

FAMILY CONSTELLATION AS A BASIC PERSONALITY DETERMINANT

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This is an attempt to bring attention to a determinant of personality that has been unduly underestimated in spite of its omnipresence and power, namely, family constellation.

Adler was probably the first to appreciate family constellation as a basic personality determinant, listing it as foremost among the objective factors which afford "trustworthy approaches to the exploration of personality" (2, p. 327). He considered the significance of being a first-born, a second child, or a last-born child; of being an only child, an only girl among boys, or an only boy among girls; or of coming from a family with only boys or only girls (1, pp. 230-241). But he did not take into account that the parents had also been children and siblings, and that their marital union may in varying degrees be similar to their own childhood family constellation. Adler did not take into account the effects this may have on the children. He also did not speak of the effects of losses through death or otherwise. It is in such respects that we are endeavouring to carry the Adlerian observations further.

Freud's Oedipus situation, of course, refers to family constellation, but it does, at least literally, represent no more than the constellation of the only child. There is no mention of any other children in the family (see 8, e.g.). Allport has commented that it is of "little individualizing value" (3, p. 561). And parents of single children tend to keep their child focused on them. Single children, in turn, want to remain children (see p. 203 below). It is perhaps in this sense that Adler stated, "The Oedipus complex characterizes a pampered child" (2, p. 185).

Our thesis is that a person can be characterized relevantly in terms of the people who have been living with him the longest, most intimately, and most regularly, and by incidental losses of such people—i.e., primarily his parents and siblings. The people who have lived with him can, in turn, be characterized relevantly by the people who have been living with *them* the longest, most intimately and most regularly, and by the losses of such people. This will refer primarily to the parents, although the people who have lived with them (their

parents and their siblings) are usually no longer present. A person's siblings may need no further attention since their family constellation always overlaps with his own.

As for losses (through death or otherwise) we can deduce the following relationships from several dynamic theories, but also from learning theories and even from common sense: The effects of a loss will ordinarily be severer, (*a*) the earlier it has occurred in a person's life, (*b*) the smaller the family, (*c*) the greater the number of losses that have occurred before, (*d*) the greater the imbalance of sexes resulting from it, and (*e*) the longer the responsible survivors took to secure a full-fledged substitute.

Absence of apparent losses in the immediate family does not mean absence of effective losses. Some of the parents' parents or siblings as well as in-laws may have suffered losses, and to the extent that these affect a person's parents, even uncles and aunts, they would have some bearing on the person in question, too. An important aspect of, and guide for, any loss is how the parents take it.

In summary, to characterize a person relevantly one should know the basic givens, or the skeleton, of his family constellation, i.e., the order and the sexes of his siblings, something about the personalities of his parents, and all incidental losses which he may have suffered. And in order to characterize the parents, one should know the order and sexes of *their* siblings and at least whether their parents "existed" or not, as well as their incidental losses.

In the following we shall examine the effect of family constellation on a person's marital relationship, his friendships, and his vocational choices. This will be followed by the presentation of a clinical case, and a method for quantifying family constellation factors.

TYPES OF MARRIAGES

In general, it may be assumed that a heterosexual relationship will tend to have better chances of happiness and success, other things being equal, the closer it duplicates for both partners the earliest (intra-familial) patterns set for heterosexual relationships. Some such hypothesis has been implicit in many of Freud's and Adler's clinical proceedings, but it has been overlooked explicitly as well as implicitly by a number of authors such as Burgess (4, 5, 6, 7), Locke (5, 6, 9), Terman (10), and Wallin (6, 7).

A person can be the first, second, third, etc. child of altogether one, two, three, etc. children, and the sexes may be distributed in many

different ways. Varying only position and sex will yield four different constellations with only two children (male-male, male-female, female-male, female-female), eight different constellations with three, sixteen with four, or, in short 2^n constellations, where n is the number of children in a family. The same holds for each of his parents. Either may come from any one of 2^n constellations. Hence their match will be one of $(n 2^{n-1})^2$ constellations, if both of them have the same number of siblings, or $nm 2^{n+m-2}$, if the numbers of their siblings differ. Consequently, parents who have but one sibling each can theoretically enter no less than sixteen different types of matches with each other. Let us for once pursue all these types of matches with the assumption that no unusual circumstances prevail.

