play. Lacking this material, both observers are forced to rely on myth and other cultural ideology. This procedure raises important methodological questions about the relationship between these phenomena and the unconscious conflicts experienced by individuals. Spiro sees this relationship as direct and causal. Using Kardinerian terms, he suggests that these belief systems represent projections of the unconscious material of individuals. Given common childrearing patterns, he claims, the members of small-scale societies "develop common fears, wishes, and fantasies" that are repressed and then expressed in commonly held myths and beliefs. Myths reflect fantasies.

Subsumed within this general process of projection, claims Spiro, are various other transformations that take the form of psychoanalytic defense mechanisms. Like Jones, he sees the omission of the father from reproductive theory and myth as a process of denial. Hostility for the mother's brother is seen as a feeling that has been displaced from the father. Spiro's facile movement from the unconscious to culture is in fact highly problematic. In theoretical systems where both theory and structural transformations are in the eye of the observer, one is sometimes left wondering, like Leach (1970:3) in his review of Levi-Strauss, if one is "being treated to a confidence trick." This feeling tends to depend on how closely explanation adheres to the data in question.

In this regard, Spiro is inconsistent. I found his analysis of various myths to be eloquent if somewhat incomplete. At other moments, however, Spiro's explanations are attenuated and tautological. To explain Malinowski's observation that dreams are not often recalled, Spiro suggests that a high percentage of these dreams concern the father, that these dreams are hostile, that they arouse guilt, and are repressed. He is prone to interject theoretical deductions and data from other cultures to bridge lacunae in the ethnographic material. This is especially true in his assertion that the Trobriand mother is overly seductive, and that the emphasis placed on the sister as an incestuous object represents a displacement from the mother. To his credit, Spiro is sometimes aware that his conclusions have become speculative.

A second problem inherent in Spiro's methodology is its minimization of culture. For Spiro (1982:49-51), cultural phenomena can be analyzed in two distinct modes. The first approach concerns itself with establishing systematic interrelationships within a culture and emphasizes conscious and shared meanings. In the second mode, cultural phenomena are explained with reference to "deep meanings" that have their bases in pan-human characteristics. Spiro's psychoanalytic approach falls within this second mode of inquiry and concerns itself with unconscious and individualized meaning. In fact, Spiro is not terribly impressed with the first approach. Cultural relativism is referred to as "that fatuous theory" and characterized as having little explanatory power. With cultural systematicity de-emphasized, Spiro's approach in *Oedipus in the Trobriands* can be described as deductive and analytic. Particular cultural components are isolated and then associated with specific ontogenetic sequences and their unconscious correlates.

It is clear that Spiro's approach privileges the process of child-rearing. He begins his theoretical premises with the phrase, "given common childhood experiences. . .," but this is a lot to concede. It is precisely at this point that culture makes its entrance into the child's life. How parents react to a child's developmental achievements and separations is guided by concepts that are embedded in a cultural framework. Can we then afford to ignore the cultural logic made manifest in child-rearing when exploring its impact on myths and other beliefs? It is certainly possible that we are witnessing an intracultural correlation rather than a process of causation when linking these variables together.

We must also wonder whether it is correct to associate cultural phenomena and psychodynamic development simply on the basis of logical similarity. Spiro is often careful in this regard, but when he attempts to validate his hypothesis by locating predicted psychological concomitants

in Trobriand culture, his evidence seems circumstantial. Perhaps Singer's critique of attempts to "psychoanalyze a culture" on the basis of ethnographic observation and the study of myth is relevant here:

Inferences from such data to unconscious psychological processes in individuals must remain highly indirect and precarious. If we know that one culture has a characteristic anxiety about disease, is it possible with the criteria now available to establish that this anxiety is wholly or in part a "projection" or "displacement" of unconscious guilt? I do not believe so. Neither the intensity of the anxiety, nor its inappropriateness in relation to the objective facts, nor its having been acquired in childhood would be sufficient criteria for this purpose. For if the anxiety had developed in the culture as a consequence of historical experience with epidemics or as a consequence of a world view which interprets disease as a punishment for misconduct, it might well be intense, objectively inappropriate, and taught to children. In that case we would still relate such anxiety to guilt feelings but these would not be unconscious; they would be conscious guilt feelings which can be explained in terms of the beliefs and values of the culture. (Singer [1953] 1971:90-91).

The absence of cultural material in a case like this might at worst distort a psychodynamic explanation and at best impoverish it. These lines of criticism can be brought to bear on Spiro's explanation of what he calls the "absent-father pattern." Spiro claims that the father is excluded from dreams, myth, and reproduction theory and that this reflects the desire of a growing boy to deny the wish to eliminate his father. But is the father actually absent from these cultural domains? Spiro notes that Malinowski merely emphasizes the presence of sisters and mothers in dreams and does not actually deny dreams of the father. With regard to myths, Spiro perceptively notes that Malinowski's classification of oral narratives into myths that exclude fathers and legends that do not is questionable.

