

The Cycle Completed: Mothers and Children

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Families create children gendered, heterosexual, and ready to marry. But families organized around women's mothering and male dominance create incompatibilities in women's and men's relational needs. In particular, relationships to men are unlikely to provide for women satisfaction of the relational needs that their mothering by women and the social organization of gender have produced. The less men participate in the domestic sphere, and especially in parenting, the more this will be the case.

Women try to fulfill their need to be loved, try to complete the relational triangle, and try to reexperience the sense of dual unity they had with their mother, which the heterosexual relationship tends to fulfill for men. This situation daily reinforces what women first experienced developmentally and intrapsychically in relation to men. While they are likely to become and remain erotically heterosexual, they are encouraged both by men's difficulties with love and by their own relational history with their mothers to look elsewhere for love and emotional gratification.

One way that women fulfill these needs is through the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women. Cross-culturally, segregation by gender is the rule: women tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men have, and to spend more time in the company of women than they do with men. In our society, there is some sociological evidence that women's friendships are affectively richer than men's.¹ In other societies, and in most subcultures of our own, women remain involved with female relatives in adulthood.² Deutsch suggests further that adult female relationships sometimes express a woman's psychological participation in the relational triangle. Some women, she suggests, always need a woman rival in their relationship to a man; others need a

best friend with whom they share all confidences about their heterosexual relationships. These relationships are one way of resolving and recreating the mother–daughter bond and are an expression of women’s general relational capacities and definition of self in relationship.

However, deep affective relationships to women are hard to come by on a routine, daily, ongoing basis for many women. Lesbian relationships do tend to recreate mother–daughter emotions and connections,³ but most women are heterosexual. This heterosexual preference and taboos against homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely – though more prevalent in recent years. In an earlier period, women tended to remain physically close to their own mother and sisters after marriage, and could find relationships with other women in their daily work and community. The development of industrial capitalism however – and the increasingly physically isolated nuclear family it has produced – has made these primary relationships more rare and has turned women (and men) increasingly and exclusively to conjugal family relationships for emotional support and love.⁴

There is a second alternative, made all the more significant by the elimination of the first, which also builds both upon the nature of women’s self-definition in a heterosexual relationship and upon the primary mother–child bond. As Deutsch makes clear, women’s psyche consists in a layering of relational constellations. The preoedipal mother–child relation and the oedipal triangle have lasted until late in a woman’s childhood, in fact throughout her development. To the extent that relations with a man gain significance for a woman, this experience is incomplete. Given the triangular situation and emotional asymmetry of her own parenting, a woman’s relation to a man *requires* on the level of psychic structure a third person, since it was originally established in a triangle. A man’s relation to women does not. His relation to his mother was originally established first as an identity, then as a dual unity, then as a two-person relationship, before his father ever entered the picture.

On the level of psychic structure, then, a child completes the relational triangle for a woman. Having a child, and experiencing her relation to a man in this context, enables her to reimpose intrapsychic relational structure on the social world, while at the same time resolving the generational component of her oedipus complex as she takes a new place in the triangle – a maternal place in relation to her own child.

The mother–child relationship also recreates an even more basic relational constellation. The exclusive symbiotic mother–child relationship of a mother’s own infancy reappears, a relationship which all people who have been mothered want basically to recreate. This contrasts to the situation of a man. A man often wants a child through his role-based, positional identification with his father, or his primary or personal identification with his mother. Similarly, a woman has been involved in relational identification processes with her mother, which include identifying with a mother who has come to stand to both sexes as someone with

unique capacities for mothering. Yet on a less conscious, object-relational level, having a child recreates the desired mother–child exclusivity for a woman and interrupts it for a man, just as the man’s father intruded into his relation to his mother. Accordingly, as Benedek, Zilboorg, and Bakan suggest, men often feel extremely jealous toward children.⁵ These differences hold also on the level of sexual and biological fantasy and symbolism. A woman, as I have suggested, cannot return to the mother in coitus as directly as can a man. Symbolically her identification with the man can help. However, a much more straightforward symbolic return occurs through her identification with the child who is in her womb: ‘Ferenczi’s “maternal regression” is realized for the woman in equating coitus with the situation of sucking. The last act of this regression (return into the uterus) which the man accomplishes by the act of introjection in coitus, is realized by the woman in pregnancy in the complete identification between mother and child.’⁶

