

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The family circle

(1967)

A series of four articles written for New Society in conjunction with Mary Douglas, Reader in Social Anthropology at University College, London, who wrote complementary articles from an anthropological perspective. The series is headed: "In this special four-week series, a psychologist and an anthropologist look at the 'outer circle' of family relationships which are too often left unexplored: brother/sister; grandparent/grandchild; in-laws; aunts, uncles and cousins." It bears witness to Martha Harris' emphasis on understanding the wider social and developmental context of personality growth, as borne out by the personality development seminars which she instituted for child psychotherapy trainees.¹ During this period she was also preparing a series of small books for parents on children's personality development (the first Tavistock Clinic series), published in 1969. There are a number of autobiographical illustrations in these books and articles. Martha Harris was involved with all the books in the Tavistock series and wrote Your Eleven Year Old, Your Twelve to Thirteen Year Old and Your Fourteen to Sixteen Year Old (1969; these were republished in 2007 as Your Teenager). Other editors in the series were Christopher Dare, Dilys Daws, Elsie Osborne, Edna O'Shaughnessy, and Dina Rosenbluth.

¹ See also her collaboration with Donald Meltzer, *A Psychoanalytical Model of the Child-in-the-Family-in-the-Community* (1976).

*Brothers and sisters*²

A family begins with the parents. Each new individual's relationship with other members of his family is influenced by the relationship that has evolved between him and his parents, not only as he has learnt to manage it in the external world, but as he privately experiences it in his unconscious mind.

When a younger brother or sister appears, the elder child is faced with a new form of the jealousy he first encountered when he realized that he had to give way to his father for possession of his mother—and then later to his mother for pride of place with his father, at times when father was regarded as the most important person in life. Mothers, anticipating and fearful of this jealousy, and eager for the child to share the pleasure of looking forward to the new baby, will often talk to him glowingly about his new baby. Then, when it arrives, the child finds that it doesn't notice him, can't do anything, and that his mother is inevitably very much occupied with it; he realizes that it's not his baby, that he can't feed or bath it or comfort it when it cries, and has to play a very minor role in looking after it. Along with a bitter sense of disappointment he has to struggle with feelings of rejection, anger and depression at no longer being the only child in the family. If the baby is of a different sex, he'll tend to feel that that is what the parents really wanted.

If parents are alive to these feelings as part of normal development, they can give the child time to make acquaintance with them, and to find his way towards an honestly based relationship with the new brother or sister. This can only be founded on some degree of recognition by the child of his own ambivalence.

Each child has his unique fashion of facing or denying or manipulating the situation. Supported by parental recognition of his predicament, his occasional panics, tears, bids for attention and infantile rages, he becomes free to find the positive advantages and pleasures in having the new child. He may identify with mother

² First published in *New Society*, 15 June 1967, pp. 871-72.

in her pride at showing off the new baby, or he may seek mutual consolation and conversation with his father when his mother is too busy to have time for them both. He may be warmed and delighted when the baby begins to recognize and to smile at him, when at times it begins to prefer his company, when it wants to play with him, when it learns to speak his name.

In order of age

Relationships between brothers and sisters tend, of course, to be influenced by their particular positions in the family. Often, encouraged by the parents, the eldest (whether a boy or a girl) will adopt a maternal attitude towards the younger ones. This caretaker role can satisfy both the eldest child and the others if it is founded on a basically loving, ungrudging attitude, not forced either by parental compulsion or by a too compelling inner need to deny resentment and envy of the mother. It may be carried on long past childhood, and after the parents are dead. The younger children can find in the older brother or sister a figure to admire and to rely on: someone to emulate more hopefully than the parents because more like themselves. They can watch, too, the physical growth and increasing achievements and privileges of the elder and think, for instance, "Mary has boyfriends and goes to dances today, my turn may be tomorrow."

Sometimes a child's development is founded on a precocious maturity that masks too much unresolved resentment against the parents and the grownup world. He then tends to flaunt prowess and privileges in order to arouse in his more vulnerable brothers or sisters (often the younger ones) the envy and frustration—evoked by painful feelings of inadequacy and childishness—which he cannot contain and resolve within himself. The younger or weaker child may have his own compensatory fantasies. We are familiar with some of these fairy tales: with Cinderella, who by her meekness and the beauty beneath her rags wins the prince and defeats her elder ugly sisters; with the many stories about the youngest of three brothers who by wit or goodness or magical aid outstrips his elders in some impossible task and so wins the hand of the princess.

