### 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 Laïus 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]

#### Form groups of four or five.

Start by sharing your feelings – not just your thoughts – as you watched the play. Does the play have 'riveting power' for you, as Freud believed it did for many in the audience. If so, what *is* its riveting power?

Did you identify with Oedipus or Jocasta? In what sense might 'everyone [be] an Oedipus', as Freud thought?

The play is not only about incest. What else struck you as important?

From your reactions and this discussion with others in your group, what themes are relevant to you as a therapist? It is easy to feel guilty oneself for actions that were not intentional. How is it possible to help people with this? It is not sufficient to say 'It was not your fault' It is very difficult to face the truth about oneself. The first reaction is to deny it. How can we approach what we see seems to be true about someone when we know that they are going to be very self-defensive? Turning a blind eye may sometimes be necessary, but at other times will lead to something worse. Solving the riddle of the Sphinx appears to benefit Oedipus, bringing him a wife and kingship. Solving the second shows him how even solving the first and certainly the second has actually brought him pain. Solving riddles can mean pain as well as benefit. We need to be careful about thinking that our experiences must be the same as other people's.

## It is dangerous to generalise from the particular

We have to be careful that we think we have found the answers, whether it is the answer to a single client's issues, or whether it is thinking that the modality we practise has the answers. It is very difficult and sometimes impossible to escape fate – that is, the natural, societal and economic forces outside us, as well as those closer to home, such as the whims and foibles of other people, and even more intimately the nature of our physical body. '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 Laïus' (Freud, 1900: 261). It's about being a therapist and the need to heal oneself. It's about knowledge, and about the consequences of not knowing. We think it is clear by now that children are trapped in oedipal triangles by their parents. Both the father-daughter-mother and the mother-son-father repeat the original oedipal constellations of the father and the mother.

