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The consequences of the neglect of children's developmental needs. The relationship of the siblings

I would like to present two different types of coexistence among siblings in the family, using as an example two well known fairy tales. *Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel* are stories that show the complexity of the relationship among siblings, both their rivalry and their mutual support. According to Bruno Bettelheim (1985), fairy tales show children "such areas of their imagination that they would never discover themselves" (p. 45).

Fantasy vs. reality - the analysis of the role of siblings in family dynamics

Angela Joyce (2011) analyses the story of Cinderella in connection with the situation of a child within a family. She says: "I do not think that we can talk about siblings without also talking about parents". I think that we can put it the other way around: There is no such thing as a child without his or her mother and father; caregivers exist either as psychic representations in the child's mind or in real interactions with him or her. The first question arises: Can we, in psychoanalysis, analyze the

relationship of siblings in isolation, without taking into account the family background? In my opinion, the answer depends on the theory that we choose. If we concentrate more on intrapsychic *conflict* and object relations, then we can consider children more separately, since we direct our attention mainly towards their internal world. Melanie Klein (Klein, 1932/1979; Schier, 2000) used to say that parents must not be involved in the psychoanalysis of children; they should simply not interfere with the process. If, on the other hand, we focus more on *deficit* in the psychic structure, like the authors who identify with the developmentally

based psychotherapy created in the Anna Freud Center, e.g. Anne Hurry (1998), then we realize that the role of the parents in the development of a child's psychopathology is essential. Therefore they should also be, in one way or another, engaged not only in the assessment but also in the process of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy of their children.

This gives rise to a general question concerning the status of the internal and the external in the understanding of development and psychopathology.

According to Joyce (2011), the "interplay of fantasy and reality [...] is at the heart of how we live in our relationships in the world". I think that this point of view allows a multidimensional insight into family interrelations and allows the analysis of the nature of sibling relationships. It is, as I see it, the perspective of Cinderella and her ugly sisters on the one hand, and the lonely Hansel and Gretel on the other.

Looking at the situation of Cinderella and analyzing her mechanisms of dealing with rivalry, we

cannot omit reality, e.g. two important facts. Firstly, the girl lost her mother in her adolescent years; her father remarried very quickly without, it seems, being able to mourn for her mother. Secondly, the stepmother with her two daughters forced Cinderella into servitude; the girl had to work day and night, and was often covered with cinders as she "curled up

near the fireplace in an effort to stay warm" (Cinderella, 2011). In one version of Cinderella's story, I found a sentence, stating: "Cinderella bears the abuse patiently and dares not tell her father, since his wife controls him entirely" (Cinderella, 2011). In this expression two important elements are shown: the orphan girl is neglected and abused in her new family and the father is able neither to help her mourn for her mother nor to protect her. Joyce (2011) sees the explanation, among others, in the intense jealousy of the stepmother concerning "the father's previous life and relationship". Joyce (2011) directs attention to the fact that in the mental representations of some parents, their children play a specific role. Sometimes particular

children in families are unconsciously linked in the parents' minds with a favoured or hated sibling, parent or grandparent. Such confusion of time and persons could lead to direct, specific types of behavior of parents towards their children, sometimes reaching the status of maltreatment.

Angela Joyce, in her paper *The parent-infant relationship and infant mental health* (Joyce, 2005a), lists not only the components of "good enough" parenting but also the factors that interfere with it. They are: 1) unresolved issues from the past or the present (parents may be prolonging their infant's dependence on them or, conversely, they may feel that the baby is demanding too much); 2) trauma and loss (the parents may lack mental representations of those events and be in a state of denial or dissociation, or an ongoing preoccupation); 3) mental illness (they may be emotionally unavailable for the child); 4) emotional and behavioral unpredictability (they may be at times loving and at times hostile, without any rules concerning those states), and 5) unhelpful ways of being with the baby (the parents may be unable to promote the separateness and individuation in the child, they cannot help him or her to develop the capacity for agency, etc).

