

A Study of Excessive Dependency in Mother-Son Relationships

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Individual Psychology has never developed a specific typology for the simple reason that it was found impossible to demonstrate the existence of pure types in clinical practice. Yet, for heuristic purposes Adler did recognize the necessity of characterological distinctions. He very early perceived some basic differences in the ways in which an individual relates himself to his environment. The personality development of the oldest, the youngest and the second child were frequently cited as outstanding examples of this tendency. Likewise, there is hardly any piece of writing by Adler in which we are not reminded of the basic differences between the styles of life of the pampered child and the rejected child. Thus, while not recognizing the theoretical validity of ideal typical types—to speak with the sociologist Max Weber—in practical work it was found necessary to take recourse to typological concepts.

Unfortunately, very little work has been done in this field by Individual Psychologists. Perhaps this is due to the quite understandable fear of adding still another typology to the innumerable ones that already inhabit the field of characterology. Yet such a negative attitude would seem to deprive us of a valuable educational tool. Just as Adler did not hesitate to speak of types in his lectures and articles—always presupposing the heuristic purposes of the concept within the framework of a holistic individual psychological theory—so his successors need not be afraid of typological concepts, if the proper precautions are taken to prevent the development of a fetishistic attachment to such theoretical constructs.

In the following pages an attempt shall be made to describe a particular sub-type which the writer has met in the course of his clinical work. Working chiefly with teen-agers and young adults (mostly males), the recurrence of distinct characterological similarities

became increasingly apparent in many cases. While—broadly speaking—most of these young people exhibited the character structure of the pampered child, quite a few of them had peculiar difficulties which were not shared by the others. The common bond that united these particular cases was invariably an excessive dependence on their mothers and a very negative relationship with their fathers.

The German language has a word "*Muttersoehnehen*," which can roughly be translated as "mother's boy." Better than any other word this term connotes the problems which these young people have to face. It indicates the person who is unable to break away from mother's apron strings, who cannot think and act for himself. He lives, as it were, in the shadow of his mother, whose presence alone provides comfort and security in his troubled existence.

Perhaps some illustrations are necessary at this point:

Case A concerns a young man of twenty-five who came for treatment because he could not concentrate in his work. He lived with his parents, characterizing his mother as a strong and forceful person, his father as a critical and negative man. In addition to his lack of concentration he felt unable to make any personal decisions which were not approved by his mother. He also was aware of his inability to initiate and to sustain a lasting relationship with a girl. He stated frankly that he would never marry because he did not think that he could live together with another person.

Case B is thirty-four years old, unmarried, and lives with his mother. His parents were divorced when he was a small child and his father died some years ago of cancer. He came for treatment because he had no goal in life. For years he worked on a job which did not make any demands on his intellect. Yet he hesitated to look for a more satisfactory job because he was afraid he would not be able to hold on to more demanding work. Subject to recurrent depressions, he felt that life held no hope for him. It is interesting to note that this young man slept in the same bed with his mother until the age of twenty, without ever becoming aware—according to his own information—that there was something unusual about this arrangement.

Case C concerns a young man of twenty-two who is unable to make personal decisions. He lives with his parents; is strongly attached to his mother and very hostile to his father. A brilliant student, he cannot make up his mind about his future career. Always able to see

both sides of a problem, he resolves his dilemma by suspending all forward motion. Constantly involved with agonizing reappraisals, with brilliant logical deductions which prove the equal validity of two contradictory positions, he has managed to put an effective brake on his personal needs and strivings. When he came for treatment he was as far removed from a productive solution of his tasks of life as a teen-ager many years younger than he.

There are some striking similarities in these three cases. All of them are youngest children, having more successful and better-adjusted older brothers. All are shy, inhibited and rather effeminate. While all of them had some heterosexual contacts, there was a marked inclination for homosexual relations. Two of them had rather frequently such relations, while the third one felt himself drawn towards other men.

Adler¹ was very much aware of the mother's key role in the development of a child's social interest. He pointed out that it is the mother who gives the baby the first and most intimate contact with another human being. The mother is the first bridge to social life. Hers is the vital task of directing the child's interest to someone other than himself. But Adler did not mean by that that the child's emotions should become fixated in this earliest relationship. He frequently observed that the child must also become interested in other members of the family, and eventually in human beings outside the family circle. A mother trying to block this development is failing in her most significant educational function.