Fairness and respect by the parents for the individuality of each child are essential in mediating these grievances, in protecting the more vulnerable from victimization by the others. Nature is unfair, and children even in the same family are unequally endowed. The dull child among bright siblings, the plain girl with pretty sisters, are obvious examples of those who start at a disadvantage. A less obvious but equally potent inequality concerns the child disposed towards ready but undefended affections who can become the tool or doormat for more omnipotent and managing brothers or sisters.

Parental help

Parents insight into the transactions between their children depends largely on having come to terms sufficiently with their childhood rivalries towards their own brothers, sisters and parents. They can therefore recognize how similar rivalries are being expressed in their own children and not add fuel to the fire by identifying too strongly and unequally with any particular child because of unrealized and uncontained aspects of their own personalities. So far as their own natures allow, the children can then identify with fair and perspicacious parents; learn to play fair with each other; respect and allow for varying degrees of skill and achievement in different fields according to differences of age, sex and ability. If children are recognized and appreciated by their parents for what they are and for what they have the potential to become, they are freer to recognize the qualities in their brothers and sisters. They are less driven to jealous competition and less of a prey to seeking triumph or being overwhelmed by discouragement. When more than one avenue to fulfilment is open, the competition is not so keen.

Because childishness—dependence on mother—is equated with femininity, the growing boy, struggling for independence, tends for a time to profess to despise his sisters and all girls. Sisters may go through a phase of tomboyish emulation, or react against the physical prowess and privileges of their brothers—and boys in general—in prim-lipped and pseudo-maternal goody-goodyness. If the father has respect for his wife as an individual and as a

woman (as more than a housekeeper and a sexual convenience or plaything), and if this also holds good for the mother's attitude to him (as more than the breadwinner and comfort-provider), children have a family climate in which they can gradually come to terms with their own sexual identities in adolescence, while respecting that of their brothers or sisters.

Friendships between brothers and sisters, founded on experience of growing up together and surviving the rivalries and betrayals which must at times inevitably temper loyalties, can give that intimate understanding and affection for a contemporary of the opposite sex. This helps people to make a wise choice of husband or wife. For the boys, sexual attractiveness is less likely to be exclusively dependent on looks; and for the girl, less heavily weighted by the man's material prospects. And the brother who gets to know his sister's friends, and who observes his sister's reactions to his girl friends, has a better chance of realizing what he is marrying than the one who has had a less intimate and extensive acquaintanceship with girls around his own age. Sisters may get a similar advantage.

In adult life the bond between brothers and sisters is tested when one of them marries. This is especially true perhaps if one brother or sister left behind has been especially attached to the newly-wed. It may be a test, for instance, of a sister's capacity to cope with her own envy and jealousy at being left out; or of her ability to accept the new in-law, despite reservations, for the sake of the beloved brother.

A further test comes at the death or incapacity of parents through old age. There may be problems of sharing responsibility for the care of increasingly helpless parents, or of accepting with a good grace the division of property on a parent's death. Whether this death is expected or not—even if it comes in the fullness of time as a relief—it always tends to evoke in the grown-up children buried infantile emotions of dependence, loss and betrayal. It also evokes equally infantile irrational jealousies about their own stake in the affections of the deceased parent, when esteem is measured (as so frequently) by material contributions.

In our society, frequency of contact between brothers and sisters in adult life varies greatly according to the limitations of time and

space imposed by their work and family commitments. For many people, however, a family feeling that is rooted in an appreciation of shared parents and shared childhood experiences remains probably a bond that is stronger than most of their friendships, and one on which claims can be made or honoured in times of need.

*Grandparents*³

The bond between grandparents and grandchildren within visiting distance of each other can often be close and mutually satisfying. But as with brothers and sisters, its nature is determined to a great extent by the primary parent-child relationship.