Once again we have a dilemma and may ask: If we agree that the factors mentioned above constitute a deficit of the mental functioning of the parent (PDM, 2006), could we then consider such parenting the child's fantasy or should we see it as an environmental reality? Is destructive sibling rivalry a phenomenon that is bound to occur in every family because it is connected to the psychodynamics of the drive – or is it characteristic only for the families where "good enough parenting" (as understood by D.W. Winnicott) does not take place? Whatever the answer may be, we know nowadays that siblings play a very important role in the family. Juliet Mitchell (2003) formulates this as follows: "siblings provide a way of learning to love and hate the same person" (p. 225).

I would like to concentrate now on another fairy tale: *Hansel and Gretel*. It is a story that can confirm the hypothesis stating that siblings do not have to fight and compete; on the contrary, they can support each other.

The tale of Hansel and Gretel is a story (in the Grimm Brothers' version) of a boy and girl who suffer rejection and are confronted with the ex-

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cessive hostility of their mother. She says to her husband: "Early tomorrow we will take the children out into the forest to where it is the thickest; there we will light a fire for them, and give each of them one more piece of bread, and then we will go to our work and leave them alone. They will not find the way home again, and we shall be rid of them" (Hansel and Gretel, 2011). The children get lost in the wood and when they discover the little house they are very happy that they can eat it. The reader has no problem understanding that they are hungry, both physically and psychologically. The house is built of bread and covered with cakes; its windows are of clear sugar. Bruno Bettelheim (1985) interpreted the story mainly in terms of the oral greediness of a child and the penalty for it stemming from internal structures. How can the fairy tale be analyzed from an interpersonal perspective? Could it be said, for example, that neglected, rejected children help each other to survive, both existentially and mentally? At the beginning of the story Hansel takes care of himself and of Gretel by collecting and then throwing white pebbles that show them the way home. Later on it is Gretel who saves Hansel's life; she is very clever and does not lose her head when confronted with the threats of the wicked witch planning to kill her brother.

Hansel and Gretel care for each other, whereas Cinderella is in a position where she must take care of her stepmother and her stepsisters. Cinderella is destructively parentified.

Parentification

In the psychotraumatology the term of *role reversal* or *parentification* is used to describe the phenomena of subjective distortion of a relationship, as if one's child were his or her parent (Burnett, Jones, Bliwise & Ross, 2006; Schier, 2010). A child takes care (both instrumentally and emotionally) of his or her caretaker or of his or her sibling. Nancy Chase (1999) defines parentification as follows: "(it) entails a functional and emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for the logistical and emotional needs of the parent" (p. 5). Childhood parentification appears related to child abuse (Burnett,

Jones, Bliwise & Ross, 2006), and Jurkovic (1997) describes pathological parentification as "a discriminable category of maltreatment". The role reversal in families is considered a trauma by some authors. According to Hooper (2007), parentification involves three of the four characteristics of trauma as defined by Tadeschi and Calhoun (1995). These are: (1) a traumatic event or environment leaves an individual feeling like he or she has no control, (2) traumatic events are usually sudden and unexpected, the person confronted with them is unprepared, (3) trauma is often an unknown event, so a person does not know how to cope with it and (4) traumatic events lead to long-lasting consequences for an individual's ability to function. Hooper (2007) points out: "First, parentification often leaves the child feeling like he or she has no control over the traumatic situation. Second, when the child first experiences parentification – depending upon age, maturity level, and developmental stage – he or she often feels ill-equipped to carry out a parental role in the family. Third, the empirical literature has supported the finding that parentification can and often does lead to long-lasting problems in adult functioning" (p. 329).

Both my clinical experience and the results from my empirical research have led me to consider parentification mainly as a form of neglect of the child's developmental needs (Schier, 2010; Schier et al., 2011). The mental representation of the self in the child's mind must be distorted, since the representation of the object plays a dominant role in his or her internal structure. Some of my patients who as children experienced role reversal in their families, used the metaphor of "an invisible child" when they were talking about themselves. Such formulation shows very clearly the consequences of this form of neglect for the development of the child.

