

## Otto Rank (1884–1939)

Otto Rank studied how birth impacts individuals' psychology and creates anxiety throughout their lives in Europe and the US during the nineteenth century. In his book *The Trauma of Birth*, Rank stated that birth was extremely traumatic and that one spent his or her whole life trying to recover from the experience of being born and harshly separated from the peaceful womb. He argued that the trauma experienced at birth is the source of all human suffering and the key to understanding anxiety later in life. He stated that the experience of birth was one's earliest experience of anxiety, which served as the blueprint for all other anxiety related experiences in life. Through his work, Rank prompted studies in developmental embryology analyzing early mother-child relationships and problems in early psychological development.

Rank was born on 22 April 1884 in Vienna, Austria, to Karoline Fleischner and Simon Rosenfeld. According to psychiatry researcher James Lieberman, Rank adopted the last name Rank during his adolescence and officially changed it later in adulthood as a symbol of self-creation. Rank had one older brother whom his parents supported financially throughout his higher education, while Rank received less financial support from his family. When Rank was young, he worked as a locksmith and in a machine shop and engaged in hobbies including writing poetry and reading philosophy and literature. According to scholar Margaret Alic, in 1904, at the age of twenty, Rank experienced suicidal depression, which he overcame through a self-proclaimed spiritual rebirth.

In 1905, Rank began his education and professional career as a student of Sigmund Freud, who studied psychoanalysis and the human mind in the nineteenth century in Vienna. Freud's work began the psychoanalytic movement, which was popular among scientists during Rank's lifetime. During the early 1900s, psychoanalysis was used to treat mental disorders through the analysis of conscious and unconscious mental states. From Freud, Rank learned psychoanalytic methods focused on the unconscious or the subconscious, which include mental states that an individual may hold without being aware. According to Freud, one's thoughts, feelings, desires, and all other mental states of the unconscious continuously influence one's conscious actions and emotions. Freud stated that a mentally ill patient must become aware of his unconscious thoughts and confront them to become cured. Treatment involved in-depth discussions with patients to encourage confrontation of the repressed emotions of the unconscious. Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis were not generally accepted until 1908, but spread rapidly in 1909 with continuing acceptance until his death.

Rank met Freud after Freud read Rank's essay that connected Freud's theory of dreams to the way that artists create. Upon reading his essay, Freud hired Rank as the secretary of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, the first psychoanalytic society in the world. Rank quickly became a member of Freud's inner circle of psychoanalysts called the Committee of Seven, a committee of six men selected by Freud to uphold his psychoanalytic theories and teach them to others. During his time with the Society and the Committee, Rank also worked on his dissertation, *The Lohengrin Legend*, which was one of the first dissertations on psychoanalysis. It was a psychoanalytic study on the Arthurian knight from Lohengrin, the Romantic opera written by Richard Wagner.

Around that time, Rank officially changed his pen name to Otto Rank, and in 1909, he published *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, in which he discussed psychoanalytical interpretations of common literary themes in myths. Mainly, he explored the influence of the Oedipus complex in common mythological themes. The Oedipus complex was a theory of Freud's that stated that individuals have a sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and a rivalry with the parent of the same sex. Throughout the book, Rank analyzed how the concept of the Oedipus complex and other concepts could be applied to further understand human psychology. In 1911, Rank published his dissertation

The Lohengrin Legend and earned his PhD in philosophy from the University of Vienna in Vienna, Austria, in 1912. In that same year, Rank published another work, "The Incest Motif in Poetry and Saga," which detailed similar ideas discussed in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*.

Several years later, in 1918, Rank served in the Austrian army during World War I as editor of a newspaper. He was located in Poland, where he married Beata Mincer in that same year and had his first and only daughter the following year. Mincer worked with Freud's inner circle and became a psychoanalyst herself. After the war ended, Rank moved in with Freud and helped edit his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, while also co-editing the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society's journals beginning in 1919.