When the grandchildren are babies, the grandmother is most likely to be closely involved with them, to want to be useful and to feel needed. When she is on basically good terms with her daughter or daughter-in-law and watching and tending the babies occasionally, the grandmother, who can often have no more babies of her own, has the opportunity to relive vicariously her own pregnancies and motherhood. If the memory of these is not too idealized—if she can recollect the complicated emotions of delight, anxiety and anger in learning to be a mother—she is less likely to make omniscient pronouncements calculated to make her an additional burden to the new mother. If she carries her experience truly, with all its trials and mistakes, she may often feel that with her grandchildren she is given a second chance not only to help the new baby, but also her own son or daughter, grow up.

The same may apply to the grandfather, though usually he does not have quite the same opportunity (or wish) for involvement in the very early stages of his grandchild. Becoming a grandparent most often means a renewal through sharing in a new life, but with less responsibility and therefore possibly more freedom to enjoy it than parenthood allowed. Some people, of course, who have been unable to come to terms with middle age and approaching old age, may be psychologically quite unready for this role, and

³ First published in *New Society*, 22 June 1967, pp. 916-17.

prefer to keep away.

But more usually, and more happily, growing grandchildren give their grandparents a stake in the new generation, in the hope and struggle for change and progress which they themselves are unlikely to live to see. They can bring them new bonds of interest and conversation with old friends in similar situations and also with their grown-up sons and daughters, where often the family may be a topic of much closer concern than work.

From a very early stage the child can sense and blossom in the special pleasure which grandparents take in his company: the admiration and approval which greets his every small achievement. The grandparents' home, when he is old enough to visit and stay on his own, can become a refuge from the turmoil of his own home, from the oedipal conflict with his own parents and the competition with his brothers and sisters. The marriage of his grandparents—and, if both are still alive, their attachment to each other—is not likely to evoke such possessive reactions as he feels or conceals about his own parents, on whom he feels more totally dependent. With the grandparents there is not the same threat of being displaced by a new baby, and it is usually a little easier to avoid acute jealousy situations with other grandchildren: they are not so omnipresent as his brothers and sisters at home. Their own children grown up, grandparents are less taken up with the daily chores of caring for the family than his mother; they have time to talk to him, to listen, and marvel at his questions, to play games or help him to make things. With them he can sometimes feel that he is really needed; at home no doubt he realizes he is often a nuisance to parents who are very much involved in the pressures of living, working and making their way in the world.

It is from his grandparents that he can hear stories about mummy and daddy when they were his age, what they did and said to their brothers and sisters, of times when they were naughty, times when they were a great success. This helps him to see his parents less as Olympians, to identify with them as children, to have more buoyant expectations of actually growing up one day himself, and possibly also to feel more sympathetically towards them as parents in their task of bringing him up.

As the parent-child relationship alters when the children are growing older and more independent, so does the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren: in both instances the passage of time eventually discloses its true quality. If it has been based principally on need—a kind of mutual protection society without growing respect and appreciation for each other's individuality—there is a tendency for the grandchildren to grow away as they go through junior school into adolescence, to find visits a duty and bore, and for the older people themselves to feel passed over and of value only as present-givers and conveniences.

An elderly widow, grandmother to three large flourishing families of children, all past infancy and most already adolescent, confided in one of her daughters in a moment of depression that she now felt useless. Her husband was dead, and she no longer needed to help with any of her grandchildren. They were busy with their friends, their school and their careers. Her daughter consoled her saying, "you can show them how to grow old—I can't do that yet, you have the chance first and it's something they will all have to learn some day—we hope."

This seemed to me a wise remark. Already in childhood we have fears of growing old and dying, experienced in many different disguises. Intimate acquaintance with those who know how to grow old gracefully helps us to come to terms with our own mortality.

An old woman of eighty, once beautiful, now gaunt and emaciated in the last stages of a fatal disease, was saying goodbye to her family and to the grandchildren who had been brought to see her before she died. One of them, a ten-year-old girl, vividly alive, hung back fearfully, unable to recognize her grandmother in this near-skeleton. The old woman understood why the child hung back, smiled with loving appreciation and whispered, "You're bonny. I wish I could say the same for myself now." The little girl then recognized the grandmother she knew, kissed her and cried. Afterwards she said, "I won't ever be so afraid of dying any more. Grandma wasn't and she wanted us all to be happy and not to cry too much when we think of her." This little girl was responding to the grandmother's sadness at leaving life and her own long-past beauty, together with her ungrudging love at seeing these live on

in one of her own descendants. The capacity to love and let go has its final test in old age and death, but is founded on the infant's first relationship with the mother during the first year when it begins to be sufficiently a whole person to realize that the person it relies upon and loves most dearly is the one who also frustrates and evokes hatred.