The results of empirical research studies show, that the outcomes of attempting to fulfill a caring role impossible for a child to accomplish adequately, could be his or her feelings of self-blame and guilt (Byng-Hall, 2002). Both somatization tendencies and depression are also very often observed (Schier, 2010; Schier et al., 2011). Many authors stress that parentified children – and then adults – frequently suffer from suicidal feelings, social isolation, psychosomatic problems and other mostly internalizing symptoms (Byng-Hall, 2002; Schier

et al., 2011). The term “parentification” was coined by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1981) to describe not only a form of family dysfunction but also a form of family life in general. Therefore, a distinction should be made between “constructive parentification” (i.e. a child's adequate contribution to the family) and “destructive parentification” (i.e. an inadequate contribution compromising the development of the child, both in the short and long term). I think that Cinderella is a victim of destructive parentification, whereas Hansel and Gretel take care of each other in such a way that leads to posttraumatic growth (Schier et al., 2011).

An important question arises here: why does a parent look to his or her child for support, whether it be instrumental, emotional, or both – instead of supporting the child? In terms of John Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris, 2011), it could be stated that in order to “survive emotionally”, children have to mobilize their care giving system towards the parents, instead of receiving care from them (Schier, 2010). Only those adults who consider their unmet needs for nurturance in childhood as “accounts due” turn to their children to fulfill parental roles, and look to their children for parenting as a way of balancing the ledger (Jacobvitz, Riggs & Johnson, 1999). The attachment needs of the children remain in the background because this is the only way they are able to maintain proximity to and contact with their parent. The parentified role may provide a child with a sense of control in an unpredictable environment (Burnett, Jones, Bliwise & Ross, 2006). Moreover, the ability to cope with the increased responsibilities experienced when children undertake adult roles may actually, in some specific sense, benefit the children if they perceive that the consequences of behavior can be controlled and self-influenced (Williams & Francis, 2010). Parentification could be considered both as an interpersonal and also intrapsychic phenomenon. This leads us back to the previously mentioned question concerning the role of the “real” in psychoanalysis, both from the theoretical and clinical point of view (Gabbard, Litowitz & Williams, 2012).

Nancy McWilliams (2011), a co-author of the PDM (*Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual*), during her lecture in Warsaw, said that the dilemma: internal vs. external in analyzing development and

explaining psychopathology in terms of psychoanalytical theory, is artificial. Some theories stress one aspect of phenomena, some another, but all of them are equally substantial. The comparison of the attachment theory of John Bowlby on the one side, and the theory of Melanie Klein on the other are examples of the significant discrepancy in thinking in terms of reality and fantasy (or interpersonal vs. intrapsychic). Gabbard, Litowitz and Williams (2012) demonstrate these differences very clearly.

The relationships in the family, the attitudes, wishes and desires between parents and children and among siblings could be expressed directly - verbally and by being acted out - or they could be shown indirectly, “through” the body (Schier, 2010). This mechanism is especially activated in families where the neglect of the children's developmental needs (e.g. parentification) occurs. The traumatic aspect of this psychodynamics for the child could be quite often invisible to the outside world (Hooper, 2007). I think that in such families the way in which the child experiences (perceives and feels) his or her body could be one of the consequences of the disturbed family dynamics. An implicit language, not readable by everyone!

The place of the body in psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud (1923/1961) said that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego” (p. 27). For many years this basic idea did not lead to the development of the theory linking the body with the mind, it was a topic quite neglected in psychoanalysis. Talking about the body we have to distinguish between the real body, the body self and the body image, the last describing the psychic representation of the body and its functions in one's mind (Schier, 2005; 2010).

David Krueger (2002) sees the importance of the early mother-child relationship for the development of the body self. According to him, the earliest imprint of the mother on the child is through bodily sensations and feelings, the earliest body contact and attunement to body sensations, sensory matching, and secure holding. It emerges in the time before verbal communication is possible. The body and its evolving mental representations are the foundations of the sense of self (Krueger, 2002).

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Where the body is concerned, one must take into consideration the role of culture and its influence on various practices connected with the body (Grogan, 2008). Nowadays, we are experiencing genuine "madness" concerning the ideal body. TV programs promising a total metamorphosis like "Make Me Perfect", various magazines (mostly for women) create a totally unreal model of the body image. Women should be slim and tall; men tall and muscular (Grogan, 2008). Toys like Barbie Dolls have unrealistic proportions; such body shapes do not exist in nature (Schier, 2010). Media imagery may be particularly important in producing changes in the ways that the body is experienced and evaluated, depending on the viewers' perception of the importance of it (Grogan, 2008). The data from empirical studies (Grogan, 2008; Schier, 2010) prove that the majority of women are not satisfied with their bodies, neither with

their body parts nor with their body functions. Lately more and more men, mostly young, are prone to the same dissatisfaction. An alarming phenomenon!

