

The Theory of Complexes



Alchemical plate from Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, 1618

The theory of complexes is not only the first of Jung's theories, it underlies almost all of Analytical Psychology.

- His references to demons and the father and mother complexes can be seen as a forerunner of the theory of archetypes.
- The work in therapy, discussion of upsetting emotional experiences, past history, can be the discussion of complexes.
- Dreams have been called the royal road to the unconscious, but complexes are the maker of dreams.
- Complexes and the formation of complexes play a central role in Jungian theories of development and attachment. (see Țânculescu-Popa 2025)
- Complex Theory has also been applied to cultural groups (see further this paper)

In the years from 1896 to 1898, while still at university in Basle, Jung attended séances given by his cousin. He was not interested in the spiritualistic aspect of these sessions, but was researching dissociation. He was one of several psychologists doing similar research at this time. Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot (France), Frederic Myers (England), William James (USA), and Theodor Flournoy (Geneva), are several psychologists/psychiatrists who were working with similar cases of spiritualism and mediums. This was not an esoteric investigation of spirits, but psychological research into the appearance of different personalities during somnambulistic/dissociated states.

On Jung's return to Zurich, under the guidance of Eugene Bleuler, he and associates reviewed earlier work done by Sir Frances Galton in England recording memories associated with selected words and research of Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig recording the timing of these responses. These he integrated with recollections of the subject around these words.

Jung's definition of a "feeling-toned complex" which came out of this research is "the *image* of a certain psychic situation" hence memories of similar situations, "which is strongly accentuated emotionally" therefore elicited by a specific emotion, "and is moreover, incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness." (Jung 1934/1948, §201) It consists of all of the memories linked physically by a specific emotion. It acts like a dissociated sliver personality.

The theory of complexes comes from this first basic interest in dissociation as a natural and normal process of psychic functioning. Although in some extreme cases they may lead to the clinical dissociation of multiple personality (Noll 1989) they are recognizable in normal phenomenon; they "slip the wrong word into one's mouth, they make one forget the name of the person one is about to introduce, they cause a tickle in the throat just when the softest passage is being played on the piano at a concert, ..." (Jung 1934/1948, §202)

Complexes are what he called "splinter psyches" resulting from either an emotional shock or repeated developmental trauma leading to the formation of a partial identity, separated from the central ego personality.

It was in a speech given in England at a conference entitled Instinct and the Unconscious in 1919 that Jung first used the term 'archetype', linking it with instinctive and repetitive acts (complexes). He gives the cause of the affect as instinct and relates this to the instinctive nature of the archetype. (Jung 1919)

In "On Psychic Energy", written 1912 but put aside until it was first published in 1928, Jung gives a definition of the complex keeping very closely to the one he used when working with the WAE: "The feeling-toned content, the complex, consists of a nuclear element and a large number of secondarily constellated associations. ... The nuclear element is characterized by its feeling-tone, the emphasis resulting from the intensity of affect." (Jung 1928 §18-19)

Jung maintained this same, simple definition of the complex throughout his work. In the short introduction to Jacobi's book *Complex/Archetype/Symbol* (1959) he wrote: "It is not difficult to see that while complexes owe their relative autonomy to their emotional nature, their expression is always dependent on a network of associations grouped round a center charged with affect." (Jung 1959 §1257)

Complexes are usually considered negative, but this is not how Jung conceived them. In fact, complexes pull (even yank) us out of our old, normal ego functioning. This could force us to look again at our, perhaps limited, usual ways of reacting, leading to new psychic growth. Working on and accepting one's own complexes can lead to compassion for others suffering from complexes, even, perhaps, their inability to face the pain that they have projected onto you, their son, daughter, or victim.

Development of the Theory after Jung

Complex theory is so central to Analytical Psychology that many authors have contributed to and reinterpreted it. It is impossible to mention them all. To note only a few:

Jolanda Jacobi gives an introduction to complexes based on Jung's 1925 Seminar.

Anthony Stevens elaborates the structure of the psyche showing the relation of consciousness, the personal and the collective unconscious and positioning the ego – self relationship and the archetypal link to the complexes (Stevens 1990 p. 29).

Verena Kast identifies the complex-landscape which varies with life situations (Kast 1990/1992, p. 33-48).

C.A. Meier compared the repeated work of integrating the “shell” of the complex (the repeated constellations and memories) to the peeling of the successive layers of an onion until you get to the archetypal core (Meier 1984: 177).

Donald Kalsched's work on trauma reawakened interest in the complex as dissociation.

Jean Knox's book *Archetype, Attachment, Analysis* (2003) stands in a central point between the classical definition of the complex as memories/expectations around a specific archetypal emotion and Jung's original emphasis on the dissociative nature of the human mind.

John Weir Perry (1970) built on the original theory, noticing that complexes often constellate in pairs, one, positive, which aligns with the ego position while projecting a usual negative image onto the other person.

