

Oedipus is alive and well

Professor Michael Jacobs

- A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with the mother and jealous of my father, and now I now consider it a universal event in early childhood ... If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate

the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfilment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one. [Freud, 1897: 272]

'the chief part in the mental lives of all children who later become psychoneurotics is played by their parents' [Freud, 1900: 260].

# two questions

- Why did Freud change his mind?
- Why did he say that the Oedipus complex is, so to speak, innate (he used the word hereditary) in children and is a natural part of psychological development?

'objections raised by reason against its presupposition of destiny'.

His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours - because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.

Our dreams convince us that that is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes. But more fortunate than he, we have meanwhile succeeded, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, in detaching our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. [Freud, 1900: 262]

























'The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement - a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis - that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius' (Freud, 1900: 261).





# two questions

- Why did Freud change his mind?
- Why did he say that the Oedipus complex is, so to speak, innate (he used the word hereditary) in children and is a natural part of psychological development?

'As a young man my only longing was for philosophical knowledge, and now that I am changing over from medicine to psychology I am in the process of fulfilling this wish. I became a therapist against my will; I am convinced that, given certain conditions in the person and in the case, I can definitely cure hysteria and obsessional neurosis'

[E. Freud, 1961: 241.]

'I only wanted to explore, solve riddles, uncover a little of the truth. I may have given pain to many, benefitted a few, neither of which I consider my fault or my merit'

[E. Freud, 1961: 370].

I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father

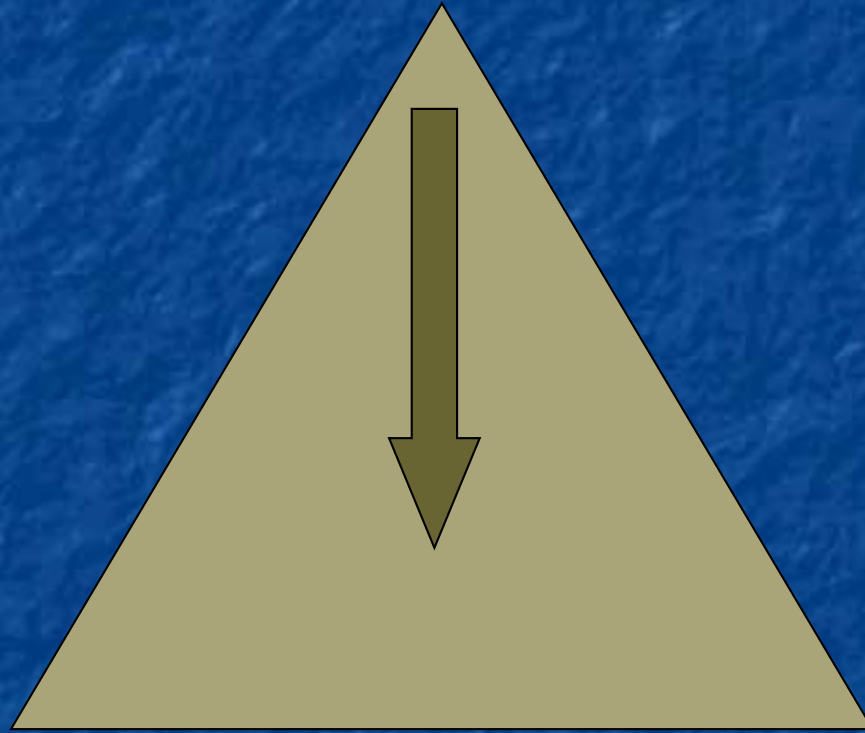
I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood.



The Oedipus complex starts during the first year of life and in both sexes develops to begin with on similar lines. The relation to the mother's breast is one of the essential factors which determine the whole emotional and sexual development. I therefore take the breast relation as my starting point in the ... beginnings of the Oedipus complex in both sexes.

[Klein, 1945: 26].

frustrating mother



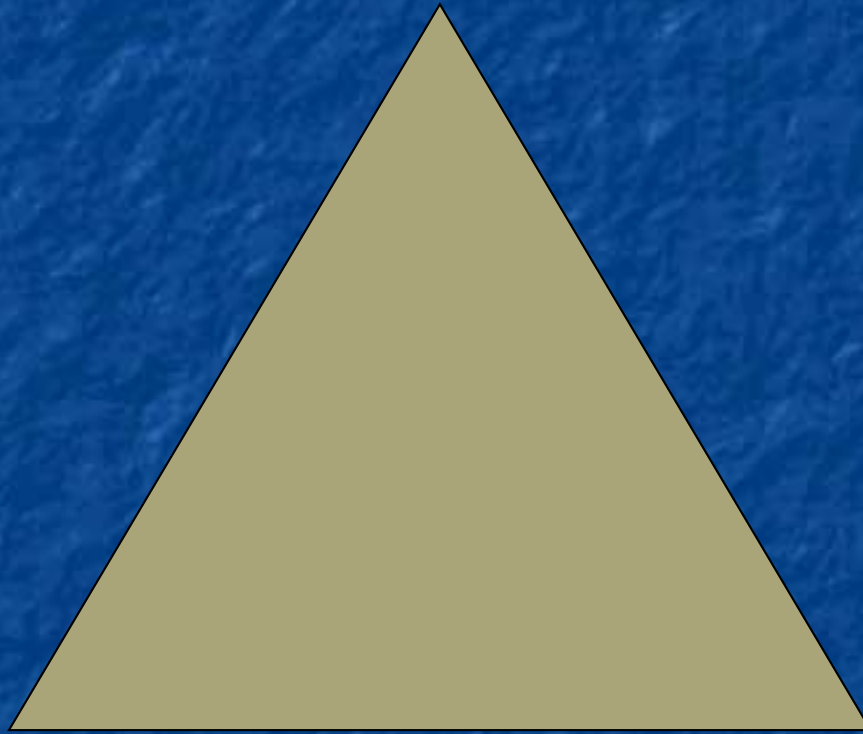
infant

satisfying mother

'many psychoanalytic writers ... have pointed out that Oedipus was an abused child, physically attacked (*oedipus=swollen feet*) and banished by his parents, a victim of Laius's fear of the oracle's prediction that he would be killed by his child, and that his 'infantile' sexuality was a consequence of this rejection'. (Holmes, 1994: 71)

Ethel Spector Person observes: 'Our culture is so saturated with Freud that when anyone alludes to triangles, our thoughts immediately go to the most basic of all triangles, the Oedipus complex' (1989: 218).

