

## **On the Institutionalized Rôle of Women and Character Formation.**

By  
Margaret Mead.

Various types of case history research in the modern American scene are bringing forward more and more evidence to show that the domination of the mother is having a destructive effect upon the emotional development of both girls and boys. I do not propose in the short space of this article to examine the evidence for this statement, but rather to accept it as a hypothesis about which to build a short theoretical discussion. For this purpose, we will accept the conclusion of the experts<sup>1)</sup> in the personality development field, and consider the different levels of interpretation from which it might be understood.

It would be possible to approach it at the strictly organic level and to insist that it is a necessary condition for the healthy growth of the child, that the element of dominating, greedy ambition be absent from the maternal care. From this point of view we would insist that there was a tie between mother and child so biologically determined that any alteration in its form which arose from cultural compulsions was inevitably bad for the child. Just as it would be impossible to substitute breast feeding by the father for breast feeding by the mother, so we would insist, it is equally impossible to really substitute dominance by the mother for dominance by the father, without condemning the child to an emotional starvation as biologically conditioned, as would be its actual starvation if it had to depend upon its father for milk.

There is a fair case to make out for this point of view, but a case which is far stronger for mother-child relationships at the levels of culture where the child will starve if its mother's breast has no milk. The intervention of artificially controlled nutrition between the mother and the child has altered not only the physical depen-

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<sup>1)</sup> Based particularly on case study materials on adolescents collected under the direction of Dr. Caroline B. Zachry.

dence of the child upon its mother but its dependence upon her emotional attitudes also. Artificial methods of nutrition, and also the perambulator, the high chair and the crib, are all cultural modifications of a relationship which at simple levels was dependent upon different factors. Now the mother who has no milk can give her child a bottle, the weak or lame or obese mother can push her child in a perambulator, the mother who sleeps restlessly need not fear that she will smother her child in her sleep, — and because of these inventions by which the old physical tie between mother and child can be so successfully implemented artificially — the maternal attitudes are no longer so essential to the child's well-being. Practices of contraception which were mechanically reliable and socially articulated might conceivably add the further check that women who did not wish for children need not have them. It is possible to argue that if the question be viewed purely from the standpoint of the dependence of the child upon the mother's care and upon the attitudes which accompany that care, that the progressive series of inventions which interpolate artificial devices into the situation may so overlay the original biological situation as to make it nugatory. This conclusion would not necessarily contravene the possibility that in contemporary American middle class society the child still has great physical dependence upon the mother and that the combination of such dependence and a maternal tendency to dominate the child towards achievement goals may not be a destructive factor. But the solution of the problem would still be possible in cultural terms, not by adapting the culture to a more primitive mother-child situation, but rather by departing still further from the original form of the situation.

A second level of explanation is to regard the attempt on the part of American middle class mothers to dominate their children, as a symptom formation. According to this view it would be said: This attempt to dominate the child, to force the child to succeed, is a type of behavior which is the result of a distortion in the maternal personality, and because it is itself an unhealthful, substitutive form of behavior, it plays havoc with the development of the child. Here again there are several difficulties in accepting this explanation as adequate. We have ample material to show that children tend to repeat and find satisfaction in behaving towards their own children as their parents have behaved towards them. In a stable and very slowly changing society, this is a mechanism which ensures the effective transfer of the culture shared by one generation to their offspring. If the social situation in the society is postulated upon an antagonism between spouses, and such antagonism is intimately bound up with the whole

economic functioning of the society, as in Manus<sup>1</sup>), then the exposure of each generation of children is a situation of inter-parental strain which effectively prevents their building or attempting to build a more sympathetic type of marriage relationship for themselves, is socially necessary. Any exposure to a type of marriage which might set up some standard external to Manus culture, a more euphoric marital expectation would be definitely destructive to the personalities of Manus individuals, because their culture would give them no opportunity to realize these expectations. Manus culture is carried by individuals who are definitely and systematically prevented from developing a capacity for enjoying heterosexual relationships.