From a detailed analysis of the above mentioned cases it became very soon apparent that this was the principal problem. All three mothers had kept the children attached to themselves and prevented the growth and maturing of their social interest. All three had been overprotective, shielding their youngest children from contacts with the outside world. Of particular interest, however, was the fact that all three mothers were forceful, domineering personalities. They had pushed their husbands in the shadow and managed to establish their dominance over the household. Yet, their ascendancy was at best an uneasy one. From time to time their superiority was challenged by their husbands who did not accept permanently the inferior position to which they had been relegated.

¹ *What Life Should Mean to You*, Little, Brown & Co., New York (1931).

In this sometimes open sometimes hidden struggle for power the youngest child became the mother's most faithful ally. Perhaps it is truer to say that the child became a pawn in the parental conflict. His mother used him as a tool to further her own imperialist end. He had very little choice in this vital matter. Acceptance was held out to him as a bribe for supporting unquestioningly his mother's position. In rejecting his father he bought for himself security and protection by the most powerful member of the family.

While never verbally expressed, there seems to have been a tacit agreement between mother and child in all three cases. He would invariably support his mother against his father. In return, he could always be sure that his mother would protect him from his father's wrath and from the outside world. He could count on her sympathy and consolation when he failed in his work and his social relations. And, invariably, there were many such failures because the emotionally fixated child is unable to use his energies and capacities in a productive way.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the full extent of the child's emotional dependency in this relationship. None of three young men could think of anything negative that their mothers might have said or done, when they first came for treatment. As one client stated it succinctly: "I felt that my mother was always right and my father was always wrong." Clearer than anything else, this one sentence expressed the basic attitude of all three clients.

Yet their basic attitude is also their basic problem. A price has to be paid for the failure to develop social interest, and the price is emotional immaturity. Their emotions are held in bondage and they cannot free themselves by their own efforts. There are extremely effective blocks against spontaneous expression. Seething underneath with violent rages and hostility, this type manages to present the appearance of the calm, well-behaved person. In all social relations he remains mother's good boy. There is a pathetic inability to become aware of his own hostility, presumably for the reason that it would ultimately be directed against his mother and thus threaten to destroy his only bond to another person.

The consequences of this state of affairs are most clearly apparent in the area of sex. The inclination to homosexual relations can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it represents an attempt to create a relationship with a father substitute. But on a deeper level,

there is also a profound hostility against the female sex, a tendency to escape from close and intimate contact. This is based on the fear of domination by another female as well as the need to keep one's hostility in check. Any female other than the mother is capable of arousing overtly antagonistic feelings that disturb the precarious balance of the neurotic structure which this type has created for himself.

It is interesting to note that all three mothers are Jewish. The same denominational affiliation is prevalent in a number of other cases with similar symptoms. At present, there is not enough clinical and statistical evidence to warrant any far-reaching conclusions about the prevalence of strong and forceful mothers in any ethnic group. From a sociopsychological viewpoint, however, it can be suggested that certain sociocultural changes within the Jewish group account for this situation. Having been relegated to an inferior position for many centuries, Jewish women now have the opportunity to assert their equality. Yet being still insecure they are trying too hard, are shooting over their goal. From inferiority they jump into superiority. The masculine protest expresses itself in a profound struggle for power in which the youngest sons become deeply and inextricably involved. Preliminary observations suggest that this phenomenon manifests itself also in other minority groups, but for the above-mentioned reason Jewish mothers seem to be particularly susceptible to such an attitude.

What is the prognosis for treatment of this type? It seems that a cautious optimism is justified. Chances are good if the therapist succeeds quickly in establishing a good personal relationship, functioning as a mother substitute without having the oppressive characteristics of the latter. Yet, at best, the curative process is a slow and tortuous one. Being deeply discouraged, not trusting his own emotions, this type needs a long time before he can break out of his self-made shell. Since his primary difficulty is the failure to develop an adequate conception of his own masculinity, the extensive elaboration and interpretation of this deficiency is of vital significance.

The conclusions presented in this short paper are necessarily of limited validity because they are based on relatively few cases. Yet it seems to this writer that they present legitimate instances where typological concepts can be exploited fruitfully within the framework

of the theory of Individual Psychology. The excessively dependent child, whose emotions are tied up in his mother, exhibits specific characterological disturbances that are frequently absent in other cases. His profound discouragement, his lacking conception of masculinity, his depersonalization, his failure to develop productive goals, are all cases in point. To be sure, further investigation is needed to corroborate or to modify the findings described in this paper. But the presently available evidence suggests to this writer that in our highly urbanized society the sub-type of the excessively dependent child is increasing in alarming proportions.