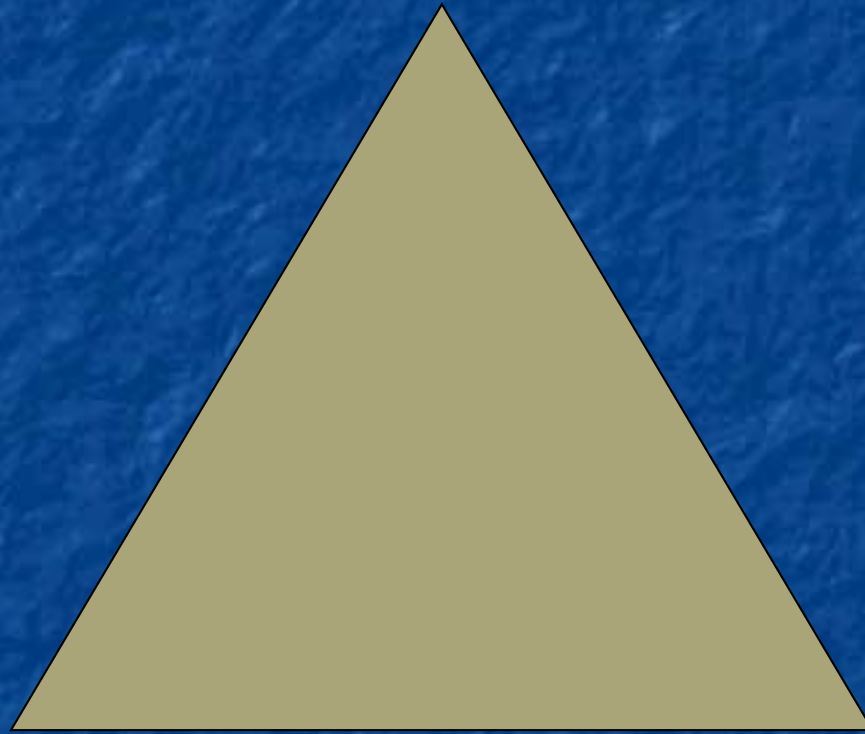
Oedipus



Laius

Jocasta

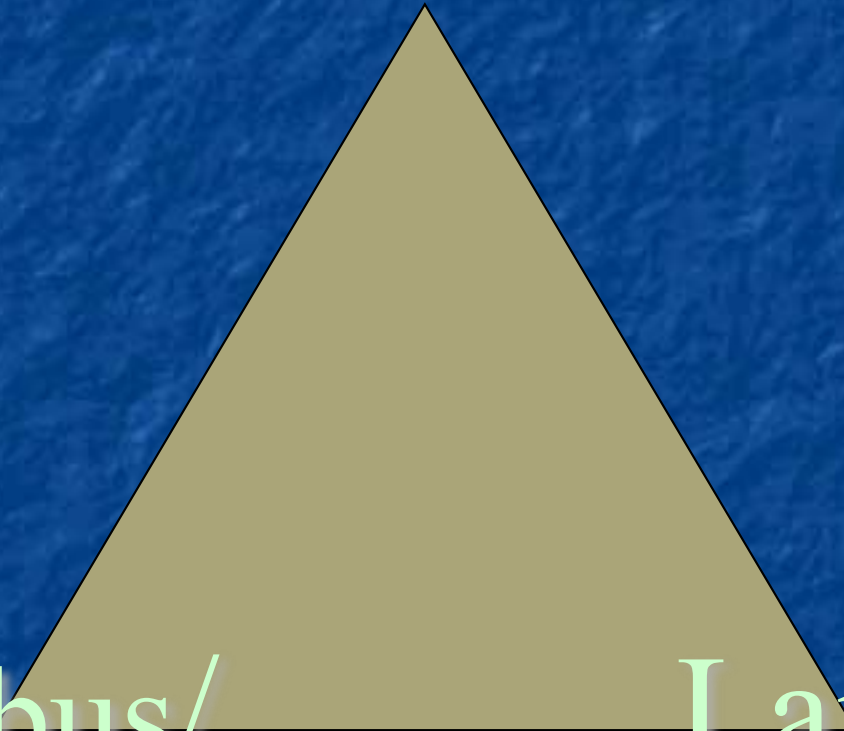
Oedipus



Polybus

Merope

# Oedipus



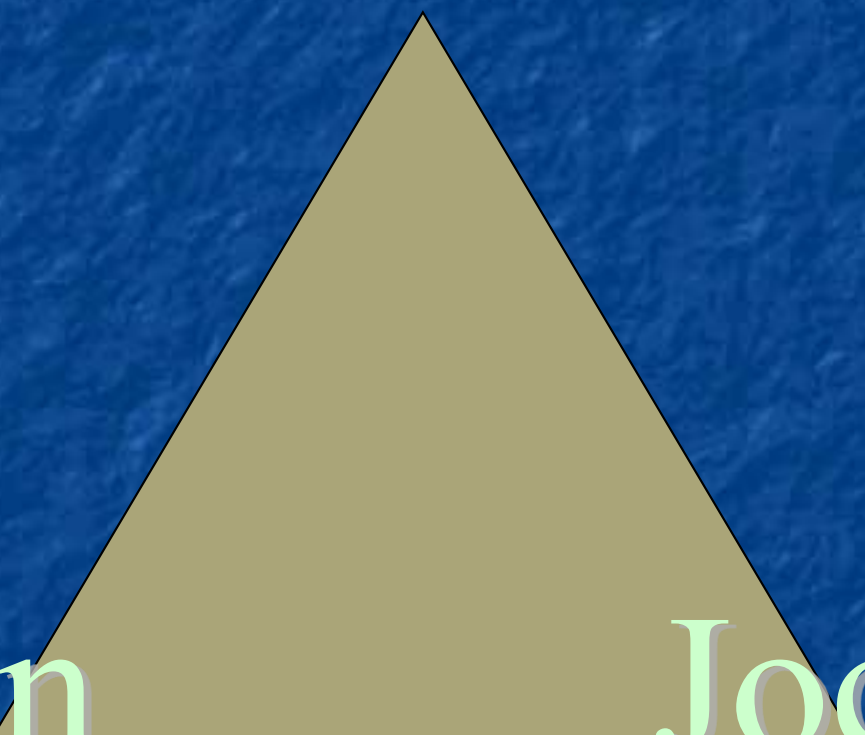
Polybus/

Laius/

Merope

Jocasta

Oedipus



Creon

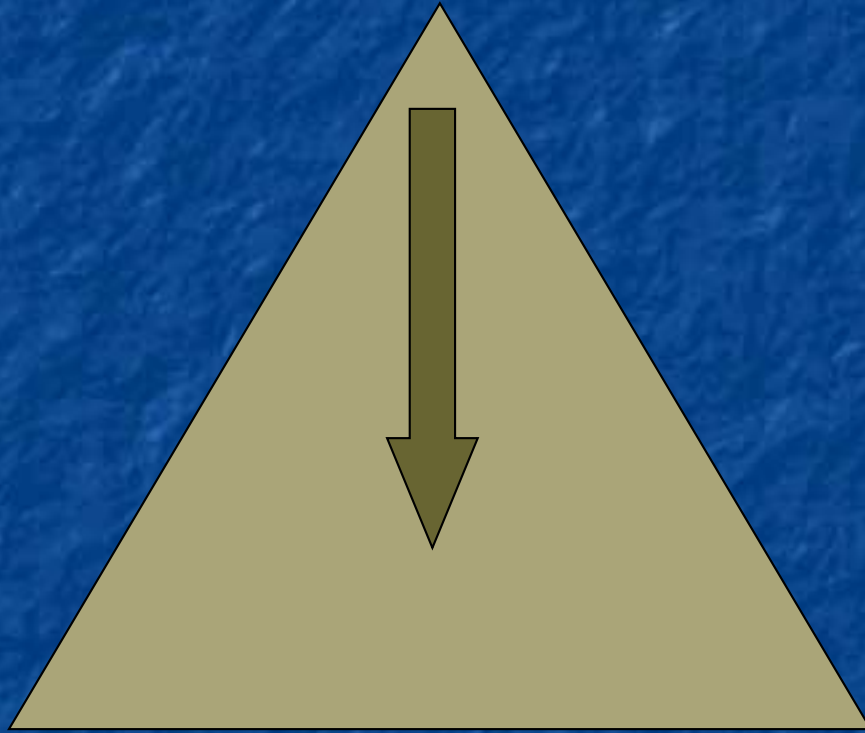
Jocasta

Creon

kingship



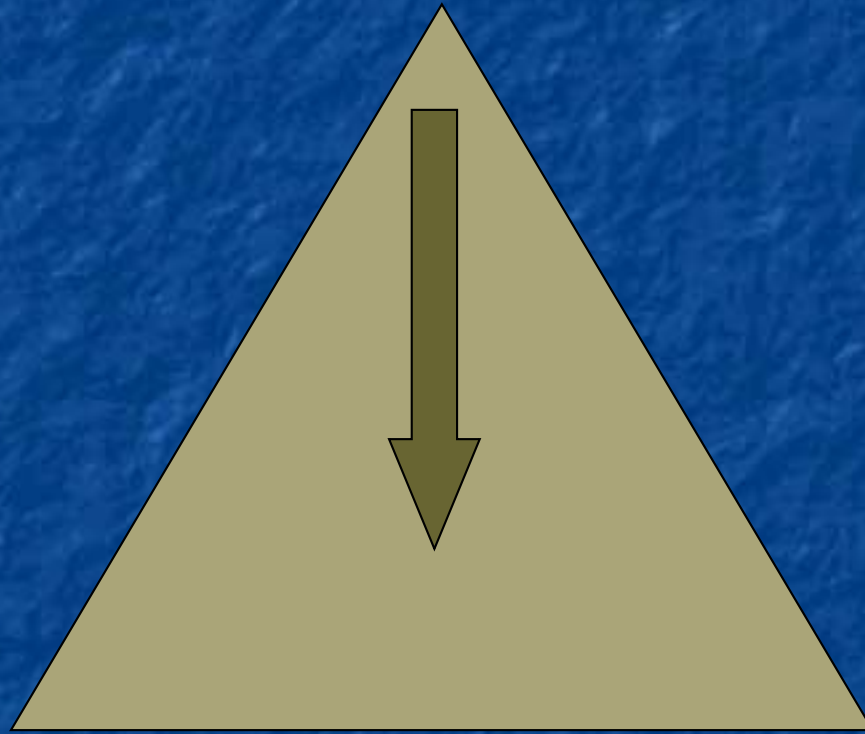
baby



mother

partner