If an older brother of a sister marries the younger sister of a brother [b (g) / (b) g], their chances, other things being equal, would tend to be optimal. They are unlikely to get into conflicts over their seniority rights. He is used to a girl his junior, and she to a boy her senior. And both are used to the other sex.

If an older brother of a sister chooses the older sister of a brother [b (g) / g (b)], things would not be quite so good. Both are used to the other sex, but each would try to be the older one for the spouse, and to transform him or her into a younger sibling. There will be rivalry over seniority rights. Once they have children, preferably of both sexes, they may henceforth be happy with each other, since now they have their "younger siblings."

If an older brother of a sister marries the older sister of a sister [b (g) / g (g)], they would also have conflicts over seniorities. Both were "superior" to their siblings in childhood. But the wife would also have some difficulty in accepting her man. After all, there had been three females in her family (mother, sister, and she, herself) with only one male, father, to share. If they did not want to get into each other's hair, they had to learn how to like each other regardless of the man in the family. They had to become somewhat more "homosexual." Sometimes, of course, especially if they could not work out such a solution, the girl may be only too anxious to get a man of her own; which, by the way, is not the best condition for making such an important decision.

If an older brother of a sister marries the younger sister of a sister [b (g) / (g) g], they may have no problem over seniority. The wife would be used to having a sibling her senior, and her husband to having one his junior. Yet she may not be used to having a man.

Similar arguments could be raised for an older brother of a brother who marries the older sister of a brother [b (b) / g (b)] or of a sister [b (b) / g (g)], or the younger sister of a brother [b (b) / (b) g] or of a sister [b (b) / g (g)]. Now, however, it is he who would tend to have trouble accepting the woman. The match with the least promise of success among these four would be the second. Both partners would have trouble accepting the other sex, and in addition they would tend to be in conflict over their seniority rights. As soon as they have children, however, they have their longed for "juniors" and may be happier, although there will be a tendency for father to gang up with the boys against the girls, and for mother to do so with her daughters.

Similar conditions would also prevail for the younger brother of a sister who marries the younger sister of a brother [(g) b / (b) g] or of a sister [(g) b / (g) g], or the older sister of a brother [(g) b / g (b)] or of a sister [(g) b / g (g)]. Among these the third combination would come close to an optimal one, although there will be a touch of a reverse authority relationship (dominant wife, dependent husband).

Finally the younger brother of a brother may marry the older sister of a brother [(b) b / g (b)] or of a sister [(b) b / g (g)], or the younger sister of a brother [(b) b / (b) g] or of a sister [(b) b / (g) g]. Other things being equal, the worst of these and, at the same time, the worst of all sixteen combinations would be the last. Both partners would have trouble accepting the other sex, and they would be in conflict over their juniority rights. Both want older siblings. Therefore not even a child of their own would make a difference, as it does with an older brother of a brother who marries the older sister of a sister [b (b) / g (g)]. In fact, they would not want a child in the first place, and if they happen to have one, that may well be all. Since they are so much in need of an older sibling, they will even tend to forge their child into such a role at the earliest possible time, and that means trouble.

Fortunately for life, in general families do not only have two, but also three, four, five, etc., children, and sometimes only one. In cases of $n > 2$ we can claim that the schematic relationships outlined above would tend to hold at least for the oldest and youngest siblings, while those in between would usually learn in their childhoods how to assume double and triple roles. Consequently, they tend to be somewhat better prepared for all eventualities of match-making than the oldest or youngest siblings are, although the latter may well be more exuberantly happy when they make an optimal of all possible types

of choices. Their happiness is somewhat more difficult to achieve, but it may be "deeper," if there is such a thing. Methods of treating quantitatively all aspects discussed will be presented below.