Spiro goes on to review the famous debate about the "ignorance" of physiological paternity in Trobriand reproduction. He sees the exclusion of the father in this domain as an active denial rather than as sexual ignorance. But is the father actually excluded? An observation made by Malinowski (1929, 207-8) and expanded by Weiner (1976: 122-25) suggests that the father molds the external form of the fetus by repeated acts of sexual intercourse with the mother. This process is continued when the father later feeds the infant and massages its head to shape it. The magic

performed to make a child beautiful is given by the father's sister as are the decorations that in adolescence attract prospective lovers.

This structuring of parental contributions to the child according to an opposition of internal versus external characteristics is certainly consistent with the matrilineal emphasis in the Trobriands. The core of a person, based on his or her mother's blood and milk as well as a reincarnated matrilineal spirit, is what gives the child its enduring social identity. Paternal input is important for the physical and social development of the individual, but is at the same time relatively ephemeral (Ibid.:225-26). Transposed to concrete social relationships, this opposition is enacted in the relationships between a man and his sister and wife (McDougall 1975:94). With the sister, sexuality is strictly forbidden, but an enduring tie is created with her and her children, With a wife, sexuality is condoned, but the tie to her children is more tenuous. Childhood sexuality may not be repressed in Trobriand culture, but it is certainly divorced from a sense of generativity.

I believe that a cultural analysis of this type must precede our attempts to analyze the reactions of parents to their children's Oedipal expressions. Concepts of male and female as well as unilineal notions of procreation are instrumental in this process. The Oedipus complex--even an "unusually strong" Oedipus complex--is not sufficient to explain this cultural logic. Western children with Oedipal problems do not develop ideologies of this kind. Rather than attempting to prove a specific sequence of development using bits and pieces of Trobriand culture, our account can only be enriched by conducting our analysis at the level of systems.

A final aspect of Spiro's analysis that I wish to criticize is his negative view of Trobriand mechanisms for resolving Oedipal tensions. Spiro tells us that the Oedipus complex can eventually be extinguished, repressed, or incompletely repressed. One of these outcomes, he claims, can be said to characterize the "dominant form" taken by the Oedipus complex in one or another society. The Trobriand practice of "extruding" the adolescent son from his parental home is classified with the practice of painful initiations as customs that indicate an incomplete repression. According to Spiro, the function of this process is to remove the physically mature boy lest he act out his weakly repressed sexual and aggressive impulses. He goes on to suggest that in societies marked by the incomplete repression of the Oedipus complex, so much emotional and social energy is focused on dealing with these issues that "more productive" allocations of resources are obviated.

This conclusion must be questioned on several counts. Although Freud did suggest that the Oedipus complex could be extinguished, there is little

evidence that this actually occurs. To one degree or another, repression is used in all societies to resolve Oedipal conflict. The suggestion that the Trobriand adolescent's residential shift is indicative of incomplete repression and that this is somehow diagnostic does not stand up to examination. Spiro implies that the survival of Oedipal feelings in puberty is only characteristic of some societies, but not so Freud. Freud ([1923] 1955:246) posited a "diphasic" pattern of sexual development in which Oedipal feelings are repressed at a young age, but then are "revivified" at puberty:

We learn that at puberty, when the sexual instinct first makes its demands in full strength, the old familiar incestuous objects are taken up again and freshly cathected with libido. . . . From this time onwards, the human individual has to devote himself to the great task of detaching himself from his parents, and not until that task is achieved can he cease to be a child and become a member of the social community. For the son this task consists in detaching his libidinal wishes from his mother and employing them for the choice of a real outside love-object, and in reconciling himself with his father. . . . These tasks are set to everyone; and it is remarkable how seldom they are dealt with in an ideal manner. (Freud [1916-1917] 1963:336-37)

Seen in this light, the Trobriand adolescent's shift to the bachelor's house seems less a matter of extrusion and more a social mechanism to reinforce healthy development. Soon after his move, a boy begins cultivating yam gardens for a father, elder brother, or elder male kinsman to establish rights to land in a particular hamlet. He also begins to receive sexual partners in a process that will culminate in marriage. Leaving the parents' house is the first step in transforming a dependent boy into an autonomous man (Weiner 1976:146, 169, 177). While the child is indeed separated from his parents, the adaptive results of this transition are undeniable.

Despite my criticisms of *Oedipus in the Trobriands*, I believe that Spiro's attempt to disprove Malinowski's contention is largely successful. There is sufficient evidence advanced to suggest the existence of an Oedipus complex. The form taken by this complex in its interface with Trobriand culture, however, remains unclear.

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