Now if we find the majority of middle class American women show a character structure in which a compulsive, substitutive, indirect form of emotional satisfaction has been developed, it is fair to say that such mothers will be a powerful influence in producing daughters who will show a similar character structure and sons who will be only able to marry women with a similar character structure. But still a development could not fairly be postulated as destructive as long as the sons and daughters functioned in their socially determined roles without breakdown. From an ideal standard, an exogenous standard, we might say, „This is an impoverished type of personality which makes exceedingly trying and essentially unnecessary demands upon the organism, why should we not attempt to construct a culture which permits a fuller, less tortuous, less painful development of the potentialities of human beings ?“<sup>2</sup>)

But it is not possible to say that the personality of the Manus mother, nor her attitude towards her children, definitely shaped by frustration as they are, are destructive of her children : they are, rather, constructive in shaping her children's characters to adequate functioning in their society. When, therefore, mental hygienists today say that the dominating, ambitious mother is a destructive force in her children's development, they may mean one of two things : (1) that they, taking the position that Dr. Dollard expresses in his article, consider the creation of personality types usual in our civilization as so wasteful and unnecessary,

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<sup>1</sup>) Mead, Margaret, *Growing up in New Guinea*, New York, William Morrow & Co., 1930, London, George Routledge & Son, 1931 ; *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands*, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* Vol. XXXIV, especially pp. 274 through 307.

<sup>2</sup>) For a discussion of this point see, Dollard, J., *Mental Hygiene and a 'Scientific Culture'*, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. LXV, Nr. 4, July 1935, pp. 431-439.

as to be, virtually, the destruction of the most valuable potentialities of human nature, or (2) that even when they accept our current form of character formation, they find that the children of dominant mothers are not able even to approximate to its meager and tortuous form. This latter finding is actually the one which they stressed. Judged by no ideal or remote standard, but by the mundane and practical demands of ordinary middle class functioning, these young people's personalities are being maimed — both boys and girls —; many of them are unable to marry and repeat their parents' substitutive satisfaction in dominating another generation. May we well not ask whether we are not dealing with something beyond the character defects of the ranks of individual mothers, if in other societies, mothers who have suffered as grave frustrations of the impulse life have not had an equally paralyzing effect upon their children?

May it not be, that it is not either the destruction of a relationship which as long as it was biologically dictated was perforce cast in warmer, less hostile terms, nor the fact of a maternal character formation which is no more serious than the character formation of mothers in the societies where the effect is not destructive which is responsible? Should we not look in the total cultural situation for a more enveloping explanation? May it not be that it is not the nature of the character of middle class American women which is responsible for a flaw in the orderly transmission of the culture, but rather a fundamental discrepancy between the social definition of the maternal role and its present actuality? A woman with a dominating personality might function as a perfectly adequate mother in a matriarchal society, she may be so handicapped and confined in a patriarchal society as to cease to be an effective cultural surrogate. The fact of female dominance in the fields of consumption, leisure time activities, and the home in America, has often mistakenly been described as a matriarchy. This is essentially false. A matriarchy is a society in which certain important institutional behavior in regard to descent and property is legally demanded of and guaranteed to women, so that all the sanctions of that society lie behind such behavior to control it and integrate it. Nor is the dominance of women a necessary correlate of matriarchal institutions, which often occur without conspicuous personality domination on the part of either sex.<sup>1)</sup>

Now America shares with western Europe a patriarchal cultural

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<sup>1)</sup> Cf. the pueblo of Zuni: Benedict, R., *Patterns of Culture*, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co 1934, Chapter VI.

form in which the father's dominance over his wife and minor children was institutionally guaranteed. And to the extent to which it was guaranteed, it was also circumscribed and channeled. As the father was, within his family, the surrogate of the powers of the state and of a patriarchally conceived Deity who stood above the state, so also the father was socially responsible to the state and to the Deity. His authority was neither capricious nor arbitrary; it did not satisfy peculiar personality demands within his own character, but had to be exercised even in the absence of such demands. The limits beyond which the paternal dominance could not exceed were socially defined, the minimum requirements which it must meet were reinforced by legal and religious sanctions. In the slowly changing society of preindustrial Europe, the personality of each generation of children was shaped to function efficiently within a system of rigidly institutionalized male dominance.