The single child has only his parents to draw on, so to speak. This does not mean that children from other sibling constellations do *not* draw on their parents. On the contrary, the parents are the most important people in any child's life (although compared to sibling configurations, their existence or "non-existence" is a fairly simple given). Psychologically speaking, they sometimes manage to change their children's seniority-juniority relationships and even their sexes. As a matter of fact, circumstances other than the parents, such as looks, talents, handicaps, etc. may also interfere, but we have ruled these out for the time being and would think that they tend to cancel each other with larger groups of cases. What happens in families with two, three, four, etc. children, however, is that, among other things, they turn to each other for what they cannot get from their parents. If the parents are happy with each other, they will tend psychologically to move into the children's backgrounds. It is easy to come to terms with such parents. Hence, the siblings will become relatively stronger determinants. Only parents who are unhappy with each other may keep their children anxiously focused on them. Normally the single child is in this position even with happy parents. We might say that such a family is already a mildly deficient one. The child has only his parents to turn to. He does not learn what children of larger families can learn from their parents, namely, how to treat children. Therefore, singletons may rather look for a father or mother in a potential spouse than for a sibling, and more often than others be content without children of their own. They want to remain the children themselves. Under certain conditions, however, they may break away from this attitude and have children of their own, occasionally even ambitious numbers of them.

Losses, apart from being effective in their own right, should tend to aggravate all prevailing conflicts. The most severe losses will be those of a parent, or both, and/or of one or more siblings when occurring in early and/or in late childhood.

If our reasoning is correct, it should be expected that any selection of individuals needing counseling or psychotherapy would show poorer than average matches among their parents and greater amounts of loss suffered either by them or their parents than could be accounted for by chance.

Inspecting the parents of my own clients, as of today some forty in all, ranging from those who came to see me only for a few hours to those who saw me for several years, I found not a single instance of the two most favorable types of matches [b (g) / (b) g and (g) b / g (b)] or their fair equivalents. By chance alone there should have been about four. The most unfavorable matches, on the other hand [b (b) / g (g) and (b) b / (g) g], were represented 7 times. Furthermore, losses suffered by the clients or their parents (losses in early or late childhood of one parent, or both, and/or of one or more siblings, through death, separation, or chronic illness) could be established in 33 cases.

A study of 20 counseling cases of children between 7 and 14 years of age at a suburban counseling center revealed also that the matches of their parents were considerably poorer than chance (not a single optimal match, only one partly optimal match, 13 poorer matches, and 6 poorest). Besides, in 16 cases severe losses as defined above had been suffered by the clients or their parents (see also 11).

FRIENDSHIPS

What holds for heterosexual relationships should hold for like-sex relationships or friendships as well. They should have better chances, other things being equal, the closer they duplicate for the partners involved the earliest (intra-familial) patterns set for like-sex relationships. Hence in a random sample of like-sex friendships the type represented most frequently should be that between older brothers of brothers and younger brothers of brothers, and the type represented least frequently should be that between older brothers of sisters and younger brothers of sisters. Identical sibling positions should also have little attraction for each other. Such people may identify with each other, but would not tend really to get along together.

These, and a few other, more complicated trends were well born out by a study of bilateral friendships among male non-coeducational youths, formed during the European equivalent of high school. Fifteen friendships between boys, all from families of two children (the easiest to handle in this context), were examined. For inclusion in this sample, a friendship had to have lasted at least a year, and be remembered as such by at least four of six former classmates who rated these friendship retrospectively. The results are presented in Table 1.

The results show that among the 10 possible friendship combinations those between boys of identical sibling positions did not occur at all. Combinations of maximally different sibling positions (differ-

TABLE I. DISTRIBUTION OF 15 FRIENDSHIP COMBINATIONS BETWEEN BOYS FROM FAMILIES OF TWO CHILDREN

	b (b)	(b) b	b (g)	(g) b
Older brother of a brother: b (b)	—	5	2	2
Younger brother of a brother: (b) b		—	1	4
Older brother of a sister: b (g)			—	1
Younger brother of a sister: (g) b				—

ence of rank as well as sex of sibling) were also rare, i.e., b (b) / (g) b and (b) b / b (g) occurred only twice and once, respectively, whereas younger brothers of brothers and younger brothers of sisters did show an affinity for each other (4 cases), possibly because the first has learned better how to be a boy than has the second, even if he was in a junior position to his brother. The greatest affinity was found between b (b) and (b) b, 5 cases.

Only children, incidentally, showed a preference for friendships with other only children, next, for older brothers of brothers. Middle children appeared to be the least particular about their friends, but more often than others they were members of trios, quartets, etc. The latter, in turn, showed a tendency for "complementary diversification." An only child, an older brother of a brother, a younger brother of a brother, and a younger brother of a brother and of a sister would form one such group, while another was composed of an only child, an older brother of a brother, a middle brother of two brothers, and a younger brother of a sister.

