

Mathematics and the Oedipal Struggle

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My thinking about this theme was seeded by a chance conversation, and is not yet worked through. The following are provisional thoughts.

Some writers about the oedipal struggle see it in terms of a resolution of the triangular relationship involving two parents and their child. The child, having become aware of his or her sexuality and also his or her romantic feelings towards the opposite-sex parent, is encouraged in this by the support and admiration of that parent. However, there comes a stage where it is important for that parent, and particularly that parent's sexuality, to be seen to be claimed back by the same-sex parent. The bedroom door is shut and the child is excluded. When a child loses the oedipal struggle, provided that this follows affirmation of the child's emotional and sexual attractiveness, he or she can take the first step on the road to independence and maturity. This first step is not taken if the child is allowed to win the oedipal struggle, if for some reason the same-sex parent is unable or unwilling to claim back the loved parent. This failure of the parent to win the oedipal struggle might be associated with ambiguous sexual behaviour, or with ambiguous emotional behaviour in which one or both parents make vicarious use of the child for their emotional satisfaction. In this case the child appears to experience a number of problems in both childhood and adult life, of which perhaps the most significant here are a fear both of failure and of success.

What significance does this have for the learning of mathematics? I am not at all sure, except that difficulty with failure and difficulty with success seem to loom large. This led me to think about the similarities between mathematics and sex. Both are means of communication which are non-linguistic and non-representational. Mathematics and sex are not about anything other than themselves. Music is another such means of communication. All three appear deeply significant for human beings in society, all are associated with strong imagery, and yet none can be connected directly to specific ideas or images. They all seem to be about doing rather than knowing. Sexual knowledge, rather like mathematical knowledge and musical knowledge is not a great deal of use unless it arises from, or can be integrated with experience.

Just as parents (and perhaps also teachers) can take an unhealthy interest in children's sexuality, this is also the case with mathematics and with music. Children's attempts to master multiplication tables, to learn algorithms, to practise scales, to pass music examinations are the focus of adult attention. Often the parents or teachers have no desire to be involved themselves, or to recognise or acknowledge their own interest in, or difficulties with, these activities. There seems to be a prevalent fear of mathematical and musical performance.

Counsellors offering help with the sexual difficulties which are experienced by adult clients often need to 'get into bed with them'. In other words, the counsellor needs to overcome shared embarrassment and the counsellor's possible feelings of sexual inadequacy, in order to be able to address in detail the specific behavioural problems of clients and the associated feelings and attitudes and awareness. It might be productive to adopt a similar approach to supporting those who are learning mathematics and music.

Masturbation can be rewarding and enjoyable. But it is probably less satisfying for most people than sex with another human being. In order for it to work, masturbation is usually accompanied by masturbatory fantasies, imagining what it would be like if we or others were engaging in sexual activity in relationships. When we engage in sexual activity with someone else, our attention might not be focused narrowly on performance goals; there is a good chance that we are distracted by the context in which we find ourselves, and by other aspects of the experience, and this distraction is likely to increase both our enjoyment and our effectiveness. For these reasons, our sexual human beings probably almost certainly learn about sexual techniques and sexual behaviour better together than alone.

Similarly, playing music with or for other people is more pleasurable than playing it alone. When I am alone I can practise a musical instrument, but am likely to be sustained in this endeavour by the thought that I shall later perform for others. Also, when I play with others I learn much more quickly. My misconceptions or presuppositions about the mood of the music, for example, can be immediately challenged. The same would seem to be true about the learning of mathematics. Doing mathematics with others is more pleasurable than doing it alone, and I learn much more quickly by having my assumptions challenged. If I do find myself doing mathematics alone, it is more pleasurable if I am planning to share what I am doing with others at a later date. For some people this might not be the case. They might prefer to work at mathematics on their own: they might have chosen to be interested in mathematics precisely because it is a subject which they can pursue without the need to relate to others. If such people teach mathematics it might be that they expect similar interests and similar behaviour from their students, and in this way set up performance anxiety.

When people have sexual dysfunctions they are often helped by behavioural techniques. These techniques might in one sense be regarded as palliatives, like giving indigestion tablets to a person with gastric pain, rather than addressing the stress which produced the pain in the first place. But indigestion tablets are the right place to start; I cannot face discovering possible causes for my stress while I am doubled up with pain. In a similar way

behavioural therapy for sex works and similar behavioural techniques for overcoming specific mathematical inabilities are likely to be helpful in the first instance.

We all make use of our sexuality in our non-intimate relationships, although it often appears necessary for people to deny this. Similarly, we all make use of our mathematical awareness in dealing with the world (and with relationships) and this too is often denied. Both sexuality and mathematics are often seen as belonging only to narrowly specified domains: an adult sexual relationship, the mathematics classroom, 'maths at work'. In both cases this leaves room for exploitation by the unscrupulous. Advertisements persuade us because we deny the sexual messages they use; spurious mathematical and statistical arguments persuade us to accept political or social deci-

sions. And children are not innocent - sexually or mathematically.

We can engage consciously in sex or mathematics for the purpose of improving our technique. But we can also become unhelpfully obsessed by performance goals. This causes anxiety and impotence.

An adult recently asked me if I could explain to her why a minus times a minus is a plus. Various people had offered explanations and none had convinced her. I wondered what made her ask the question. She did not have any use for the answer. It seemed to me like trying to convince someone that sexual performance can be impaired by stress, when their sexual performance was not impaired. Why would they want to know, and why would anyone want to convince them?

Henry Moore, *Three-piece carving*, 1934