#### 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



### 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).





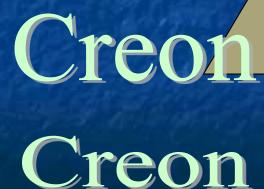




## Polybus/ Merope

Laius/

Jocasta



Jocasta kingship



# mother



### frustrating mother



### satisfying mother







## returning father





#### returning father





#### husband's interest wife's baby





### partner B's new interest





## partner B changes





#### woman as lover (mistress)

Alex splits two aspects of woman



Sarah as parent/wife

#### Alex's internalised image of his father





### Gina & Ben's internalised parental relationships





### Andrew's mother





the value of different personal strengths

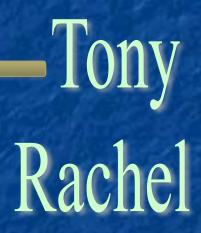
#### very similar needs

Florence

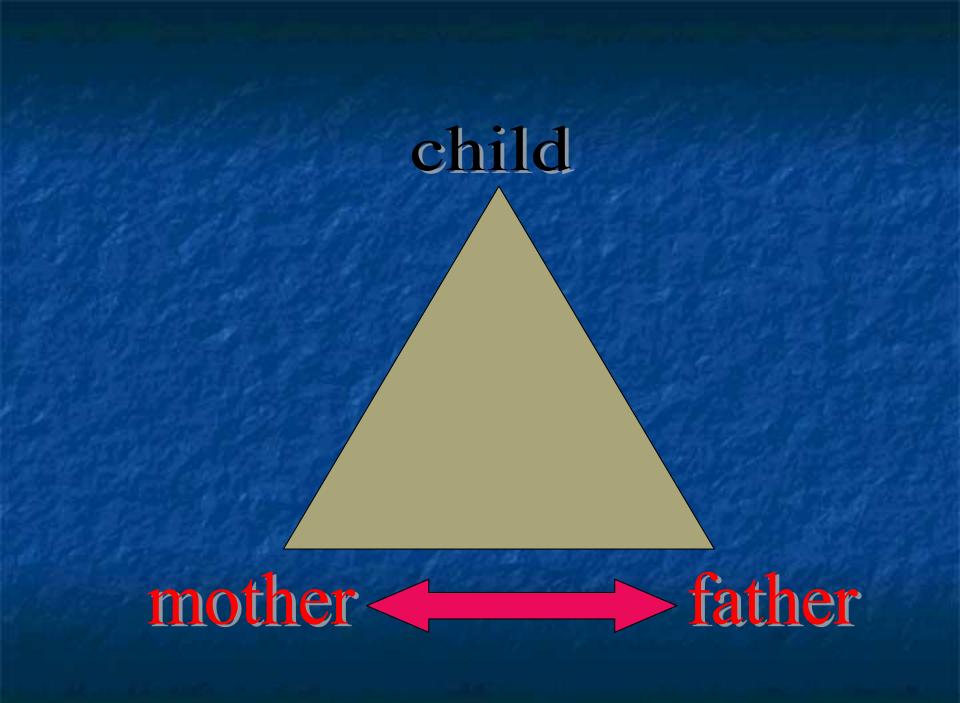