Similar trends could be established for all the friendships that the subjects in question had formed during their lifetimes. And as for friendships before marriage with girls, a certain preference for older sisters could be found among younger brothers, and one for younger sisters among older brothers. The findings are, however, too complex and too inconclusive yet to be reported.

VOCATIONAL CHOICES

Regarding vocational choice our data refer to a somewhat unusual kind of vocation. Fourteen unmarried women between 25 and 40 years of age who had become "foster mothers" and each taken on a family of up to nine children in "Children's Villages, Inc.," were compared to eight women who worked for the same institution, but either did not want to take on families of their own or did not meet the re-

quirements (see also 11). "Children's Villages, Inc." is a Central European institution to take over children from broken homes as soon after the break as possible. One of the assumptions investigated was that "foster mothers" would have to have suffered losses of their own in order to develop an interest in doing something for "orphans." Yet these losses would not have been of the most severe type, say loss of both parents in early childhood, for then the women would not be able to carry out the sacrifice involved in their job. And the losses would not have been of the mildest type, say loss of a friend, for then the women would not develop the interest in orphans. It was found that all "foster mothers" investigated, or their parents, had indeed suffered such losses, whereas the control group showed either extremely severe losses, very mild ones, or none at all, even among their parents. Those with extremely severe losses were those who had tried, but failed, to become "foster mothers". Another assumption was that "foster mothers" would come from larger families than the control group in order to wish to take on a family of up to nine children. This was also found to be the case. Finally, it was assumed that in order to be willing to tolerate the general shortage of men that prevails in the Children's Villages, let alone to forego marriage, the "foster mothers" must have been used to such a shortage at home. It was found among their siblings that the girls outnumbered the boys 2 to 1, while in the control group the ratio was approximately 1 to 1.

A CLINICAL CASE

Although I have collected some anecdotal and systematic clinical evidence of most aspects dealt with above, I should like to focus on the sibling configurations of parents and the prospects of happiness and success in the family life they create by presenting the following case.

Joe, a boy of 15 years, was referred to me by his parents. He had quit high school and enrolled in a school for commercial art. His parents had wanted him to finish high school so that he could go to college, should he decide to, but he had persuaded them that neither high school nor college would be of use to him. The parents let themselves be persuaded. Only when he switched from sculpture and design to photography, did they get worried and insisted on his seeing someone. The boy was among the most precocious and blase-looking youngsters I had ever seen. He talked and behaved as if he knew everything under the sky, and as if whatever he did not know could not possibly matter. Not in general, of course, he explained. No, there was nothing that would not matter to some people. But for him, at this time and under the present circumstances, nothing did matter. Etc.

Our questions in this context was: Why had he been an only child although his parents were well-to-do? And why does he pretend so doggedly to be an adult?

It turned out that his father was the younger brother of a brother, and his mother the younger sister of a sister. Other things being equal, this has been outlined (see p. 000) as the worst of all possible matches of parents coming from families of two children only. Both parents would have conflicts over the acceptance of the other sex and over their juniority rights. Both would want an older sibling. A child would make no difference. They would not even want one, but if they should have one, they would tend to forge it into the role of an older sibling at the earliest possible time.

This is precisely what had happened to Joe. The parents were acutely at a loss as to how to guide him in view of his "poor" educational choice, but unconsciously they had wanted *him* to guide *them* all along, and this is what he had tried to do the best he could. The fact that both parents were the youngest also probably explains why they had no more children. One child was already too much, unless children would come as grown-ups to begin with.

In the course of treatment Joe wanted to quit art school and emigrate to Australia, then to become a pilot, then to join the French Foreign Legion in North Africa, not so much in order to run away from an intolerable home, but to find perhaps what he lacked at home: a leader, a guide, someone who knew how to distinguish "right" from "wrong," who would not be interested in Joe's elaborate rationalizations for what he was going to do, but would tell him in no uncertain terms what to do.