The sisters of Cinderella, who in the Grimms' version, were "beautiful yet evil" (Cinderella, 2011), tried to trick the prince by cutting

off parts of their feet. One of them cut off her toes, the other her heel. They did so, on the advice and with the help of their mother, thus attempting to fit into the shoe, a small slipper that Cinderella had lost and which could fit only her.

If we look at the story from a sociological perspective, we should not forget to analyze the role of body modification in culture. Bettelheim (1985) stresses that the ancient story of Cinderella stretched back to China in the 9th Century BC. In China the tradition of foot binding in women is very long. Foot binding (2011) was the painful custom of tightly binding the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. Tiny narrow feet were considered beautiful. Bound feet were regarded as intensely erotic in Chinese culture and a woman with perfect lotus feet was likely to make a more prestigious marriage. To enable the size of the feet to be reduced (7-9 cm), the toes on each foot were curled under, then pressed with great force down-

wards and squeezed into the sole of the foot until the toes broke. This was all carried out without the use of pain relief, and was extremely painful for the girl being bound. Foot-binding resulted in lifelong disabilities for most of its subjects (Foot binding, 2011).

I think that such enormous pressure of the environment cannot be denied when analyzing the functioning of a person. Together with the intrapsychic perspective, the cultural and family dynamic elements must also be elaborated on. In *Cinderella* it is the mother who forces her daughters to undergo these cruel practices. She wants them to marry and to find, perhaps through marriage, social acceptance. Jones (2011) gives an interesting clinical example showing the importance of the relationship with the mother for the positive libidinal investment of the body of a maturing girl. The girl presented in the clinical vignette is not eating sufficiently; she is in serious conflict with her growing body, a conflict existing also in the mind of her mother, who found "the first stirrings of her adolescent sexuality unacceptable".

In *Cinderella* "the body" is being used as a scene for acting out the rivalry among siblings. "Through" the body or through the actions undertaken towards it by Cinderella's sisters, the cruelty representing the strength of the aggressive drive could be expressed. But the bodily contact could also be a source of care, which is illustrated by another fairy tale, discussed in this paper. In *Hansel and Gretel* the children were lost in the woods when they left home. They were able to use their bodies for coping with the external danger: "All night the two children huddled together for warmth at the foot of a large tree" (Hansel and Gretel, 2011). Gretel helped Hansel to trick the wicked witch by showing her an old bone instead of Hansel's finger. It could be said that they were using their bodies or parts of them to protect and support each other.

According to Dinora Pines (2010), the early mother-child relationship is developed through the body; the attitude of the mother is practically felt via the skin. Pines (2010) states, that: "through her handling of the child the mother's skin may convey the full range of emotions, from tenderness and warmth and love to disgust and hate" (p. 8). A child that is vulnerable and does not have adequate adaptation and defense mechanisms to cope with emotional pain, uses the body to cope with

it (Lemma, 2010). Such a child did probably not experience his or her mother as a mirror. Angela Joyce (2005b) in connection with the theory of D. W. Winnicott, describes mirroring as a situation in which “the baby gazes into her eyes and sees himself” (p. 45).

How does psychoanalysis deal today with the challenges stemming from our culture concerning the unrealistic ideal of the woman's and man's body? There are attempts to develop the theory of body self (Krueger, 2002), to conduct empirical research based on psychoanalytic assumptions (Schier, 2010) or to analyze the unconscious fantasies connected with body modification (Lemma, 2010). All these efforts seem, however, to be insufficient; they cannot influence the media and “the images of the slender pre-pubescent bodies ... invade our minds” with full strength (Lemma, 2010, p. 17). There predominates a “normative discontent” with our bodies (Schier, 2010; Lemma, 2010).

According to Alessandra Lemma (2010) thinking about the body must exist in dialectical relationship with the external world. Body and mind are inseparable. Lemma (2010) says: “We need to reclaim the body from its relative neglect in our subjective experience, in our social life, in our analytic thinking and practice, otherwise thinking itself is not possible” (Lemma, 2010, p. 176).