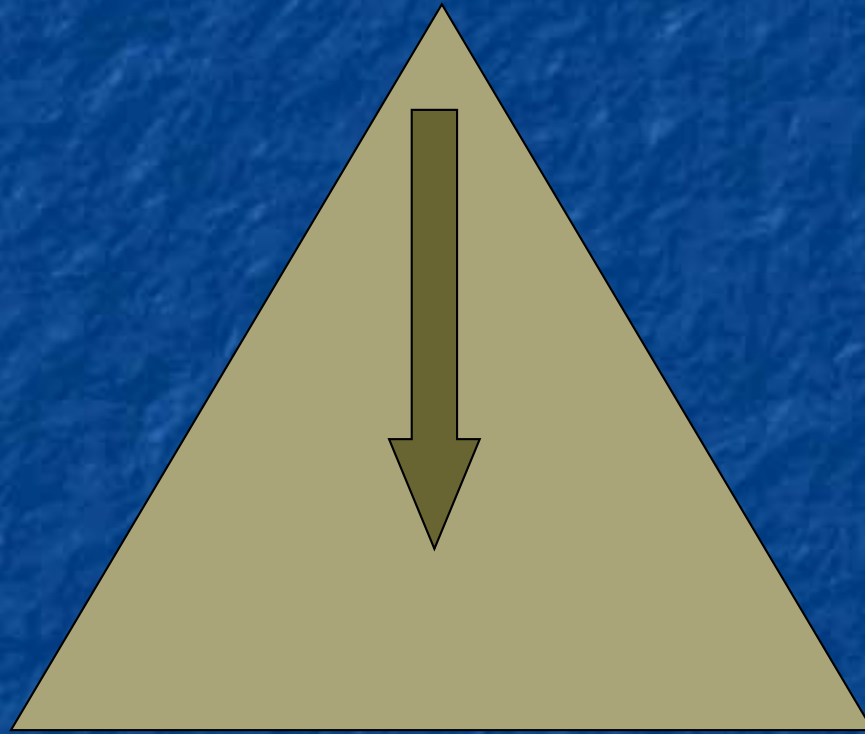
frustrating mother



infant

satisfying mother

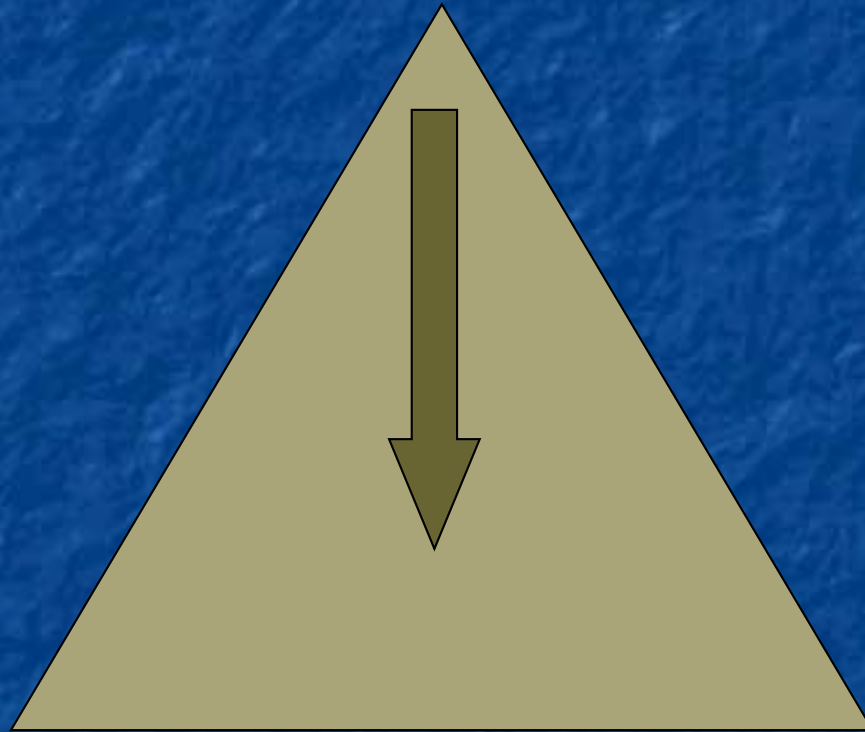
partner



baby

mother

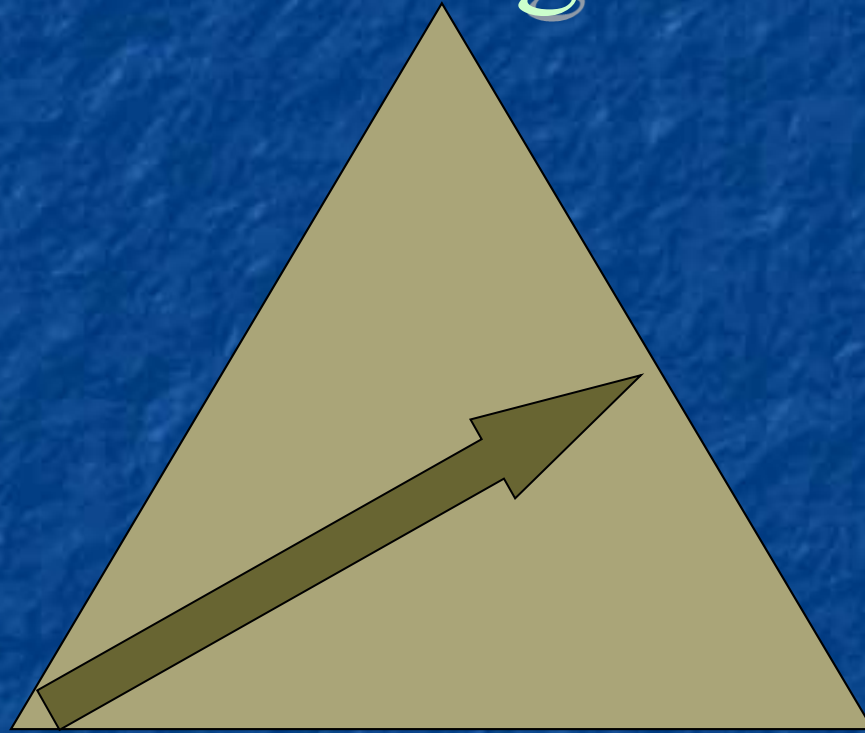
returning father



child

mother

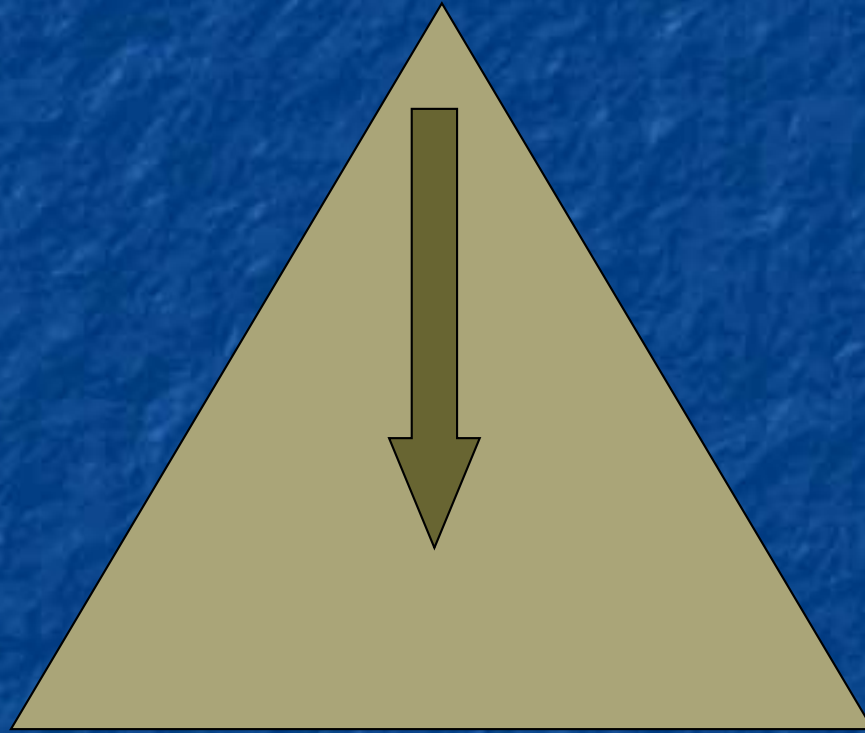
returning father



child

mother

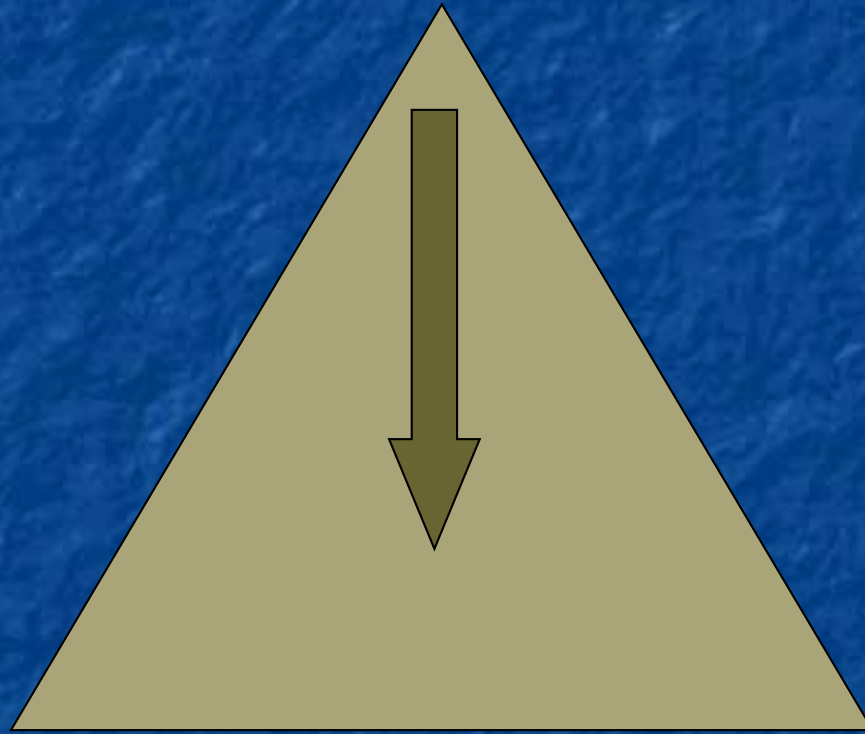
husband's interest  
wife's baby



wife

husband