Our next question was: Why did the parents make such an incompatible choice? It turned out that, at the time of choice, Joe's mother had just been gravely disappointed by a suitor who suddenly married someone else. He was the older brother of two sisters. And Joe's father had just been disappointed, too, although by a girl who had been an only and allegedly very spoiled child. She married a dear friend of his, incidentally an older brother of a brother, whom he had introduced to her with pride. Joe's father and mother found each other while mourning over potential partners they had just lost.

One might say that this was the coincidence that made them find each other "by mistake." But is there such a thing? We are often unable to trace even the most relevant determinants, but that does not mean that they do not exist. In this case, however, some possible determinants were found indeed. The (older) sister of Joe's mother had just been married at that time, conceivably in (imagined) competition with Joe's mother. So when she lost her suitor, she had to get another one quickly. Also her mother had allegedly been an ungiving mother who regretted to this day that she gave up teaching in favor of marriage, and the reasons for this derived, in turn, from her family constellation.

Joe's father, on the other hand, had had a father who entertained women besides his wife as far back as Joe's father could remember. His mother had been a kind of forsaken woman all along, and his older brother had been her chief pride and consolation. Thus Joe's father had been let down by his father, and then by his mother. He had been traumatized by letdowns, both those experienced and identified with. Hence one should expect him to be quite vulnerable in this respect, and either avoid potential letdowns anxiously or, once they had occurred, get out of them as quickly as possible, if necessary by a haphazard marriage.

DISCUSSION

We have attempted not to prove, but merely to demonstrate, our theses. The examples could be multiplied and pursued in greater detail. Data concerning areas other than skeleton family constellations have been omitted in order not to distract the reader.

Family constellations do not explain everything. Without their consideration, however, explanations will run into dead ends before long, as I have seen in many case conferences including the most sophisticated. What is more, groups of clinical cases, or techniques of treatment, etc. cannot really and reasonably be compared without being matched, among other things, for family constellation. It might well be that some of the contradictory results found in the literature could be clarified in this way.

It could be argued that what matters is how a person perceives his parents. True. But this is inevitably linked to what the parents really are, ultimately even to what they were like as children, and how they, in turn, perceived their parents. Granted, these matters may be difficult to trace, when it comes to grandparents and great-grandparents; but most adults know about their parents' sibling configurations, about the psychological existence or non-existence of the parents' parents, and about deaths or other final losses.

Data that constitute skeleton family constellations surround us everywhere. I recommend to the reader to investigate his own family constellation as well as that of his prospective or actual spouse, but also those of his parents, his friends, and the friendships and antipathies that prevail among them. I promise surprises and interesting insights, and if only a minimum of tact is exercised, nobody will feel offended. On the contrary, everyone usually likes such an inquiry.

And be sure to inspect a person's parents with special care whenever he does not act as expected. Sometimes an oldest brother appears like a youngest, because this is what his father had been. Or, a girl may act like a boy, because her father had come from a family of boys only, expected at least some boys of his own, and had to transform one of his three girls into a son. Or, a younger brother may behave like an oldest, because his older brother happened to be of low intelligence, and his older sister ran away from home when she was fourteen, which left him with two younger sisters.

It has been my experience that data on family constellation are of greater diagnostic and prognostic value than psychological test data that can be secured only in a greater amount of time. Good clinicians,

I am sure, have considered these data all along, but did this implicitly or "intuitively" rather than explicitly, which in the long run might not be enough.

QUANTIFICATION OF CONSTELLATION FACTORS

Generally speaking, the following formulas have been found helpful and valid means of quantifying conflicts and losses for purposes of broader comparison (see also 12).

(a) The degree of sex conflict prevailing in a marriage can be expressed for each spouse by d_s , the coefficient of sex distribution, as a function of the number of his same-sex siblings (n_s) over the number of siblings in the family, Formula 1:

$$d_s = \frac{n_s}{n - 1} \tag{1}$$

Hence the older brother of a sister and brother who married the younger sister of two brothers—expressed symbolically by b(g, b) / (b, b) g — would have a sex conflict of $d_s = 0.5$, and his wife one of zero. The degree of overall sex conflict (d_{sm}) would be the sum of both.