Thomas Singer and Samuel L. Kimbles (2004) build on Perry's idea of the “affect-ego” and the “affect-object” and applied it to groups. Analogous to the personal complex, the cultural complex is based on intense collective emotion. The memories include historical facts, but may also contain cultural myth and shared values. This is not only a late development of Jung's original theories, he himself laid the basis for the theory of the cultural complex in his 1925 Seminar (Jung 1989/2012), the image of archetypal energy linking individuals, families, clans, down to our animal ancestors (lecture 16, diagram 9, page 143). The Wotan paper is often referenced when this topic is discussed (Jung, 1936). I would also include another paper from 1936 paper “Psychology and National Problems” (Jung, 1936), which is only rarely cited.

Summary

The ego-complex is a group or set of mild complexes which are experienced regularly (Krieger 2014 chapter 9). This accords with Jung's theories of the ego forming “like a chain of islands or an archipelago” (Jung 1946/1954 §387). Complexes are dissociated sub-personalities which have broken off or were never part of the ego-complex. They vary in the distance they are from the ego, their emotional charge, and the amount to which they are unacceptable. The individual complexes within the ego-complex can be activated, for example stimulating memories. Or something happened and a strong emotion was evoked, positively, for example when you see an old friend you have not seen in years and positive, long-lost memories flood over you. But negative emotions can also be evoked, for example when you are violently shoved by a stranger and are flooded with anger. Both are the result of complexes in the psyche and the body potentially causing a dissociated reaction. It is important for us, working as practitioners, to recognize that these are normal reactions, although possibly maladaptive. They can be worked on by the telling of the stories and accepting the emotion.

Bibliography

- Dieckmann, Hans (1991/1999). *Complexes: Diagnosis and therapy in analytical psychology*. Originally published in 1991 as *Komplexe: Diagnostik und Therapie in der analytischen Psychologie* (1991). Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications
- Jung, C.G. (1902). "On the psychology and pathology of so-called occult phenomena". *Psychiatric studies* (Read, Sir Herbert, Michael Fordham and Gerjard Adler, editors. R. F. C. Hull, translator. (1957)). CW 1: 3-263. London: Routledge.
- Jung, C.G. (1904). "The associations of normal subjects", *Experimental researches*, CW 2, 3-196.
- Jung, C.G. (1919). "Instinct and the unconscious", *The structure and dynamics of the psyche*, CW 8, 129-38.
- Jung, C.G. (1921/1971). *Psychological types*, CW 6, London: Routledge.
- Jung, C.G. (1928). "On Psychic Energy", *The structure and dynamics of the psyche* CW8: p. 3-66
- Jung, C.G. (1934/1948). "A review of the complex theory". *The structure and dynamics of the psyche* (Read, Sir Herbert, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler and William McGuire, editors. R. F. C. Hull, translator. (1960/1969)) CW 8: 92-105. The Bollingen Foundation. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C.G. (1936). "Psychology and National Problems", CW18 566-581.
- Jung, C.G. (1946/1954). "On the nature of the psyche", *The structure and dynamics of the psyche*, CW 8, 159-234.
- Jung, C.G. (1959). "Forward to Jacobi: 'Complex/Archetype/Symbol'" *The Symbolic Life*, CW18: p. 532-533.
- Jung, C.G. (1989/2012). *Introduction to Jungian Psychology: Notes of the Seminar on Analytical Psychology Given in 1925 by C.G. Jung*, Philemon Series, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press Kalsched, Donald E. (1996). *The inner world of trauma: archetypal defenses of the personal spirit*. London: Routledge.
- Kast, Verena (1990/1992). *The dynamics of symbols: fundamentals of Jungian psychotherapy*, Originally published as *Die dynamic der symbole* (trans. Susan A. Schwarz), New York: Fromm International Publishing Corp.
- Knox, Jean (2003). *Archetype, attachment, analysis : Jungian psychology and the emergent mind*. London and New York: Routledge.

Krieger, Nancy M. (2014). *Bridges to Consciousness: Complexes and Complexity*, London: Routledge.

Krieger, Nancy M. (2019). "A dynamic systems approach to the feeling-toned complex", *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 64(5): 738-760.

Meier C. A. (1968). *Die Empirie des Unbewussten*, Zürich und Stuttgart, Rascher Verlag.

Meier C. A. (1984). *The unconscious in its empirical manifestations*. Volume one of *The psychology of C. G. Jung*. Boston, Sigo Press.

Noll, R. (1989). "Multiple Personality, Dissociation, and C. G. Jung's Complex Theory", *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. 34: 353-370.

Perry, John Weir (1970). "Emotions and object relations", *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 15(1): 1-12.

Singer, Thomas and Samuel L. Kimbles (2004). Editors. *The Cultural Complex: Contemporary Jungian Perspectives on Psyche and Society*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Stevens, Anthony (1990). *On Jung*. London: Penguin Books (first published by Routledge).

Țânculescu-Popa, Lavinia (2025). "Exploring the Attachment Complex: Teleological Perspectives on Longing and Loss", https://mcusercontent.com/733a6a9e0ca06919403956a5c/files/9297ec89-ad98-2ade-7cd1-715a8b06def7/An_Attachment_Complex_LTP_SW_Ed.pdf, downloaded 27/04/2025



Nancy Krieger is a training and supervising analyst with ISAP, Zurich. She has a PhD from the Study of Psychoanalytic Studies, the University of Essex. Author of *Bridges to Consciousness: Complexes and Complexity*, and various articles on complex theory. She teaches regularly at ISAP.