Tony

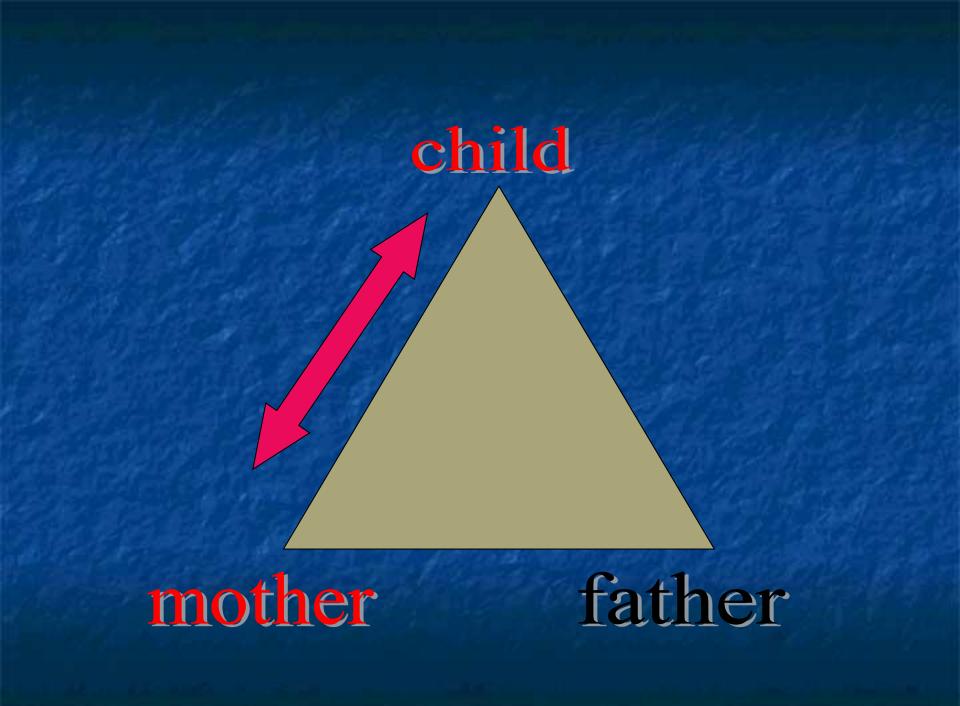
# Florence

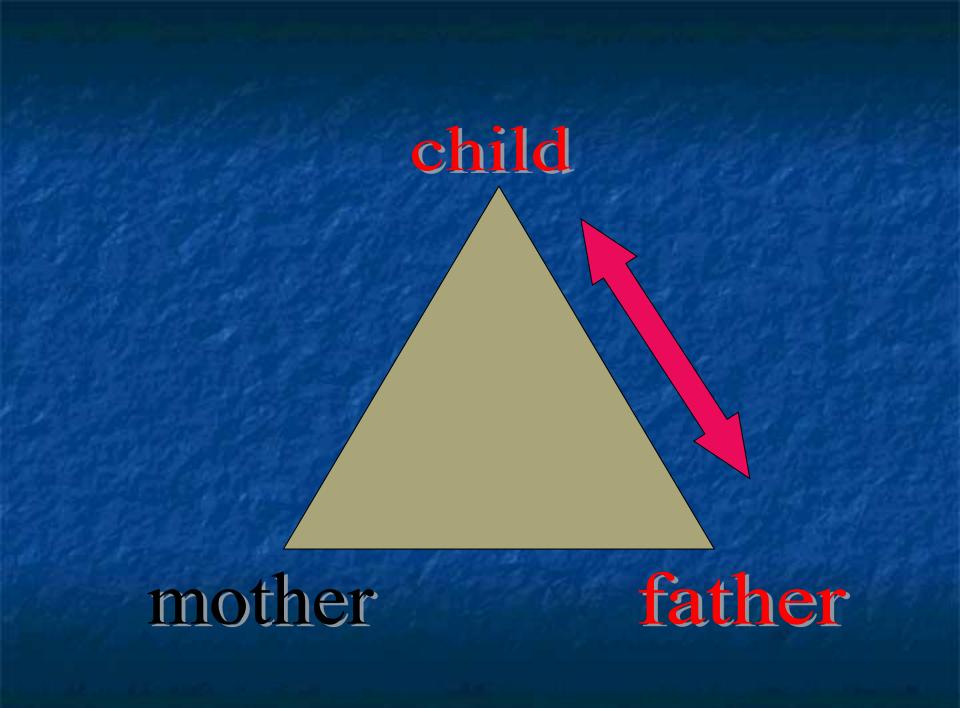
Tom

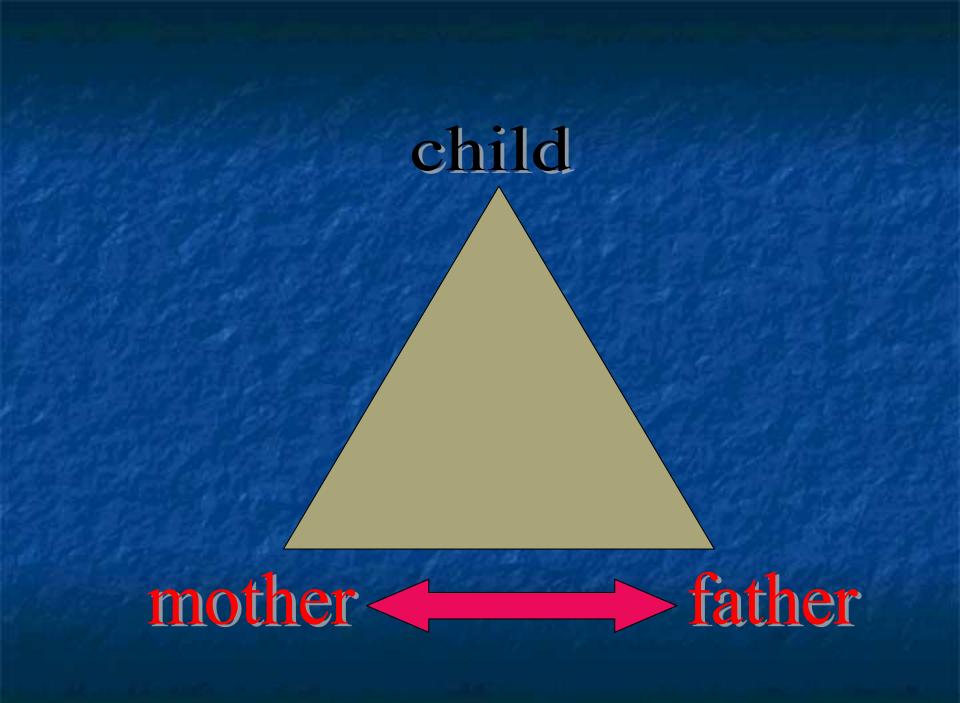


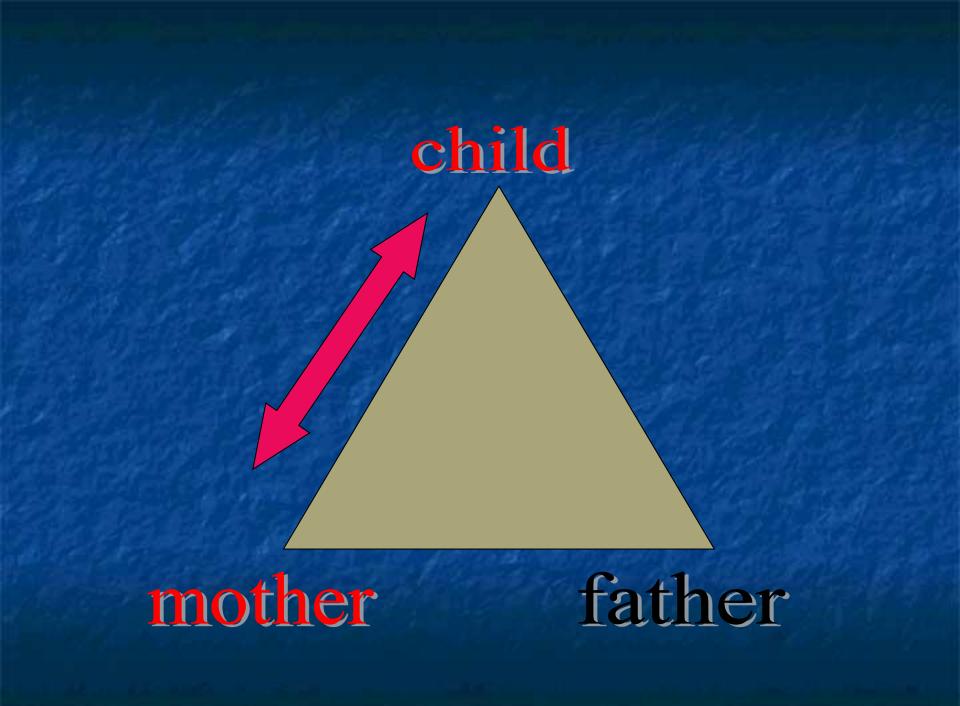
It's inherently rigid. That's a very special property to have ... This is why you see triangles all over the places in the world around you. In electricity pylons, cranes, bridges and many houses.