I find a short clinical example to be the best way of illustrating the issues discussed above.

Zosia - Cinderella, Gretel or both of them?

I met Zosia (Sophie) when she was seventeen years old and had contact with the patient and her parents in the process of a prolonged assessment and diagnosis. Zosia's parents “brought” her to the meeting with a psychotherapist because she was seriously worried that she would not be able to pass her examinations at the end of the school year. It is important to point out that she was the best student in her class. The girl was blond, slim, not very tall, attractive. To my surprise both parents came with the girl to the first meeting and it was they who did all the talking. Zosia was in the room but remained mostly silent, as if non-existent.

The parents started by explaining in detail their

duties and responsibilities. They both had high social positions; they were both chief managers of big enterprises. The father expressed his difficulty in understanding the concerns of the girl. He kept stressing that his daughter “should stop thinking this bullshit, stop exaggerating and just concentrate on her work”. I had the feeling that he could not empathize with his daughter, but in some way he seemed able to care, at least in terms of her scholastic achievements. The mother on the other hand, talked mainly about herself throughout the meeting, focusing on how busy she always was. She expressed her wish that Zosia “leave both her dirty shoes that she was wearing at school and her excessive concerns at school instead of bringing them home”. I proposed an individual diagnostic session with the girl. It was not surprising for me to notice that without the presence of her parents, Zosia behaved differently. She was ready to talk; she created the impression of being intent on speaking about herself and her family. I learned that the patient had a younger brother, Kuba (Jacob), who was born when she was twelve years old. “He is practically like a son for me”, she said with pride. Zosia would take her 5-year-old brother to kindergarten every day, she very often took care of him at home when



she came back from school; and she even spent two weeks of summer holidays alone with him at the seaside. I had the impression (which later on proved correct) that in Zosia's family a role reversal had taken place; the sister had to take extensive care of her brother. I asked the patient to use the *Scenotest* and arrange a scene. The patient took a few figures and two chairs. The female and male figures were seated opposite each other. The figure of a girl was standing at some distance; she was carrying the figure of a small boy on her shoulder. “It is the brother of the girl”, Zosia said. And she added: “Kuba likes when I carry him like this”. For me it was a typical image symbolizing parentification, it reminded me of a painting by René Magritte; “L'Esprit de Géométrie”. In this picture there is a huge baby in a dress carrying the small figure of a woman in its arms. However in Zosia's scene it was not a child carrying a parent, but a sister car-

rying her brother. The patient told me that their mother had practically “left” Kuba to her (Zosia) and to her mother-in-law. According to the girl their mother was very busy with her work. Each day when she came back home she was so tired that all she could do was lie down. But, as I discovered during an interview with the mother later on, she displayed a totally different image to the outside world. Zosia's mother presented herself as an ideal mother. She told me, for example, how proud she was to be the mother of her daughter, “a genius”, the best pupil in the class. But it was apparent that she knew very little about the internal life of her daughter, she knew nothing about her daughter's friends, her problems at school or her plans for the future. I had the impression that in her mind there was very limited room for her daughter, for some reason she could not accept (and mirror) her emotional needs. In some sense Zosia was “invisible”. Most probably Zosia's mother herself did not have good enough “mirroring” experiences with her own mother; perhaps she had also had to suffer neglect or rejection in her childhood years.

I was sure that the nature of the relationship with her mother must have had an impact of the representation of the body in Zosia. I asked her how she felt about her body. At that moment the girl started to cry bitterly. For quite a long time she could not stop crying; through the tears she said that she felt “ugly, fat and stinky”. I was very moved by this description of the enormous hatred she directed towards her body. It was obvious to me that to protect the “good” internal representation both of her brother and her parents (mostly, her mother), she had to shift all the negative impulses towards her body. She did not allow herself to think consciously that the situation at home was “rotten”, but it was her body that according to her did not smell good. Zosia told me that she could cope alone with the situation at school and with her fears about the examinations, but she needed help regarding her body. I understood that the role reversal was not only a burden to the girl but it also helped her to develop a kind of reflective function. She knew precisely what kind of support she needed. I believed that it was the girl's body that carried the burden: both the family burden and the burden of her denial and reaction formation connected with her feelings towards the birth of her brother and the necessity to take care of him.