In modern America, we preserve the patriarchal institutional form. It is still the father who is responsible for his wife's debts and for his children's misdemeanors. The forms remain, almost empty, now that, owing to a series of complex and separate sequence of events, — the pioneer situation, the reduction of the productive role of women within the home, the absorption of men into distant and time-consuming activities, the disorganization of immigrant family forms, and many others — the actual domination has passed to women. The prevailing dominating character of middle class American women may be seen as the product of an elaborate network of socio-economic events, of which her character is only one result. But because her character, with its pattern of dominance, must function in a social situation which does not allow for that domination, which surrounds it with no safeguards and dignifies it with no socially sanctioned role, her dominance is extra-legal. She exercises her great freedom, her desire to dictate the lives of her children, as a licence and not as a right. Her behavior is marred by the confusions which attend the role of an usurper who becomes tyrant far more easily than lawful ruler. To play the role of tyrant who in turn enslaves those beneath one's control, it is only necessary to possess the power and the will to use it, but to become a legitimate ruler, some institutional alteration is necessary.

So I would suggest that it is not because dominant mothers are biologically inadmissible nor because, again, a given character formation in all of the parents of a society necessarily mars their children's development, that the dominant mother plays her present destructive role in her children's lives. It is rather the combination of a character structure which demands the chance

to dominate, a social situation in which the characters have the freedom to dominate, and institutional forms which do not adequately recognize, dignify, circumscribe and safeguard such a maternal role. Such a situation may be said, to use the analysis of Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown<sup>1</sup>), to be dynomic — there is a flaw in the social system, and this in turn has important repercussions in individual breakdown and increased malfunctioning.

De l'influence du rôle social de la mère  
sur la formation du caractère de l'enfant.

L'article part du fait qui apparaît de plus en plus clairement dans la psychologie américaine moderne de la personnalité, qu'un certain type de domination de la mère dans la famille exerce une influence fâcheuse sur l'évolution psychique des garçons et des filles. L'auteur étudie les diverses interprétations, qu'on peut donner de ce fait.

La première interprétation discutée est celle-ci : pour des raisons biologiques, l'amour naturel serait nécessaire à une évolution saine de l'enfant ; l'égoïsme de la mère exercerait une influence nocive parce qu'elle serait en opposition avec cette nécessité biologique. L'article indique que les rapports naturels de la mère et de l'enfant sont, sous bien des rapports, remplacés par des relations culturelles (en particulier pour l'alimentation), ce qui montre l'incertitude de cette interprétation.

La deuxième explication discutée est celle-ci : la tendance à dominer l'enfant, à l'élever en vue de succès conformes aux désirs maternels, serait signe du caractère „névrosé“ de la mère, la nocivité de cette conduite serait imputable à la névrose de la mère. Mais, à l'aide des faits ethnologiques, l'article montre qu'une mère agressive, ambitieuse d'autorité n'exerce pas nécessairement une action nocive sur l'évolution du caractère de l'enfant, mais tout au contraire est susceptible de conduire à l'adaptation la meilleure des enfants aux exigences futures de la société.