Then it is that we first have the task of getting to know these forces of envy and jealousy within ourselves, which when uncontained and projected away from ourselves can diminish and spoil the quality of good objects that are not felt to be within our possession and control. Then we first begin to struggle with the "depressive position"—as Melanie Klein has termed the attempt to know and to take responsibility for the realities of our own nature and the integrity of our relationships with people. In the struggle, if our envy, our fears and guilt allow, we are helped by the example of those who can face loss, age and finally death with an ungrudging love of life.

*In-laws*⁴

Attitudes towards in-laws may vary from the extreme of suspicion and dislike to the extreme of idealization in accepting the new family. The latter extreme accompanies a desire to break away from and disown the family of origin.

The more closely knit each family is, with traditions and standards of its own, the more widespread its interest and concern about the marriage of any one of its members. In societies with rigidly defined classes the preservation of the family, its power and prestige, has been more important than the happiness of the individual. When possible, families married into other families to the mutual advantage and aggrandizement of both. Acceptance of the idea that an individual should, from love and respect, choose to unite with another individual, so that they can in freedom found a new family unit of their own, is relatively new even in western society.

⁴ First published in *New Society*, 29 June 1967, pp. 949-50.

But the permission of society confers only a relative freedom. The newly-married carry within themselves their own past experiences, their own internal families as formed by the interchange between them and the members of their family as they grew up. Individuals who have achieved little of the maturity that necessitates self-questioning, or empowers them to shoulder responsibility for their own faults and inadequacies, tend to put the blame as far from themselves as possible when things go wrong. Then, in disagreements over the behaviour of the children, the unpleasant characteristics are viewed as derived from the other partner, the in-laws: "This sort of behaviour was never known in my family—he's growing up just like your Uncle Ernie."

The idealization of one's own family, when based on some real appreciation of them as people, is the product of loyalty, the attempt to hold on to the good in them, to protect the family from being spoilt or adulterated by harmful elements. Such separatism from alien elements and conservation of the familiar, traditional and safe (equated with good), operates in the prohibition against marrying out of the faith—exercised, for instance, by Jews and Roman Catholics—or admission to the family of the saved only for a convert who has been re-educated and cleansed of the foreign creed of the in-laws.

False idealization

But when the idealization is extreme it grows false, uncritical and unreal. It is based on little that is solid and rewarding in relationships with human beings as they are—compounded of good and evil. Evil is other people and the barrier against alien elements is particularly rigid. It forms a brittle defence against paranoia, the delusion of persecution. Dangerous and tragic examples of our time are the Nazi idealization of the Aryan family, threatened by contamination with the Jews, or the white South Africans' terrified exclusion of all colour.

On the other hand the idealization may be of the in-laws—as an escape from all that is familiar and boring and stifling within one's own family. Then they offer the opportunity to break out

from the prison of one's childhood with all its disappointments, its unlearnt lessons, unresolved conflicts, and most especially the unresolved oedipal conflict with the parents.

When marriage is embraced enthusiastically as a new life sure to be "happy ever after", the urge to leave behind all previous family encumbrances and restrictive parental figures can lead to a severance of ties with both families—by moving away or emigrating for instance—a determination to be independent and to have a life of one's own. But if the motive is less that of rebellion against parental restriction, than a feeling of shame about parents and a family who have provided an unworthy heritage, the new marriage may be seized upon as the gateway to a better family and a better life. True worth is recognized here and rewarded: the beggarmaid who marries the prince and becomes heir to the kingdom.

Anyone's initial approach to the unknown in-laws would ordinarily be mixed with a little apprehension and uncertainty: the hope of being liked, of being considered worthy to support or to housekeep for the prospective spouse. But realistic caution is likely to be somewhat complicated by anxieties that arise from more irrational sources—from the former little boy's or girl's dream of marriage to the parent of the opposite sex. Hence the initial approach of the bride to her future mother-in-law, and that of the groom to his future father-in-law, is customarily a delicate matter.