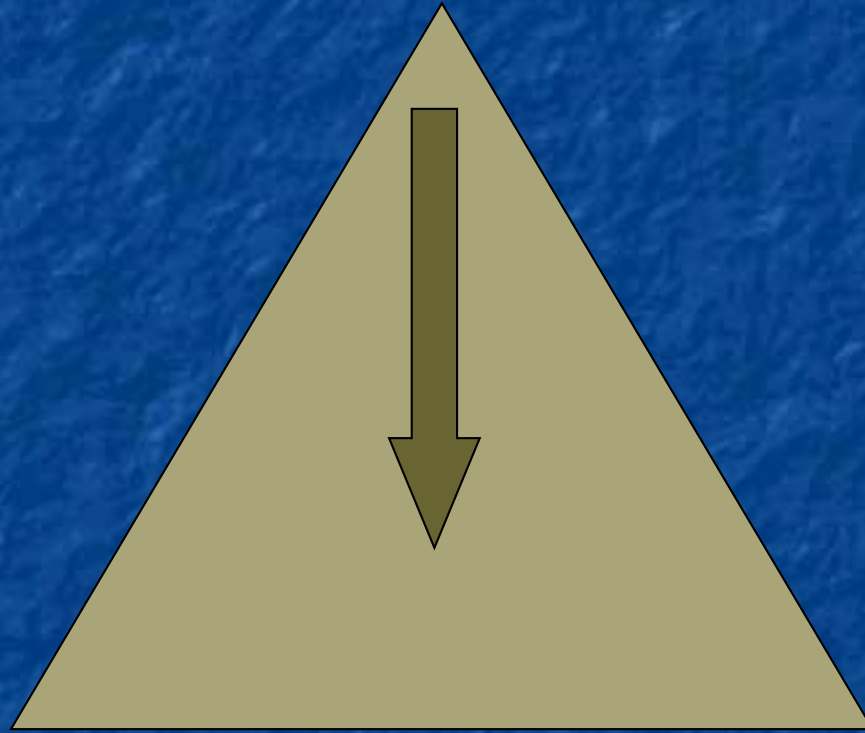
partner B's new interest



partner A

partner B

partner B changes

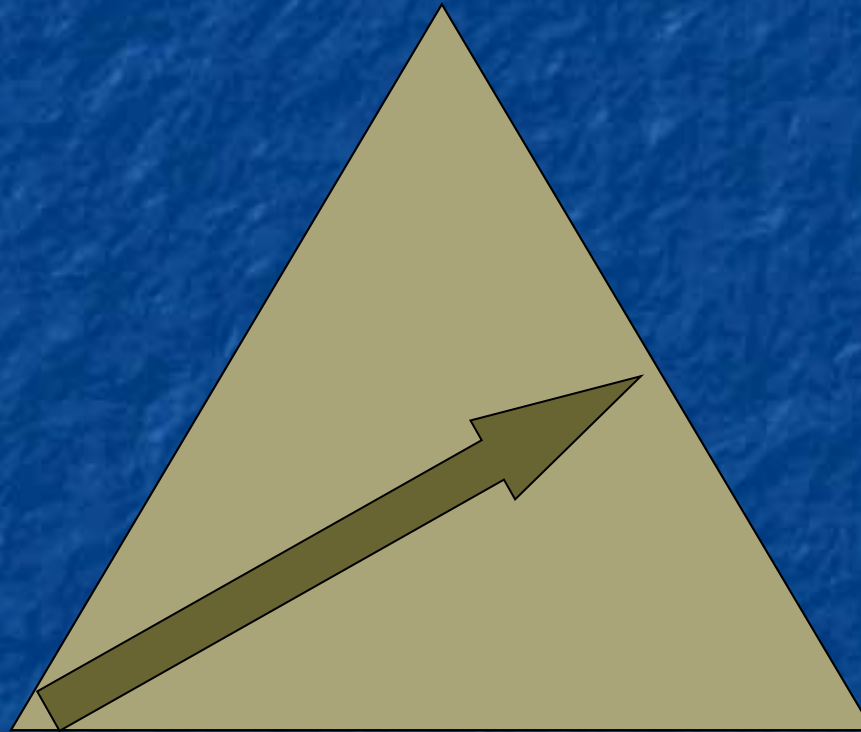


partner A

partner B (as was)



woman as lover (mistress)

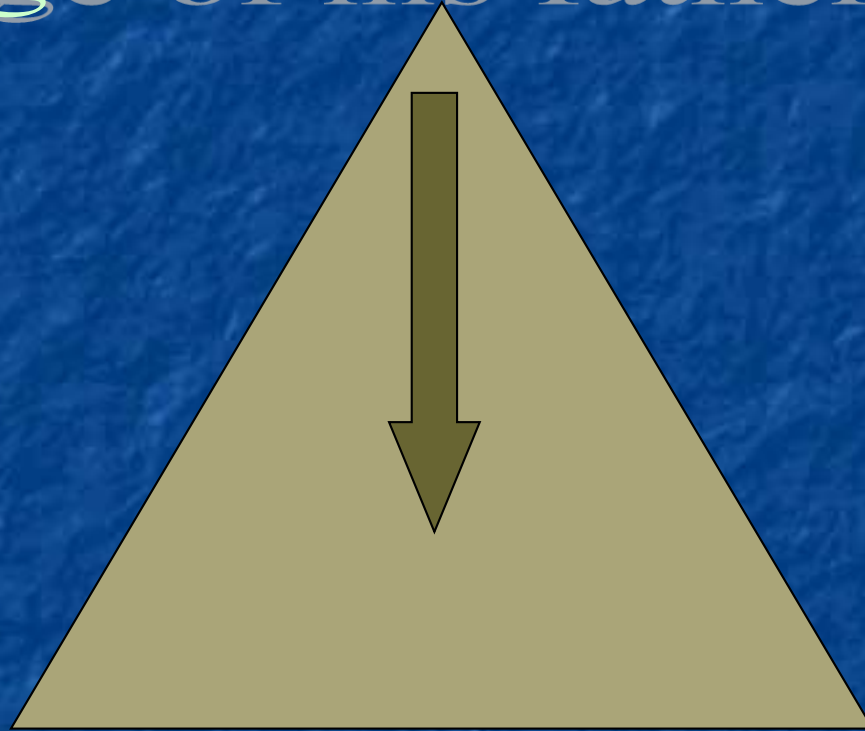


**Alex splits  
two aspects  
of woman**

Alex

Sarah as parent/wife)

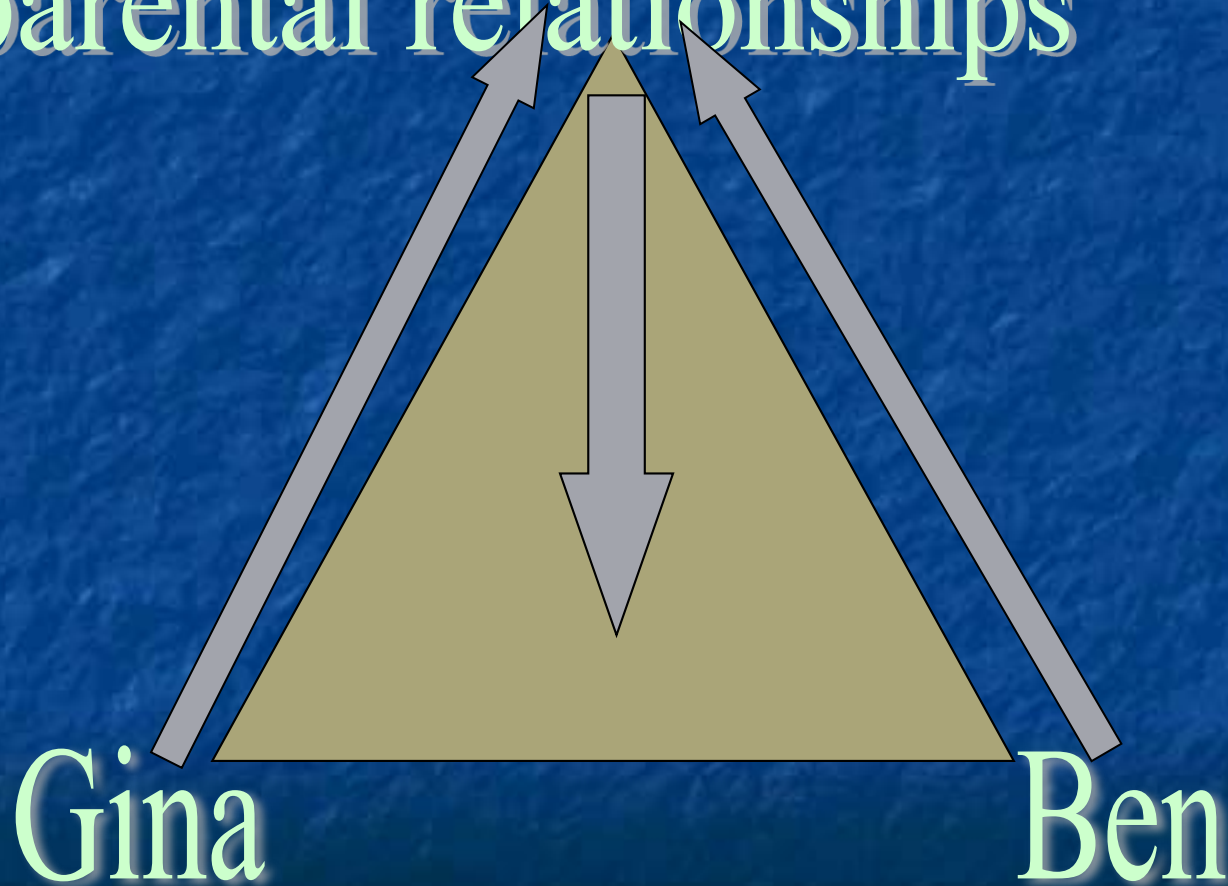
Alex's internalised  
image of his father



