



FREUD'S CASE STUDY OF LITTLE HANS (1909)

Aim: To monitor the development of a child up to around 5 years

Little Hans was the son of a couple who followed Freud and were great believers in his work and theories. Herbert Graf was a famous Austrian-American composer, and it is now known that he is the Little Hans from Freud's 1909 case study.

The aim of this case study was to monitor the development of a child up to the age of around four or five years. The details of this case study would provide the evidence Freud believed to support his Oedipus complex. The data came from the letters Little Hans' father would send Freud, and also on the very few occasions Freud met with Hans. Little Hans himself actually asked his father to tell Freud a few things, also.

Because Freud understood that the parents were followers of his, he realised that they may have only noticed the things in Little Hans which fit his theory and passed those details on, therefore Freud tried only to take evidence from Little Hans himself, even if this was through his father.

Freud understood that readers of the case study might not necessarily agree with his analysis and conclusions, but he argued that you had to be present at the time of a case study in order to understand and agree with the analysis.

Case description

Hans appeared to have an early interest in "widdlers" (penises). He had noticed the widdlers on animals, and that his mother and baby sister did not have widdlers. At one stage, Hans placed his hand on his penis and his mother threatened to cut his penis off. He had a dream where he wanted a (female) friend of his to share in his widdling. He also dreamt of wiping his bottom, as well as having children and wiping their bottoms. Hans denied thinking these things and said that they came to him purely in dreams. This is what Freud thought to be of particular importance.

Little Hans would be left with his mother a lot as his father was away a lot on business, and Hans seemed to want his father to go away. When the family moved house and his father was at home more often, Hans wished his father was dead. Whenever his father was away, he would sleep in his mother's bed with her. The mother was very close to Hans, she would bathe him (although working around the penis, as she told him not to masturbate).

Hans developed a phobia that horses would bite him. Eventually, he became afraid that a white horse would bite him. He had an anxiety attack in the street and stopped going out. At one point, he was afraid of a horse coming into the room. He later became particularly afraid of white horses with black things over their mouths and covering their eyes. He was also very afraid of horses pulling laden carts. Eventually, he recalled a real experience of seeing a horse, which was pulling a bus, fall down. Little Hans had heard the father of a girl who was staying with them tell her not to put her finger on the white horse that was pulling the cart to take her to the station, as it would bite her.

When Little Hans was around three and a half years old, his mother had a baby girl, of whom he was jealous of right from the start. Hans said he was afraid of going underwater, and also became afraid of water. Little Hans dreamt of a plumber taking his bottom and widdler away and bringing him new, bigger ones.

Freud took particular interest in another dream. Hans had a dream with giraffes. One was crumpled with Hans just sat on it, and another giraffe was just stood at the site watching.

Also, there was a time where Little Hans was playing with dolls and "having children" – but his father told him that a boy cannot have children. Hans said that his mother was the children's mother, he was the children's father, and that Hans' father was the children's grandfather (making Hans his own father, and Hans' father his grandfather).

Case analysis

Freud believed Hans' obsession on widdlers, including his mother's threat to cut his off, had been repressed into the unconscious and may have affected him later, in the phallic stage. When he would talk about widdlers, ask to see his mother's and father's widdlers and mention the widdlers of horses, Freud believed this indicated he was trying to understand himself and make connections by comparing himself to other things. Freud said that the dreams of bottom-wiping of his and others' bottoms was due to this being done to him as a child and him getting pleasure from it. This links to features of the anal stage, although Hans denied this – an example of what Freud identified as repression.

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This idea of Little Hans wanting to be with his mother and wanting his father gone was explained by Freud as Hans' desire to possess his mother, part of the Oedipus complex. The phobia of horses was really a fear of his father for hating him and wanting him out of the way.

Freud thought Hans was jealous of his sister because her birth and the attention she received brought back the pleasure Hans had experienced when he was that age. Freud felt that the fear of going underwater meant Little Hans wanted his sister to fall underwater and drown. He wanted his mother, according to Freud, to let go of his sister's head when she was bathing her. After discussing this idea with Hans' father, the father confronted Hans about this to which he replied "yes", so both Freud and the boy's father agreed he wanted her to drown. Freud said that Little Hans wanted both his father and his sister out of the way so that he could have his mother all to himself.

Freud believe telling the girl not to put her hand on the white horse when going to the station made the connection with Hans not to masturbate. Therefore he connected this with horses, ergo a fear of horses. This, along with the threat of cutting his penis off, led to the castration fear according to Freud.

The giraffes in Hans' dream were representative of his parents according to Freud. It was interpreted as a sexual scene between Hans and the giraffe he was sat on, who represented his mother, and the other giraffe watching, who was his father. Freud also linked this with the fear that a horse would come into his room.

Freud told Hans' father to tell Hans that the white horse was his father. The black bits covering the horse's eyes show Hans' father's glasses and the black thing over its mouth was his adult moustache and beard. Hans was afraid of his father and the horse represented his father, which explained the fear of the white horse in particular.

The dream about the plumber seemed to suggest that Hans wanted a bigger widdler. Put to Hans, he agreed this was the case. Freud thought that now he was overcoming the castration fear and identifying with his father, and so considered his 'therapy' to have been successful. Although not very clear, Hans' phobia did seem to go away. The claim was that his unconscious fears had been made conscious and therefore had gone away. Freud and Hans' father thought that when playing with dolls and making himself their father (and his father their grandfather), Hans had got around the problem of wanting his father dead.

Conclusions

Knowing about the anal stage of Freud's psychosexual theory, it is evident how much of the findings from the Little Hans case study provided the support and ideas for this theory. Much of the case study was focused on the Oedipus complex (castration fear, desire of the mother, wanting the father out of the way), and there is evidence here that Freud believe shows Hans had those feelings. The dreams he had seemed to show these confused feelings, which supports Freud's theory that the unconscious has a way of expressing itself through means such as dreams.

Evaluation

Strengths:

- ✓ The amount of detail obtained and the depth of the data – the material is thorough and there is information from both Little Hans himself and the parents about Hans – Freud is able to draw conclusions from dreams, thoughts, feelings, activities and friendships
- ✓ The amount of information from the case study also means it can be re-analysed
- ✓ No other research method could have yielded such quality, in-depth data

Weaknesses:

- ✗ The parents were responsible for passing the details onto Freud and since they were followers of his it is likely that they only passed on what they felt was relevant in terms of fitting his theory
- ✗ The concepts, such as the Oedipus complex and castration fear are not measurable and so cannot be scientifically tested
- ✗ There are other possible explanations, e.g. Bowlby (1949) suggest that the mother-child attachment is very strong; also Hans' mother threatened to leave at one stage, which would have worried Little Hans, and so the fear could have been a response to this