Of the individual in-law relationships, the mother-in-law one is perhaps the most emotionally complicated and difficult. It evokes all the unresolved conflicts in that primary and most essential relationship with one's own mother. From the point of view of the mother-in-law, it can be a particularly threatening relationship if she is a person who has married and given birth to children without ever having herself learnt to enjoy being a child and the whole process of growing up. She who has been living her own unfulfilled childhood through her own children, "giving them everything" at the expense of mutuality and respect in the bond with her husband, is most likely to be threatened by the marriage and the in-laws who take her child away. Then the newly-married daughter, for instance, who is unable either to cut off effectively her own mother's clinging, or to deal with it in sympathetic maturity,

finds herself torn between loyalty to parent or to spouse. In terms of amity and absorption with her husband such a hovering mother becomes an encumbrance. When she falls out with her husband however, the thought of going home to mother may become in cowardice a haven, and in anger a weapon. To the husband, uncertain of the strength of the regard between himself and his wife, such a mother-in-law becomes a persecutingly critical outsider waiting to rush in and triumph whenever he slips up.

When it is the husband's mother who clings, is secretly more married to her son than to her own husband, then the daughter-in-law can feel threatened and undermined in her role, first as a wife, and then especially as a mother. There are both obvious and subtle ways of doing this. The mother-in-law can make downright criticism of the new mother's competence, or produce snide glancing comparisons between the grandchild and her own son at that stage.

On the other hand, a mother-in-law whose own life is full and complete, who has learned to love and respect her child as a unique and developing human being, is likely to be able to contain and resolve her sadness at her son's or daughter's departure from home and to welcome their partner as a necessary factor in her child's welfare. She can then appreciate the new member of the family for what he (or she) is, and find truth in the old cliché of not losing a daughter but gaining a son (or vice versa).

*Aunts, uncles, cousins*⁵

When grown-up brothers and sisters remain close—often held together by regard for, and continued contact with, ageing parents—the aunts, uncles and cousins play an important role in the lives of the next generation.

If an unmarried aunt is not embittered by her state and jealous of her married sisters, she can find an outlet for her maternal tenderness in caring for her nephews and nieces. If she is young, she

⁵ First published in *New Society*, 6 July 1967, pp. 9-10.

may even be looking forward to marriage and children of her own some day. Jane Austen is one famous example of a favourite sister and a favourite aunt, like her creation Anne Elliott. In our present-day society, where it is easier for women to earn their own living and to be independent, the unmarried aunt is less likely than in the nineteenth century to become an unpaid governess to children all too likely to despise her unprivileged dependence when they come to need her less. Her position is now more comparable to that of the bachelor uncle who, when interested in his nephews and nieces, is a traditional bringer of presents and giver of treats.

It is, of course, possible for aunts and uncles to be much more than this. When a child is involved in conflicts and wrangles with its parents, the aunt or uncle who is prepared to be interested is a safe person to receive complaints, to talk things over with, and get help in solving knotty problems. They are outside the oedipal conflict, the main heat of the battle, but can be concerned for the welfare of both parties.

In one family I know, the mother's health was seriously damaged after the birth of a fifth child when the eldest was barely six years old. For the next fifteen years she had bouts of depression and physical illness which made her an unpredictable support for the family. Although she was fundamentally upheld by her husband, he had to work long hours to keep them going and had relatively little time to spare for the children in their early years. The mother's unmarried younger sister, who worked in a neighbouring town, came to spend nearly every weekend with the family, and took a great interest in the growth and upbringing of each of the children. In time they began to regard their aunt as a second mother, and one to whom it was safer to bring confessions of misdeeds and worries which would have been too much for their real mother to bear.

It was the kind of situation where the aunt might well have alienated the family's affections if she had been disposed to triumph, to compensate for her unmarried state and less obvious attractions, by stealing her sister's children from her. The bond between the two sisters, despite some inevitable degree of rivalry and jealousy, was nevertheless one of essential love and respect. It

was rooted in common appreciation for their own parents. The aunt not only helped the children with their own problems, but also to take a more sympathetic and tolerant view when they felt that their mother had failed them by collapsing when they most needed her.