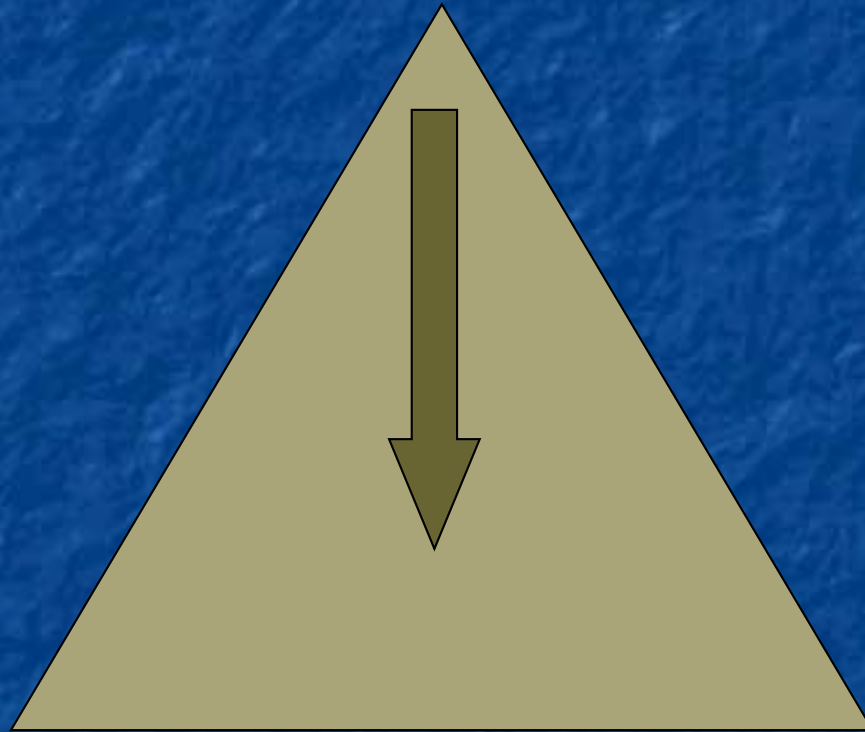
Sarah

Alex

# Gina & Ben's internalised parental relationships

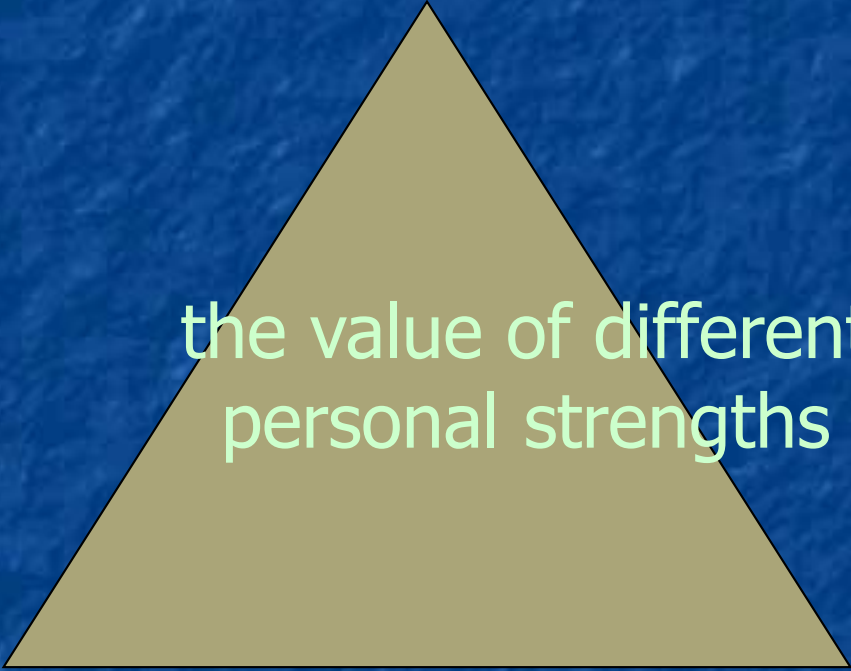


Andrew's mother



Elizabeth

Andrew



the value of different  
personal strengths

very similar needs



Florence

Tony

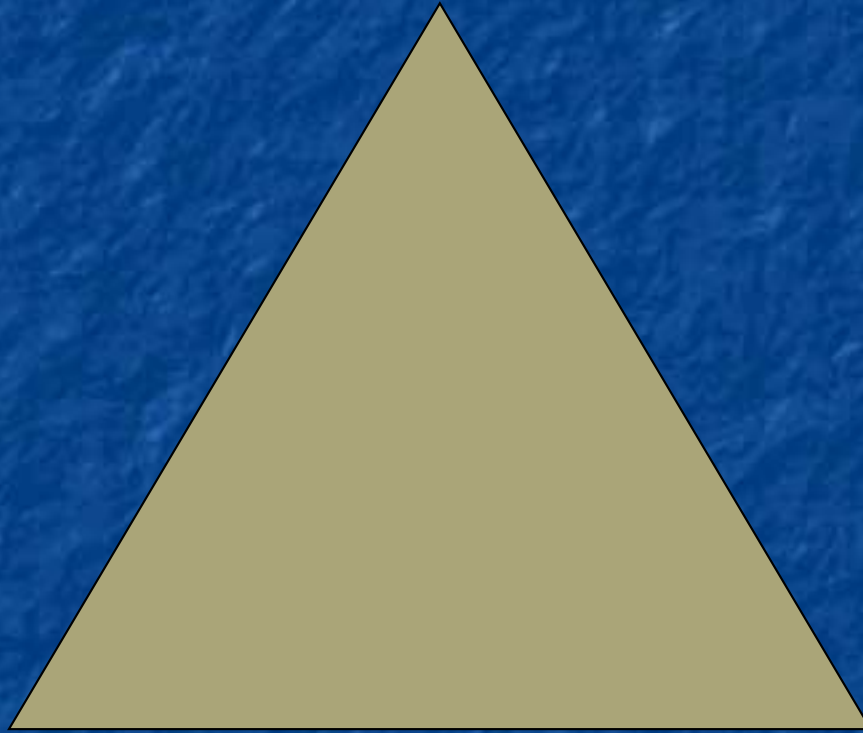
Florence ————— Tony

Tom ————— Rachel

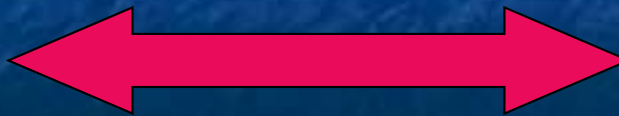
It's inherently rigid. That's a very special property to have ... This is why you see triangles all over the places in the world around you. In electricity pylons, cranes, bridges and many houses.