M. Mead présente une troisième explication possible : l'influence nocive ne tiendrait pas à la structure du caractère de la mère, mais à la contradiction entre le rôle effectif de la mère dans la famille et son rôle officiel dans la société. En Amérique, la mère a pris effectivement la direction dans la famille, cependant il serait entièrement faux de parler d'un matriarcat, puisque cette domination de fait n'a pas de caractère officiel et n'est pas reconnue par la société. Rien n'a été changé à l'organisation patriarcale de la société américaine, mais les formes patriarcales ont été partiellement privées de leur contenu et sont en contradiction avec les rapports de fait à l'intérieur de la famille. On pourrait dire que la mère exerce son autorité à la manière d'un tyran et non d'un maître légitime. Cette forme de pouvoir maternel non contrôlé par les institutions sociales offre un moyen d'expliquer l'influence nocive de ce pouvoir sur les enfants.

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<sup>1</sup>) Reprint from the American Anthropologist, Vol. 37. No. 3, July-September, 1935.

Zum Einfluss der gesellschaftlichen  
Rolle der Mutter auf die Charakterbildung des Kindes.

Der Aufsatz geht von der in der modernen amerikanischen Persönlichkeitsforschung immer evidenter werdenden Tatsache aus, dass ein gewisser Typ der Vorherrschaft der Mutter in der Familie eine schädliche Wirkung auf die seelische Entwicklung von Knaben und Mädchen hat. Die Verfasserin untersucht, welche verschiedenen Interpretationen für diesen Tatbestand möglich sind.

Zunächst wird eine Interpretation besprochen, die davon ausgeht, dass aus biologischen Gründen für die gesunde Entwicklung eines Kindes mütterliche Liebe notwendig ist und dass aus dem Gegensatz zu dieser biologischen Notwendigkeit heraus die egoistische Mutter einen schädlichen Einfluss darstellt. Durch den Hinweis darauf, dass die „natürliche“ Beziehung zwischen Mutter und Kind in vielen anderen Hinsichten durch kulturelle ersetzt werde, speziell in der Ernährung, wird die Fragwürdigkeit dieses Gesichtspunktes begründet.

Dann wird die Erklärung diskutiert, nach der die Tendenz, das Kind zu beherrschen und gewaltsam zu im Sinne der Mutter liegenden Erfolgen anzutreiben, ein Symptom des neurotischen Charakters der Mutter und die Schädlichkeit dieses Verhaltens eben in der Neurose der Mutter zu suchen sei. Es wird an ethnologischem Material gezeigt, dass eine aggressive und herrschsüchtige Charakterstruktur der Mutter nicht notwendigerweise schädliche Wirkungen auf die Charakterentwicklung der Kinder hat, sondern ganz im Gegenteil zur optimalen Anpassung der Kinder an die sie später erwartenden gesellschaftlichen Anforderungen führen kann.

M. Mead legt eine dritte Erklärungsmöglichkeit vor : dass der schädliche Einfluss nicht in der Charakterstruktur der Mutter an sich zu suchen ist, sondern in dem Widerspruch zwischen der faktischen Rolle der Mutter in der Familie und ihrer „offiziellen“ Rolle in der Gesellschaft. Während die amerikanische Mutter häufig tatsächlich die Herrschaft in der Familie an sich gerissen hat, wäre es doch ganz falsch, von einem Matriarchat in Amerika zu sprechen, da die faktische Herrschaft in der Familie in keiner Weise den Charakter einer offiziellen und gesellschaftlich anerkannten Herrschaft der Frau angenommen hat. Vielmehr hat sich an der patriarchalischen Organisation der amerikanischen Gesellschaft nichts Entscheidendes geändert, aber die patriarchalischen Formen sind zum Teil ihres Inhaltes beraubt worden und stehen im Gegensatz zu den faktischen Verhältnissen in der Familie. Die Mutter übt ihre Herrschaft gleichsam nicht als ein rechtmässiger Herrscher, sondern als ein Tyrann aus. In dieser durch gesellschaftliche Institutionen nicht kontrollierten Form mütterlicher Herrschaft wird eine Erklärungsmöglichkeit für den schädlichen Einfluss dieser Herrschaft auf die Kinder gesehen.