To one of the boys in his adolescence the aunt confided that she had found it easier to bear their worries than if she had actually been their mother, responsible for bringing them into the world in the first place. She felt very secure in her capacity to earn her living; she was very sympathetic to her sister (who in her own childhood had been something of a second mother to her); she had felt unable to leave her in the lurch with five small children, inadequate help and little money. She said that she herself had had the chance of marrying and had been tempted. But by that time she realized that her nieces and nephews had grown dearer to her than the man who wanted to marry her and she hardly thought it fair to him. She added that her nephews and nieces must never be bound by guilt towards her, for had she indeed cared more for her friend she would surely have placed them second and married him.

Take another example. When asked what she thought about her aunts and uncles, a fifteen-year-old girl at once replied, "The best thing about them is that they have children—I like my cousins." Yet for all families of growing young people, the visits to and from cousins are by no means an unmixed blessing; they carry some flavour of obligation. When the relationships in the older generation, between the full brothers and sisters and the in-laws, is too strongly based on rivalry masked by duty, this tension is conveyed to the cousins. It is likely to be used by them to feed and to justify the rivalries which would in any case be stirred from time to time in their contacts with each other.

Parents may use their own children—their cleverness, their looks, their good behaviour—as pawns in the game for prestige in their immediate and extended family of brothers, sisters, parents and in-laws. Then the children are inclined to use their own parents—their position, their gifts and indulgences—to gain status and evoke envy among their cousins, or to despise their own

parents if they are less wealthy or less indulgent than their aunts or uncles are towards their offspring.

The cousin group is less close and confined than that of brothers and sisters who have to share so much. Yet it can offer a wider framework that still has some measure of security and permanence within the family, in which to make friendships, to quarrel and make up, to learn about the vagaries of human passions, the treacheries, the loyalties and the generousities in the interplay between others and oneself. In this cousin group there are opportunities to learn politics in embryo: how to make allies in order to carry a point; how to prevent oneself from being overridden by the stronger; how to accept or remedy defeat. There are opportunities to learn different things about oneself as one appears to other children; to recognize oneself in the behaviour of others; and to gain a more complete sense of one's own identity and growing potentialities.

These opportunities are there in the foregathering of any group of children. The basis for many friendships is the hunger for companions of one's own age, the need to find oneself and to discover unknown and unexpressed aspects of one's own personality by meeting other people. This need to have a society of its own, independent of the parents' generation, leads to the formation of various groups, most notably in adolescence. But the cousin group is different from those formed spontaneously by contemporaries; there is usually more variation in interests and in age. Also the children are born into it. We can choose our friends; we do not choose our relations. Neither do we choose our basic human nature, although we may hope through experience to get a better grip of it, to win the possibility of choosing and modifying what we become.

In the extended family group of aunts, uncles and cousins, held together (however loosely) by common ancestors, contact is more likely to be maintained over a long period, though it may be infrequent. And added to the experience of brothers and sisters growing up together is that of cousins growing, altering, developing or deteriorating in various ways. Insofar as each person accepts his place in that wider family, there is some feeling of participation in

the fate of each of its members. Thus for a member in need, there may be some degree of hope or expectation of kindness from the more fortunate ones.

The claims of the poor relation and of the black sheep are traditionally a persecution. The poor relation, at least, is a bogey which the welfare state has rendered less overwhelming and unfair. Yet those family members who have enough sense of individual and of collective responsibility to contain and mitigate the condition of their own unfortunate or delinquent relatives are the necessary foundation of a healthy community.

Recent educational research and organized inquiry (such as went into the Plowden report on primary schools) offers statistical evidence that the family plays a very great part in the education of the child. The core of the family unit—parents and child—is the foundation on which all else rests.⁶ The parents, initially the mother, can help the child to develop the necessary security and confidence to venture forth to enlarge his experience and to find different aspects and means of expressing himself in different relationships.

Parents' generosity can with a good grace allow the children to grow away from them when it is wise and safe to do so, and let them get from others the experiences which they cannot provide.

And life in a family which has breadth and continuity—brothers, sisters, cousins, grandparents, uncles and aunts—and which can also assimilate the foreigners, the in-laws—is the best preparation for that communality of spirit, founded on responsibility, of which Donne's words remind us: "No man is an island unto himself." It prepares us too for that part in history and mortality which is our own and all the human family's: "Never ask for whom the bell tolls—it tolls always for thee."

⁶ The implications of this are later elaborated in relation to Bion's "learning from experience" in the paper with Donald Meltzer, "A psychoanalytical model of the child-in-the-family-in-the-community" (1976).