child

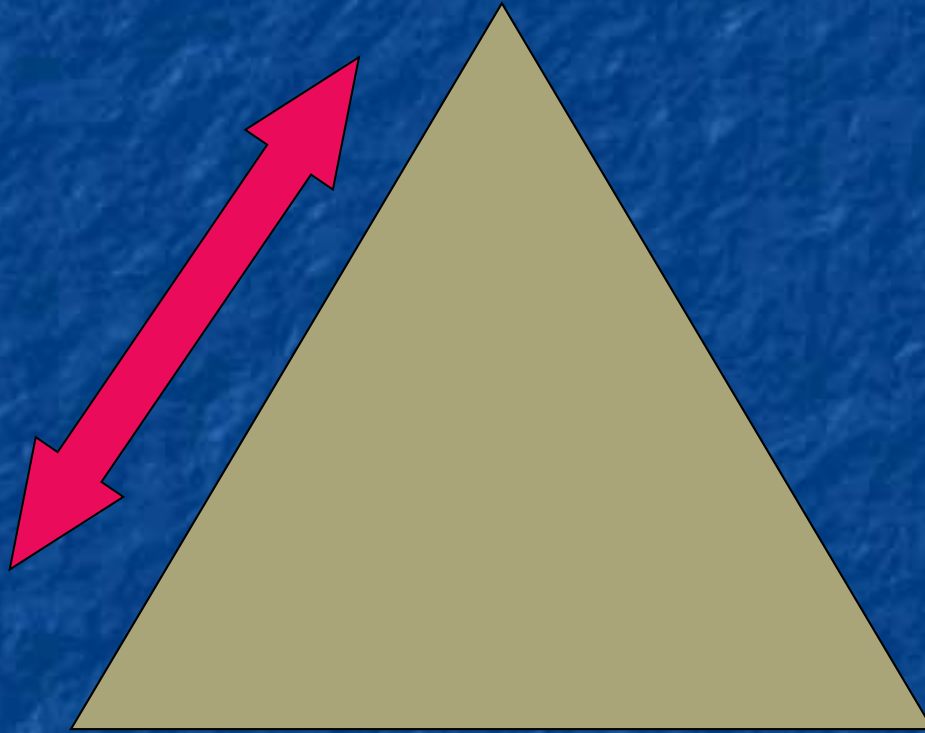


mother



father

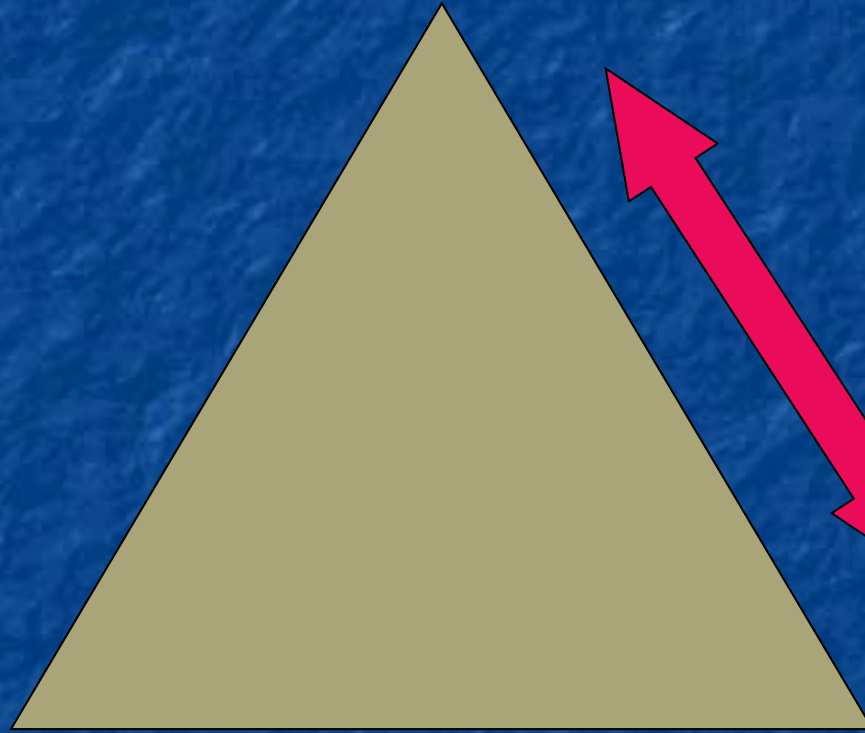
child



mother

father

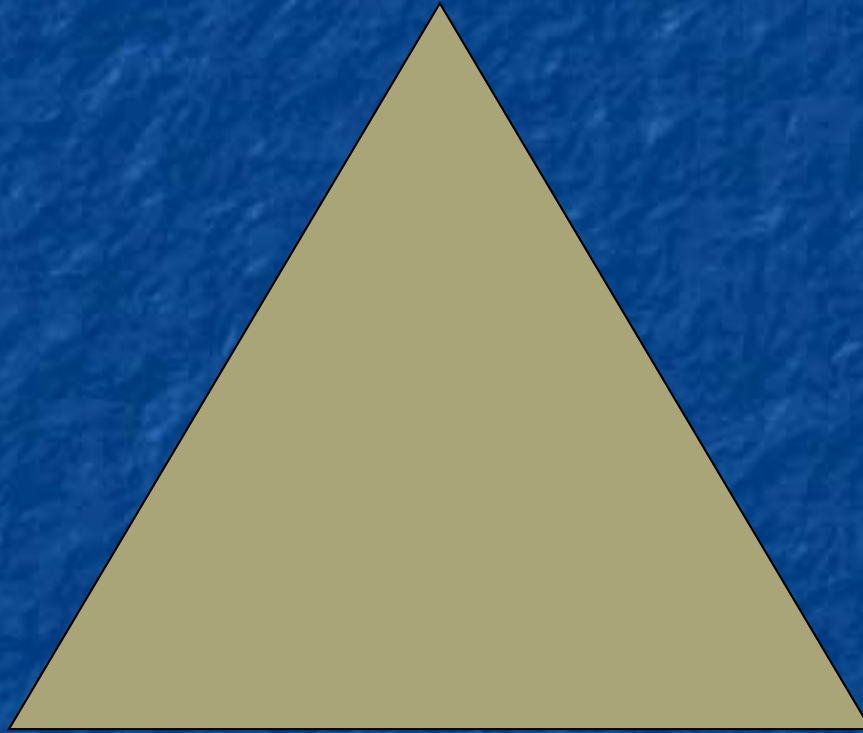
child



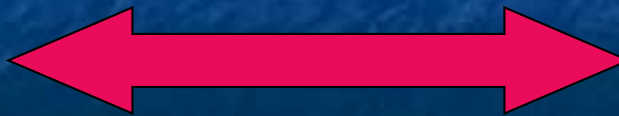
mother

father

child

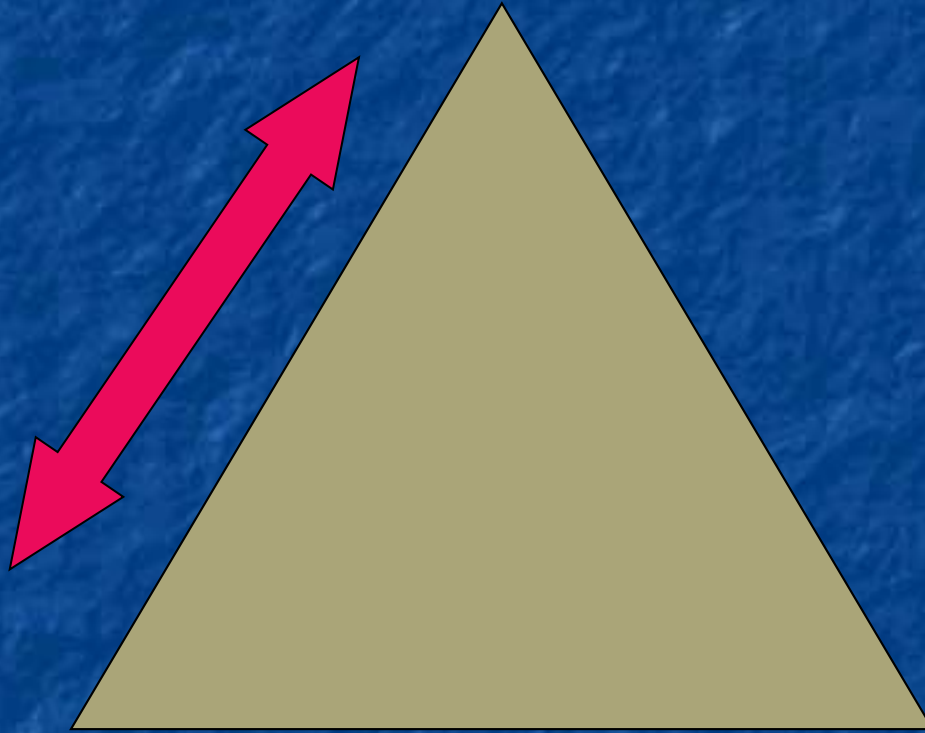


mother



father

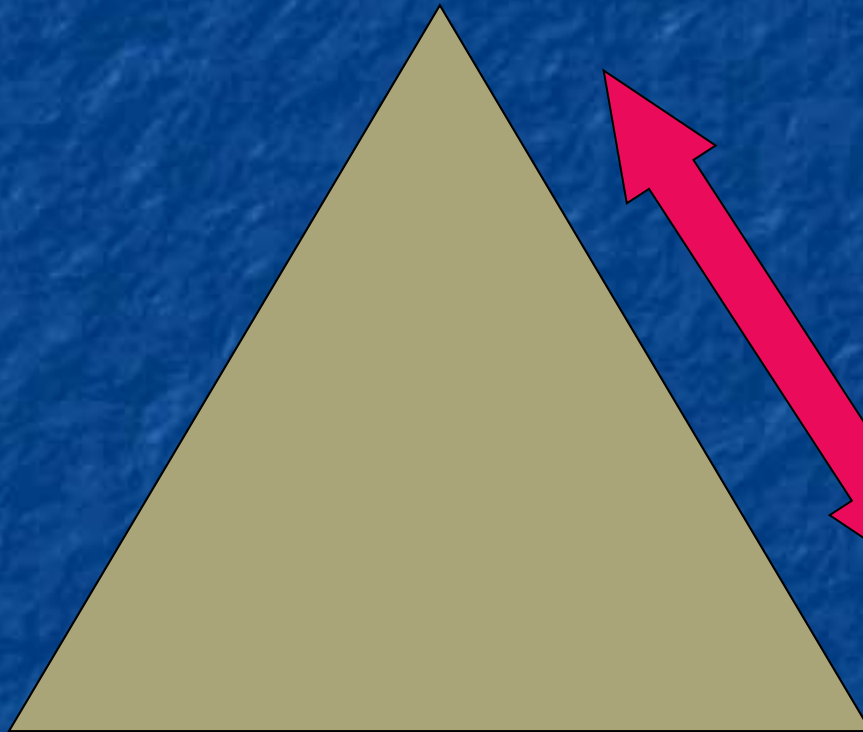
child



mother

father

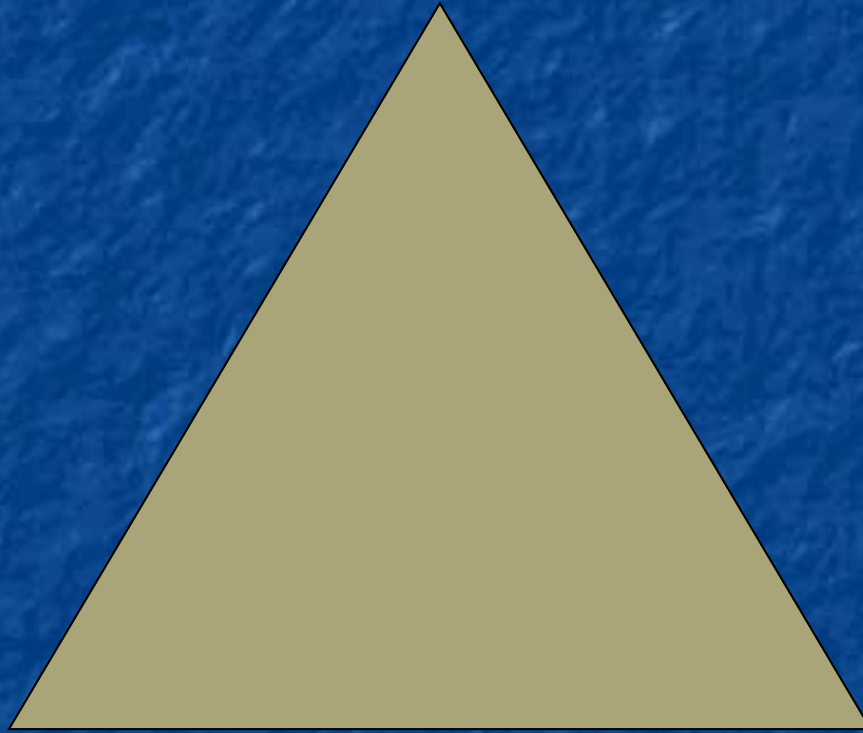
child



mother

father

child

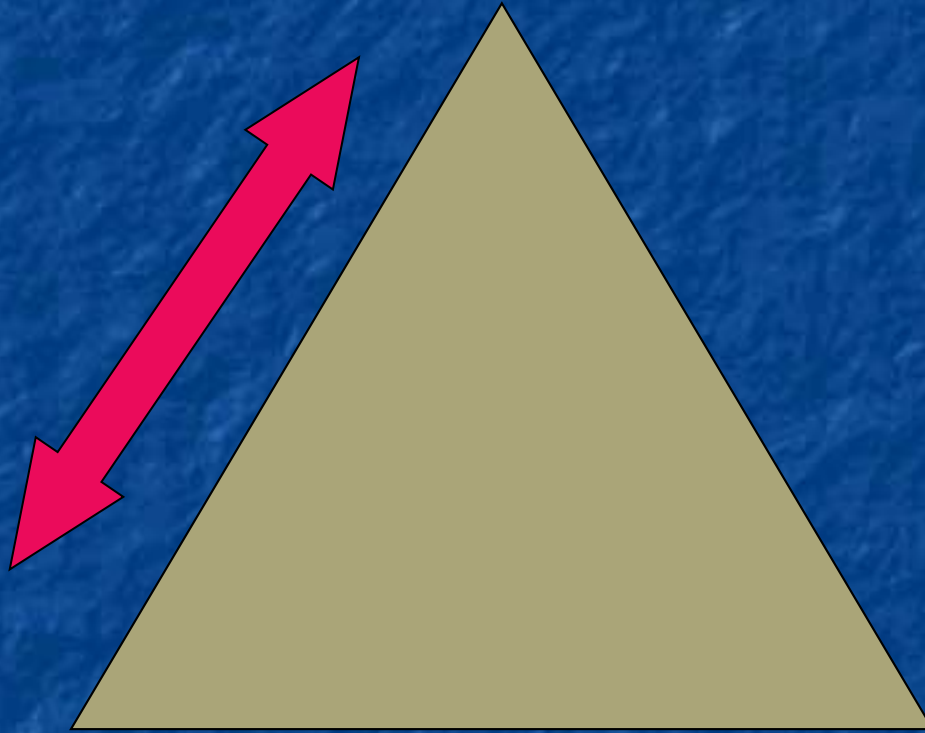


mother



father

child

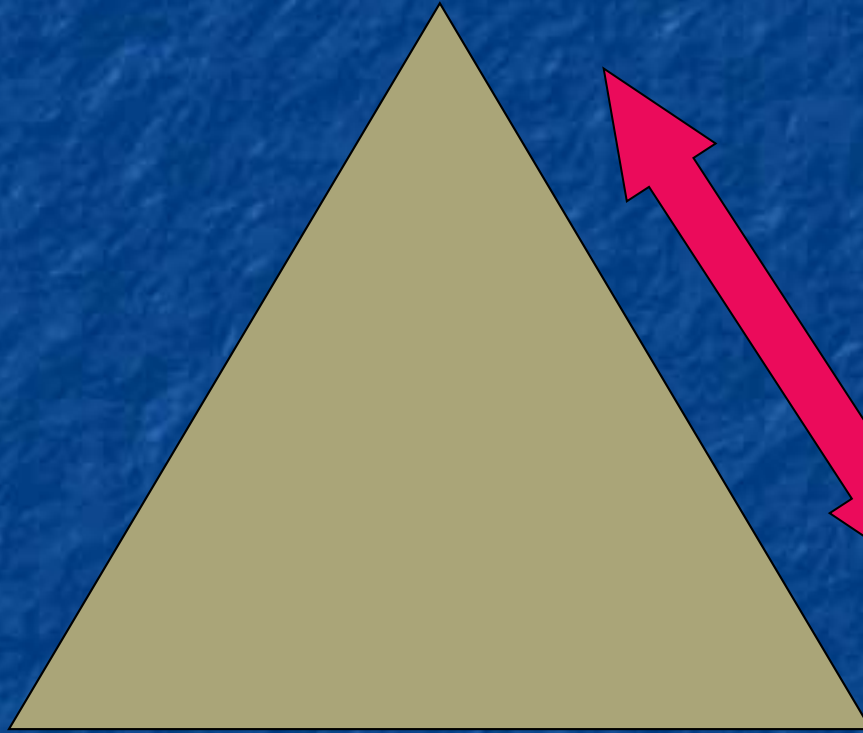


mother

father



child



mother

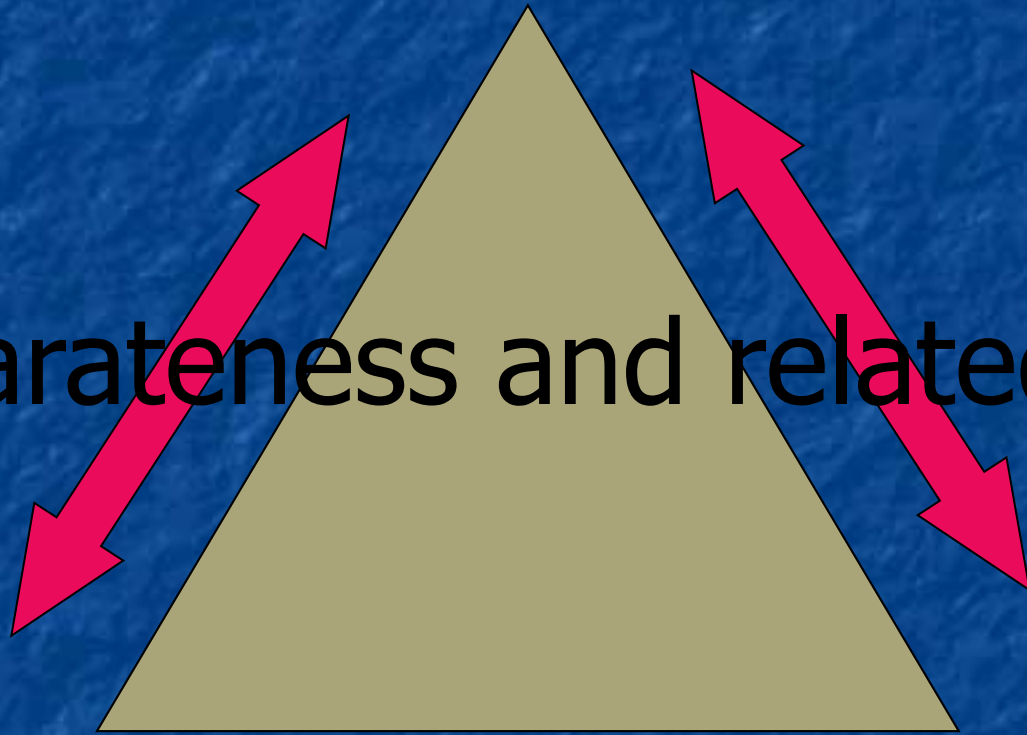
father

child

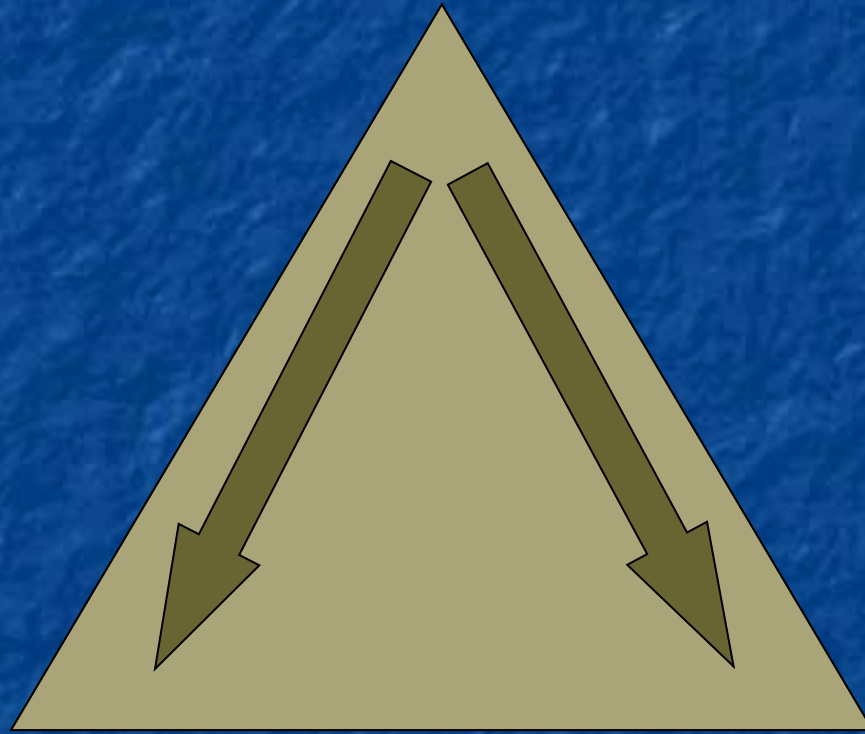