But, on the other hand, the role of “mother” to her brother gave her some kind of control over her impulses (intrapsychic) and over the situation at home (interpersonal). In this sense, it favored to some extent the posttraumatic growth. I referred Zosia to a colleague who works with adolescents and who is both a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist and a dancer. This woman knows very well how to combine working through the mental content and working with the body, both “the real body” and the mental representation of it. The concept of *vitality* (both in psychological and physical terms) proposed by Daniel N. Stern (2011), could be useful in understanding the necessity of this kind of integration in the psychotherapeutic work.

Conclusion

The clinical example illustrated the difficulty of distinguishing between reality and fantasy in the mental world of an adolescent girl who suffered from role reversal in her family. Her younger brother could not be experienced as a rival, since she had to take real care of him. She became the “as if” mother. I think that the patient was both Cinderella, serving her family, mostly emotionally but also instrumentally, and Gretel: a sister that has to “rescue” her brother. But she was also Cinderella's sister. Her body had to pay a very high price, she hated it intensely. The neglect of her own developmental needs was in some sense “written down” in her body, in her attitudes and emotions towards it. It was the reason why I thought that the patient could profit from integrative psychotherapeutic help, both for her mind and for her body.

As it has been said before, for some reason, the representatives of some psychoanalytic schools used to fight fiercely to prove that their theoretical and clinical perspectives were better than others. Some schools stressed the role of the unconscious fantasy and the dynamics of the drive, some, on the other hand, explained psychopathology in terms of various interpersonal factors. But perhaps now the time for more integration and cooperation is at hand? If we analyze the body-mind connection the “old” dilemma: internal vs. external is not valid any more. One cannot speak about embodiment using only one perspective. Both elements: in-

trapsychic and interpersonal must be taken into consideration. And additionally, the cultural aspects mustn't be forgotten! I think that the connection between family dynamics, between the "real" in relationships and the way of coping with it on the "fantasy" level – both in the mind and in the body – is truly complex. The precise elaboration of this complexity is beyond the scope of a paper like this one.

I suppose that the second edition of *Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (2012), edited by Glen O. Gabbard, Bonnie E. Litowitz and Paul Williams, is an example of integrative development in psychoanalysis. One could be under the impression that the editors and the authors of this book have tried to introduce the schools in psychoanalysis not as competing, but rather as coexisting "siblings". I sincerely hope that soon we will all, using the psychoanalytic way of thinking about the human condition, start to identify more with *Hansel and Gretel* and less with the ugly sisters of *Cinderella*! I am sure that our patients like Zosia, suffering both psychologically and physically (in terms of their distorted body self), would be truly grateful for this.

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Abstract

The author analyzes the relationship of siblings in connection with the problem of the neglect of children's developmental needs. The dynamics of the family and especially the problem of role reversal or parentification are elaborated. The dilemma: external vs. internal and the problem of the body-mind connection are discussed and illustrated by two fairy tales: *Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel*. The author proposes the hypothesis that in families where the neglect of children's developmental needs (e.g. parentification) occurs, one of the consequences of the disturbed family dynamics could be the way in which the child perceives and feels his or her body. The theoretical discourse is enriched by a clinical example. The author discusses the attitude of different schools in psychoanalysis in terms of their coexistence and rivalry. The metaphor of siblings is used in this context.

Sammendrag

Forfatteren analyserer forholdet mellom søsken i relasjon til neglekt av barns utviklingsmessige behov. Familiedynamikk og spesielt parentifisering er vektlagt. Hun diskuterer dilemmaer mellom eksternaliserte versus internaliserte vansker i forbindelse mellom kropp og sinn. Dette er illustrert med de to eventyrene om *Askepott* og *Hans og Grete*. Forfatteren diskuterer om forstyrret familiedynamikk i kombinasjon med manglende utviklingsstøtte (for eksempel parentifisering) kan påvirke barnets opplevelse av egen kropp. Klinisk eksempel illustrerer teorien. Forfatteren tar også for seg rivalisering mellom forskjellige psykoanalytiske skoler og retninger.

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