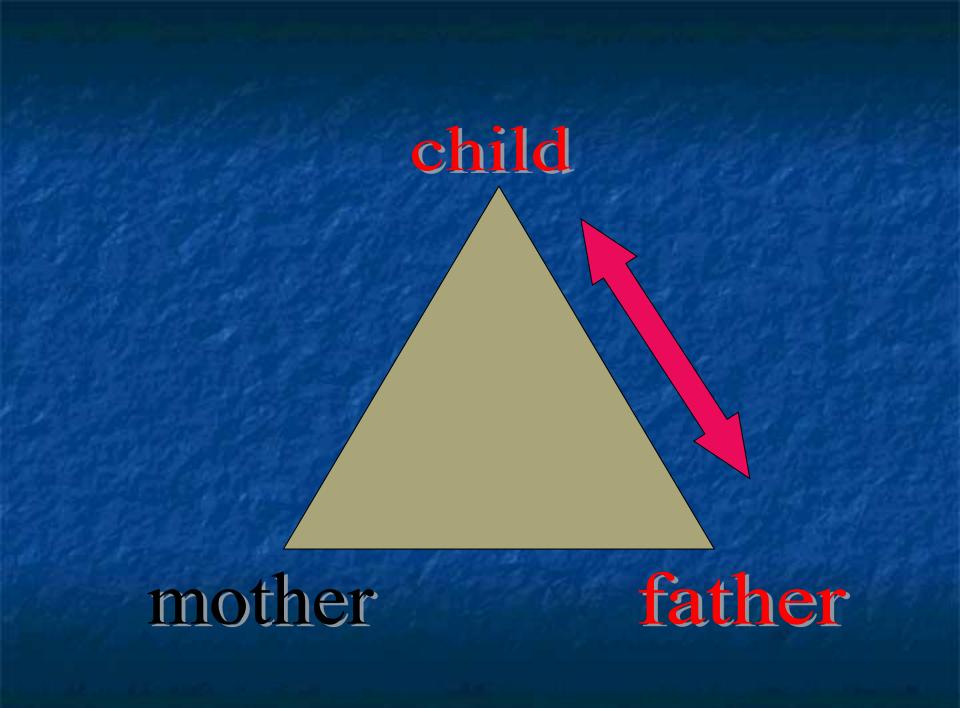


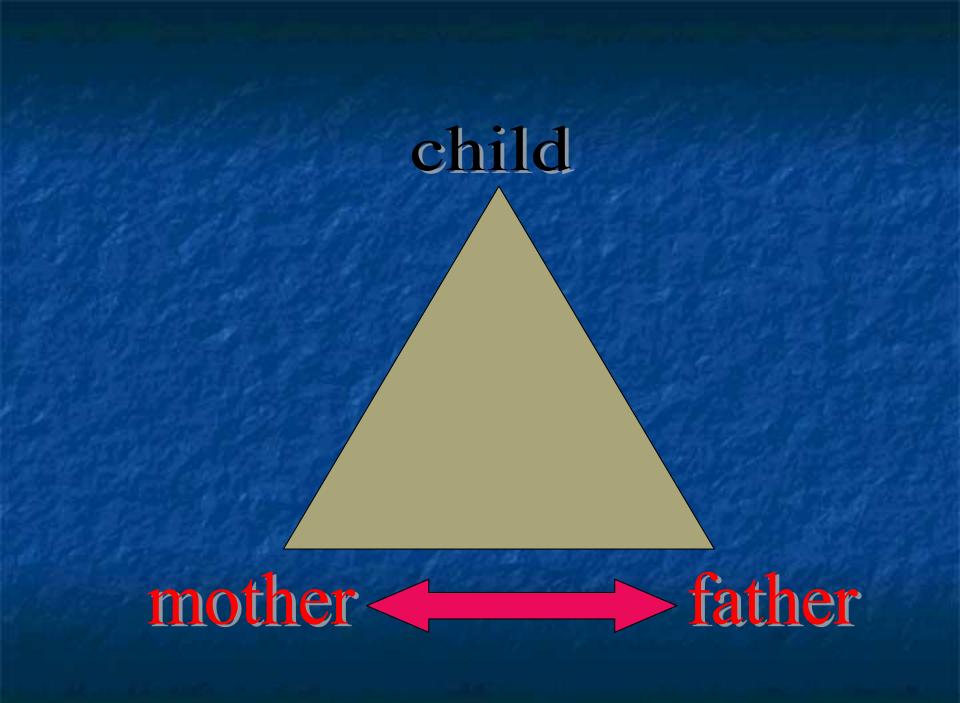


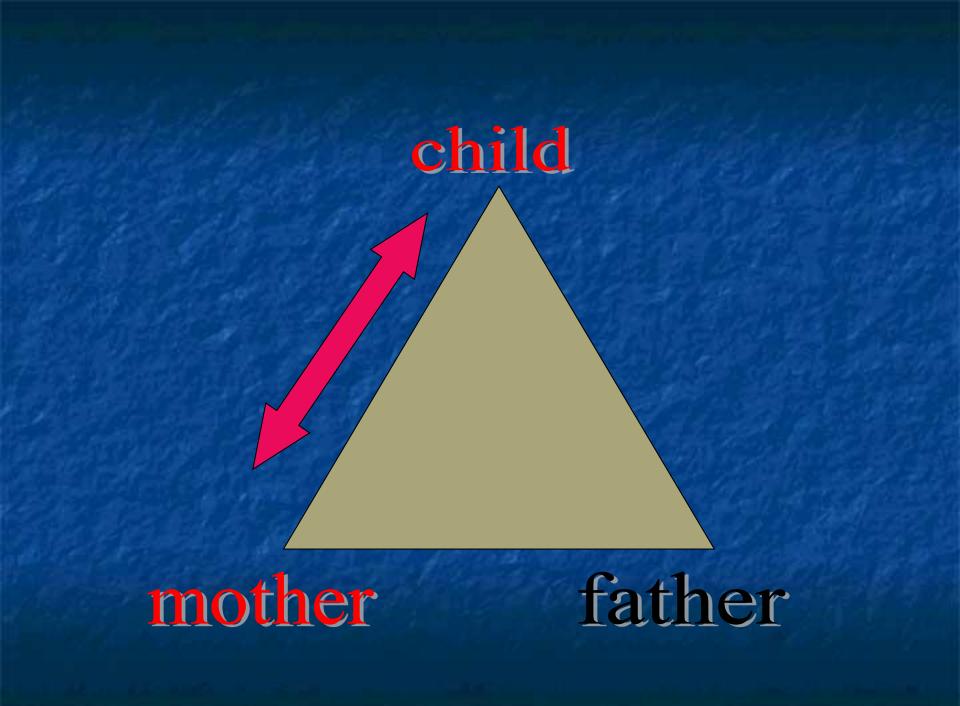


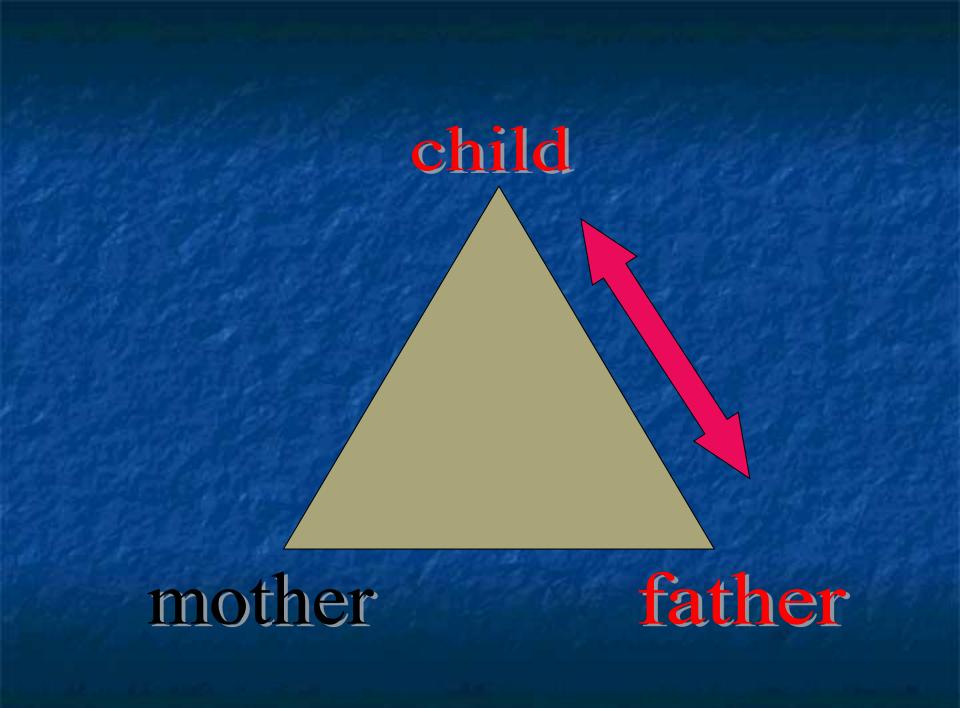












child

### separateness and relatedness



### therapist





'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 styory 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



### getting to know

#### resistance

## therapist



### supervisor





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!'

Yes, with justice. You shall hear. He whom I killed had sought to kill me first. The law acquits me, innocent, as ignorant of what I did.

# 'Oedipus' is alive ... and well?