separateness and relatedness

mother

father



therapist



partner A

partner B

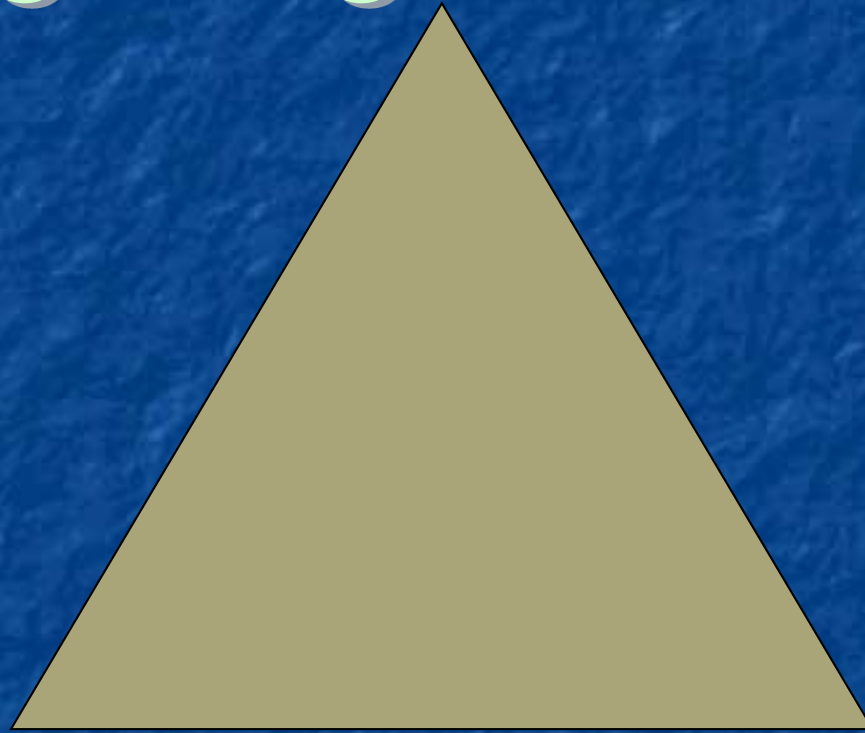
'Therapy involves helping people to see. Side by side with the desire for knowledge there is resistance to knowledge. Getting to know inevitably brings the individual into contact with objects that arouse displeasure' (Thorner, 1981: 75)

Every member of the audience watching the play recoils in horror, and perhaps recoils from recognising how much the story of Oedipus is, in certain respects at least, also his or hers

‘Human beings have an urge to love, to hate, to know, and a desire to be loved, a fear of being hated, and a wish to be understood.’

(Britton 1998: 11)

getting to know



