

Family Roles:

Because the family in which we grow up is our most critical support, its influences are by far the hardest to resist. In the charged field that was the family of our childhood, we began to be sculpted into a shape according to our family's largely unconscious but extremely collective will. Early in life, we settled into *roles*, psychological postures that, over time, became both rigid and limiting. Caught in our family's need for us to play certain parts in its drama, rarely did we question the rightness of those needs.

The extraordinary thing is that most of us, as adults, are still playing the same parts we learned as children. If we are to understand the underlying issues in our adult intimate relationships, we need a working knowledge of the "dramatic structure" of the family we each grew up in – particularly the roles we assumed, and how we came to occupy them.

You may find it implausible that the roles we played in our childhood families are repeated in our adult intimate relationships and marriages. Even more implausible may be the idea that we are, as parents, involved in sculpting the roles of our children.

There are several common problematic family roles which influence our choice of adult partner, which shape the marriage or relationship we create, and which powerfully affect our children's lives. Not only that, there is a fascinating ebb and flow of the family drama over time. Our parent's roles in life influenced ours, which now influences our children's. In the large life drama of our family that goes from grandparents through to grandchildren there is a story that can make sense of the successes and failures of all members of that family across generations. If we lose a sense of this larger family story across the generations we miss some of the interesting aspects of our own history.

None of us played just one role in the family we grew up in. Most of us had a few roles and some of us occupied several roles in relation to a particular person. These roles can be seen as ways of describing the function we filled in the complex web or relationships that was our family.

When I, as a family psychologist look at a family, I will often look at each child's role in the family in relation to both parents. For example, I will be on the lookout for coalitions between parents and children that seem problematic for the children. Very often one finds that the coalition between a parent and a child is stronger than the coalition between the parents. What is interesting to note is that very often these inappropriate pairings also extend back a generation: many adults have not been able to separate from their own parents, even though they are married and have children themselves.

In assessing a family, then, we not only ask, "Where are the teams in this family?" but we are also curious about the way these coalitions function. That is, if a child is "tied" to a parent, *how* is he or she bound to the parent?

Children who are held tightly by their parents and who are pulled toward the center of the family are called *bound* children and they are a very common role for children. There are three kinds of *bound* children – parental children, companionate children,

and dependent children. Parental children function as mini-parents in the family, sometimes working alongside the parents, sometimes actually parenting the parents. Companionate children function as peers with their parents. Like parental children they are pressured to be more adult than is healthy for them. Finally, dependent children are held in an exaggerated childlike position. Unlike parental children, they are encouraged to be less mature than they are capable of being.

The net effect of being a *bound* child, whether parental, companionate, or dependent, is that later in life it becomes hard to leave home. Because the parents of bound children need them so badly, they unconsciously set up obstacles that make it hard for them to leave and can communicate this in the most subtle and indirect ways. Because bound children are so loyal and so sensitive to their parents' needs, they respond strongly to their parent's anxieties about their leaving.

Because these things are so subtle and indirect, it is often very hard for the bound child to untangle itself from the web of family life. Think of your own life in these terms. Were you or one of your siblings bound into the family in these ways – or are some of your children filling these roles? All families bind themselves together in different ways with people assuming different roles. The problems emerge when they go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Next week I will look at some of these roles in more detail. (I can be contacted at celticspirit@eircom.net).