For all these reasons, it seems psychologically logical to a woman to turn her marriage into a family, and to be more involved with these children (this child) than her husband. By doing so, she recreates for herself the exclusive intense primary unit which a heterosexual relationship tends to recreate for men. She recreates also her internalized asymmetrical relational triangle. These relational issues and needs predate and underlie her identifications, and come out of normal family structure regardless of explicit role training. Usually, however, this training intensifies their effects. In mothering, a woman acts also on her personal identification with a mother who parents and her own training for women’s role.

This account indicates a larger structural issue regarding the way in which a woman’s relation to her children recreates the psychic situation of the relationship to her mother. This relationship is recreated on two levels: most deeply and unconsciously, that of the primary mother–infant tie; and upon this, the relationship of the bisexual triangle. Because the primary mother–infant unit is exclusive, and because oscillation in the bisexual triangle includes a constant pull back to the mother attachment, there may be a psychological contradiction for a woman between interest in and commitment to children and that to men. Insofar as a woman experiences her relationship to her child on the level of intrapsychic structure as exclusive, her relationship to a man may therefore be superfluous.

Freud points tentatively to this (to him, unwelcome) situation, in contrasting men’s and women’s object-love. In his essay ‘On Narcissism’, he claims that ‘complete object-love of the attachment type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the male’.⁷ Women, by contrast, tend to love narcissistically – on one level, to want to be loved or to be largely self-sufficient; on another, to love someone as an extension of their self rather than a differentiated object. He implies here that the necessary mode of relating to infants is the normal way women love. Yet he also claims that women do attain true object-love, but only in relation to their children – who are both part of them and separate. Freud’s stance here seems to be that of the excluded man viewing women’s potential psychological self-sufficiency vis-a-vis *men*. This situation may be the basis of the early psycho-

analytic claim that women are more narcissistic than men, since clinically it is clear that men have just as many and as serious problems of fundamental object-relatedness as do women.⁸

Clinical accounts reveal this contradiction between male–female and mother–child love. Fliess and Deutsch point to the extreme case where children are an exclusively mother–daughter affair.⁹ Some women fantasize giving their mother a baby, or even having one from her. These are often teenage girls with extreme problems of attachment and separation in relation to their mothers, whose fathers were more or less irrelevant in the home. Often a girl expresses this fantasy through either not knowing who the father of her baby is, or knowing and not caring. Her main object is to take her baby home to her mother.

Deutsch points out that in women's fantasies and dreams, sexuality and eroticism are often opposed to motherhood and reproduction.¹⁰ She reports clinical and literary cases of women who choose either sexuality or motherhood exclusively, mothers for whom sexual satisfactions become insignificant, women with parthenogenic fantasies. Benedek and Winnicott observe that the experience of pregnancy, and the anticipation of motherhood, often entail a withdrawal of a woman's interest from other primary commitments to her own body and developing child. As Benedek puts it, 'The woman's interest shifts from extraverted activities to her body and its welfare. Expressed in psychodynamic terms: the libido is withdrawn from external, heterosexual objects, becomes concentrated upon the self.'¹¹

This libidinal shift may continue after birth. Psychological and libidinal gratifications from the nursing relationship may substitute for psychological and libidinal gratifications formerly found in heterosexual involvements.¹² The clinical findings and theoretical claims of Bakan, Benedek, and Zilboorg concerning men's jealousy of their children confirm this as a possibility.

On the level of the relational triangle also, there can be a contradiction between women's interest in children and in men. This is evident in Freud's suggestion that women oscillate psychologically between a preoedipal and oedipal stance (he says between periods of 'masculinity' and 'femininity') and that women's and men's love is a phase apart psychologically (that a woman is more likely to love her son than her husband). Deutsch points out that a man may or may not be psychologically necessary or desirable to the mother–child exclusivity. When she is oriented to the man, a woman's fantasy of having children is 'I want a child by him, *with him*'; when men are emotionally in the background, it is 'I want a child.'¹³

Women come to want and need primary relationships to children. These wants and needs result from wanting intense primary relationships, which men tend not to provide both because of their place in women's oedipal constellation and because of their difficulties with intimacy. Women's desires for intense primary relationships tend not to be with other women, both because of internal and external taboos on homosexuality, and because of women's isolation from their primary female kin (especially mothers) and other women.