therapist

client

getting to know



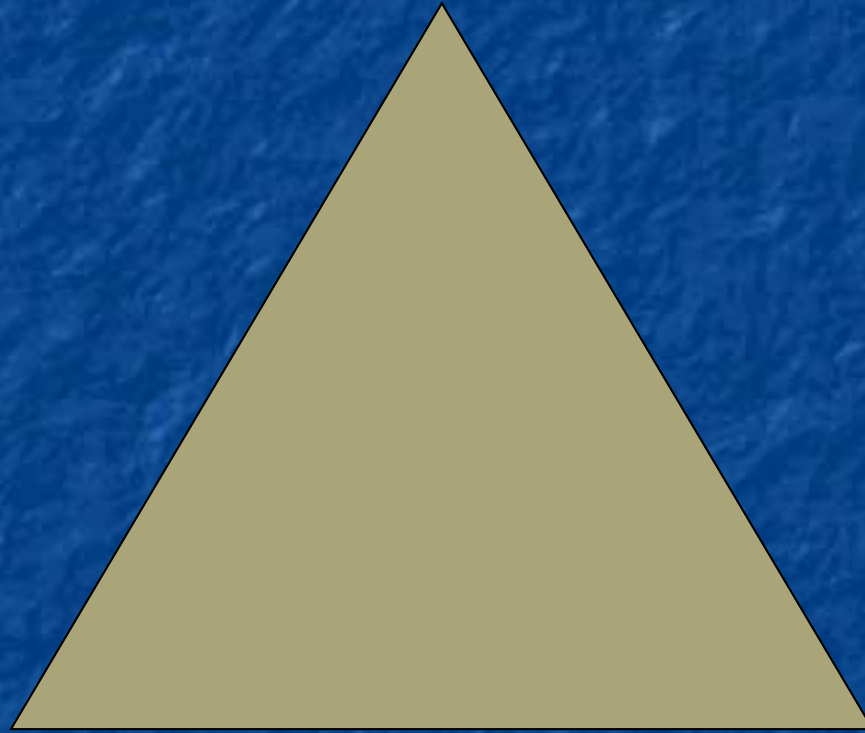
**resistance**

therapist

client



supervisor



supervisee

client

An opportunity to discuss  
these different examples  
of triangular dynamics  
from your own experience  
of working with past and  
current clients

'My strength has been in suffering, not doing — as you should hear, could I but tell it; could tell all that my father and my mother did — whence comes, I know your fear. Was I the sinner? Repaying wrong for wrong — that was no sin, even were it wittingly done, as it was not. I did not know the way I went. They knew; they who devised this trap for me, they knew!'





'Oedipus' is alive ... and well?