In 1924, Rank published *The Trauma of Birth*, in which he argued that the source of anxiety throughout all of life stems from the psychological trauma that one experiences during birth. *The Trauma of Birth* was an extension of Freud's idea that birth is the first experience of anxiety and therefore is the source and basis of anxiety. Throughout the book, Rank argued that birth is the ultimate biological basis of life and that the physical experience of passing from a state of contentedness and union with the mother in the womb to an environment of harsh separation creates a trauma that causes lasting anxiety. Relating feelings experienced during birth to feelings associated with anxiety, Rank argued that birth is the source of all anxiety by drawing parallels between the feelings of confusion, constriction, and confinement experienced during birth and during other anxiety-related experiences.

Rank claimed that his ideas in *The Trauma of Birth* stemmed from his clinical evaluations of patients who experienced a fantasy of a second birth during psychoanalytic treatment and became free from birth trauma in doing so. Rank argued that in their fantasies of second birth, patients biologically re-experienced their intrauterine lifespans and later described the experience to a psychoanalyst during their therapy sessions. According to Rank, by sharing the experience of intrauterine life with an analyst in detail, patients identified analysts with their mothers, and created unconscious relations between patient and analyst reflective of those between pregnant woman and child. Rank explained that through treatment, patients re-experienced birth through a fantastical second birth, understood the trauma, and became cured through transference, a psychoanalytic process that refers to the redirection of desires and feelings towards a new thing. Through transference, patients redirected the unconscious feelings associated with the mother and the trauma of birth to the analyst and therefore became free of them. After understanding the trauma of birth through re-experiencing it, patients recovered from and no longer experienced the anxiety originally caused by the traumatic experience of birth.

Rank offered the dedication of his book *The Trauma of Birth* to Freud in 1923, though he rejected the importance of Freud's Oedipus complex in causing anxiety. According to Menaker, Rank was the first to shift the focus of psychoanalysis from the Oedipus complex to something else, specifically shifting the cause of anxiety from the father to the mother. Nonetheless, Freud did not state an opinion of the book at the time of its publication in 1924. In the meantime, Rank went to North America to further share his concepts with the American Psychoanalysis Association. Freud's initial quietness on Rank's work caused conflict within the Society, but in his publication of 1926, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud condemned Rank's ideas, and he argued that the trauma of birth was not an adequate means of explaining anxiety. Rank was further denounced by Freud when Freud said that the fetus is not aware of its own existence and that it could not have the sensory impressions during birth that would allow it to recall the trauma later in life. Freud refuted Rank's idea of a harsh separation between life in the womb and being born into the world and argued that there is continuity between inter-uterine life and childhood.

In 1926, Rank was removed from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Rank continued to teach his concepts in the US and Europe, primarily in Paris, for ten years. During that time, he wrote many works on developmental psychology, education, and therapy. In later years, he wrote about consciousness, will, self-creation, and action-based psychoanalytic therapeutic methods. In 1932, Rank published *Art and Artist*, in which he explored human creativity. Throughout the book, he used his knowledge of psychoanalysis to discuss humans' urge to create and how creativity and art fit within the context of society. In 1934, Rank and his wife separated. A year later, in 1935, Rank emigrated to the US during the rise of Nazi Germany and became a teacher at the Pennsylvania School of

Social Work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he taught until his death.

The work Rank did throughout his life sparked further research about early mother-child relationships and early developmental psychology. Although highly debated, his research was addressed by psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion in 1977. Utilizing Rank's idea of discontinuity between intrauterine life and life after birth, Bion used the experience of birth as a model for describing other experiences of discontinuity throughout a child's early relationship development. In 1981, psychoanalyst Frances Tustin also applied Rank's work in describing premature psychological birth in autistic children. Rank's research on the trauma associated with birth encouraged further studies into the significance of early psychological problems and the earliest aspects of the relationship between mother and child.

Three months before dying, Rank married Estelle Buel, his secretary. Rank died in New York City, New York, on 31 October 1939 from a reaction to a drug he was given for a kidney infection.

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