As they develop these wants and needs, women also develop the capacities for participating in parent–child relationships. They develop capacities for mothering. Because of the structural situation of parenting, women remain in a primary, preoedipal relationship with their mother longer than men. They do not feel the need to repress or cut off the capacity for experiencing the primary identification and primary love which are the basis of parental empathy. Also, their development and oedipal resolution do not require the ego defense against either regression or relation which characterizes masculine development. Women also tend to remain bound up in preoedipal issues in relation to their own mother, so that they in fact have some unconscious investment in reactivating them. When they have a child, they are more liable than a man to do so. In each critical period of their child’s development, the parent’s own development conflicts and experiences of that period affect their attitudes and behavior.¹⁴ The preoedipal relational stance, latent in women’s normal relationship to the world and experience of self, is activated in their coming to care for an infant, encouraging their empathic identification with this infant which is the basis of maternal care.

Mothering, moreover, involves a double identification for women, both as mother *and* as child. The whole preoedipal relationship has been internalized and perpetuated in a more ongoing way for women than for men. Women take both parts in it. Women have capacities for primary identification with their child through regression to primary love and empathy. Through their mother identification, they have ego capacities and the sense of responsibility which go into caring for children. In addition, women have an investment in mothering in order to make reparation to their own mother (or to get back at her). Throughout their development, moreover, women have been building layers of identification with their mothers upon the primary internalized mother–child relationship.¹⁵

Women develop capacities for mothering from their object-relational stance. This stance grows out of the special nature and length of their preoedipal relationship to their mother; the nonabsolute repression of oedipal relationships; and their general ongoing mother–daughter preoccupation as they are growing up. It also develops because they have not formed the same defenses against relationships as men. Related to this, they develop wants and needs to be mothers from their oedipal experience and the contradictions in heterosexual love that result.

The *wants and needs* which lead women to become mothers put them in situations where their mothering *capacities* can be expressed. At the same time, women remain in conflict with their internal mother and often their real mother as well. The preoccupation with issues of separation and primary identification, the ability to recall their early relationship to their mother – precisely those capacities which enable mothering – are also those which may lead to over-identification and pseudoempathy based on maternal projection rather than any real perception or understanding of their infant’s needs.¹⁶ Similarly, the need for primary relationships becomes more prominent and weighted as relationships to other women become less possible and as father/husband absence grows. Though women come to mother, and to be mothers, the very capacities and commitments

for mothering can be in contradiction one with the other and within themselves. Capacities which enable mothering are also precisely those which make mothering problematic.

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NOTES

1. Booth (1972); this is a finding certainly confirmed by most writing from the men's liberation movement.
2. See, for cross-cultural confirmation, most ethnographies and also Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974). For contemporary capitalist society, see Booth (1972), and for concrete illustration, Bott (1957); Gans (1967); Komarovskiy (1962); Stack (1974); Young and Willmott (1957).
3. See Deutsch (1944); Rich (1976); Wolff (1971).
4. For a contemporary account of exactly this transition, see Young and Willmott (1957).
5. This is not to deny the conflicts and resentments which women may feel about their children.
6. Deutsch (1925: 171).
7. Freud (1914: 88).
8. See Kernberg (1975); Kohut (1971).
9. Deutsch (1944); Fliess (1961).
10. Deutsch (1944).
11. Benedek (1949: 643).
12. On this, see Balint (1939); Fliess (1961); Newton (1955, 1973); Whiting et al. (1958).
13. Deutsch (1944: 205).
14. Benedek (1959).
15. See Klein (1937). Barbara Deck (personal communication) pointed out to me that Klein's interpretation of a woman's participation in mothering is homologous to that described by Ferenczi and Balint in coitus. A woman's gratification in mothering comes from becoming her mother and from identifying with her mothered infant. Similarly, she is both the receiving mother (womb) and identifies with the male penetrating her in coitus.
16. The mothers I describe in Chapter 6 are cases in point.

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