(b) Similarly, the degree of rank conflict prevailing in a marriage can be expressed for each spouse by d_r , the coefficient of rank distribution, as the difference between the number of junior siblings (n_{jun}) and the number of senior siblings (n_{sen}) over the number of siblings of the person in question, Formula 2:

$$d_r = \frac{n_{jun} - n_{sen}}{n - 1} \tag{2}$$

A positive value of d_r indicates that the person is more of a senior, a negative value, that he is more of a junior. The absolute value of d_r shows how much. Thus a man who has had an older brother, a younger sister and a younger brother - symbolically: (b)b(g, b) - would have a value of $d_r = 0.33$, and the younger sister of a brother and sister - (b, g)g - a value of $d_r = -1$. If these two people were married, the sum of d_r would express their overall rank conflict (d_{rm}). Its value would be $d_{rm} = -0.67$. The couple would remain somewhat in need of a senior.

(c) Marriage will for many people differ in number from the peer relationships the spouses have had at home. The discrepancy coefficient $d_n = \frac{n - 2}{n}$ would express it for each spouse, and the sum of the absolute values would express it for the couple (d_{nm}).

(d) A last conflict concerns the degree to which the configuration of a couple's children duplicates their own sibling configurations. The coefficient $d_{ch} = 1 - \frac{n_d}{n - 1}$ would express it for each spouse, where n_d is the number of (dual) sibling relationships of a parent that have found (one or more) duplicates in his children, and n , as usual, is the number of children that constitute his sibling configuration.

There are other ways, too, of considering a couple's children, but they must be foregone in this context.

Pooling all conflicts, we could say that the overall amount of conflict prevailing in a marriage (d_t) is expressed by Formula 3:

$$d_t = \frac{d_{s_m} + d_{r_m} + d_{n_m} + d_{ch_m}}{4} \quad (3)$$

Losses suffered by spouses could be treated either in their own rights or as aggravators of all prevailing conflicts. The overall amount of loss (l_t) is expressed by Formulas 4 to 8, for each person in question.

$$l_t = \frac{1}{\log a_p} \sum_{i=1}^{n_l} \frac{l_i}{c_i} \quad (4) \quad k = \frac{a_t^t}{a_0 a \sqrt{a} (n-1)} \quad (6)$$

$$l = \frac{1}{-\log k} \quad (5) \quad c = 1 - (s_b - s_a) \quad (7)$$

$$s = \frac{n_{s_l}}{n} \quad (8)$$

In these formulas l_t is the total cumulative loss; a_p the present age (in years) of the person in question; n_l the total number of losses the person has suffered; l is the individual loss, and k the measure of its magnitude; a_t the age (in years) of the person lost, a_0 the age of the oldest person in the immediate family; t represents the length of time (in years) that the lost person has lived with the person in question; a is the person's own age at the time of loss; n is the number of persons that constitute the family (including parents, siblings, and the person in question); c is the change-of-sex-balance coefficient; s is the sex-balance coefficient, and n_{s_l} the number of persons in the entire family that are of the lost person's sex; s_b is s before the loss, and s_a thereafter. For the sake of simplicity c could be taken as one.

The values of l_t will vary between zero and infinity. The larger they are, the severer the cumulative loss suffered by the person concerned. Values of one and above will indicate severe losses, while values of three and above represent rather hopeless predicaments. The amount of loss prevailing in a marriage (l_m) is the sum of l_t of both spouses.

If a pooled measure of conflict and loss prevailing in a marriage (P_m) is desired, and if we assume that losses aggravate conflicts — an assumption that has withstood a preliminary test of validity — Formula 9 may serve as a first approximation:

$$P_m = (d_t)^{1+l_m} \quad (9)$$

Conflicts and losses experienced by the spouses' parents could also be included' although they would have to be weighted down (quartered) before summation.

Relationships between people of the same sex can be treated analogously. In Formula 1, however, n_s should be the number of opposite-sex siblings rather than same-sex siblings, and Formula 4 would have to be multiplied rather than divided by c .

SUMMARY

A person can be characterized relevantly and efficiently in terms of the people he has lived with the longest, most intimately and most regularly, and by the losses of such people that he has suffered. A skeleton family constellation can be reconstructed from the order and sexes of a person's siblings, from his parents' positions among their siblings, from the degree of compatibility for each other derived therefrom, and from the losses that have occurred. The psychological significance for several life problems of these simple and easy-to-obtain data has been illustrated with a number of social psychological studies and a clinical case. A more formal quantitative treatment of the problem has been briefly suggested.

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