

## Review of

*Individuation for Adult Replacement Children. Ways of Coming into Being* by Kristina E. Schellinski, published by Routledge, London and New York, 2020; 228 pp.

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This recent publication by Kristina Schellinski, a senior analytical psychologist with the C. G. Jung Institute in Zürich, is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the subject of the ‘replacement child’ condition. The book is structured in eleven chapters, covering such topics as *Famous replacement children; Identity; Working through grief*, and *Treatment, prevention and transgenerational transmission*. It also includes numerous clinical cases, some fifteen illustrations of paintings and statues, and an extensive bibliography.

Throughout the book, Schellinski presents a variety of phenomenological and psychodynamic descriptions of the adult ‘replacement children’ condition, attempts to understand the deep-rooted reasons for their suffering and sense of identity confusion, and offers therapeutic suggestions on how they may emerge from their predicament.

In each chapter, under the heading *On a personal note* framed alongside the main text, the author bravely discusses her own experience of coming to terms, as an adult, with the loss of her two-year old brother Wolfgang, who died when their mother was already three months pregnant with her. ‘When I felt no longer the need to be like my brother’, she writes in one of the last of these *Notes*, ‘I became freer to become myself... as I no longer believed that I owed my life to his disappearance’ (p. 164). Her own personal case, however, as well as many of the others discussed here,

raises for me fundamental questions concerning the definition itself of *replacement children*.

In the author's view, such a definition should include those individuals whose identity as replacements of a deceased person is attributed to them by others (mostly a close relative), or those who self-identify themselves with that role. In my own view, 'replacement children' should refer only to those who have been conceived by their parents (for a complex mixture of conscious and unconscious reasons) in order to replace another one who had recently passed away, such as the patient I describe in my article on this subject (Sabbadini, 1988) and several of Schellinski's own patients.

Is mine too narrow a definition? Perhaps, but the risk is to expand it to such an extent ('Millions of children', the author tells us, 'have been born to make up for the loss of a human being' [p. 1]) that the concept could become redundant. Because she includes here children born after a 'stillbirth, miscarriage or abortion', those who were 'assigned the role to replace a missing person' (p. 21) and even those of relatives from the distant past ('unfinished grieving can be unconsciously *transferred* from one generation to the next' [p. 99]), and insofar as *all* families are inevitably confronted with losses, every single human being could then be classified as a replacement child. To be fair, Schellinski does concede that 'not every child born after a loss is a replacement child' (p. 6), but her whole volume seems to demonstrate the opposite – indeed, to include not only children born *after* a loss but also those born *before* one.

A generalized existential anxiety making some people feel a sense of uncertainty or confusion about their 'true' identity, that they are 'not themselves', that they are inauthentic or impostors, or even that they experience themselves as being 'someone else', are common symptoms suffered by replacement children, but not exclusively by them. Denial, idealization, projection and introjection of one's emotions after the death of someone close are universal defensive mechanisms potentially inducing a sense of loneliness, confusion and despair in those mourning them, and are not just limited to the experience of replacement children. Many of the cases presented in the book, then, interesting as they are in themselves, concern experiences of traumatic loss, grief, resentment, survivor's guilt, emotional or physical deprivation in a general sense and are not, to my mind, to be understood as directly resulting from their condition of having allegedly replaced someone else.

For instance, according to my more limiting definition, many of the replacement children from the history of psychoanalysis mentioned by the author would not fall in

that category: not Freud, who was born soon after the death of his paternal grandfather and whose brother Julius died when Sigmund was two years old; probably not Jung, who was born after two stillbirths and the death of a five-day old boy but who never mentioned any of these facts in his extended autobiographical writings; and certainly not Sabina Spielrein who lost her beloved younger sister when she, Sabina, was already a sixteen year-old adolescent.

Nor would I find it helpful to classify as replacement children some of Schellinski's own patients: like Leo who 'discovered in his thirties that he was meant to replace his grandfather' (p. 73) or Jeremy who 'was conceived around the time that his grandmother had terminated a pregnancy' (p. 77). On the other hand, some other famous people mentioned in the book, such as Vincent van Gogh and Salvador Dalí, who were both conceived a few months after the death of their brothers (and who were also named after them) are also for me clear instances of replacement children. A more arguable case would be that of Schellinski herself, who, as mentioned above, had already been conceived at the time of her brother's death.

Adult replacement children (among others) may suffer from symptoms of depression, anxiety, identity confusion, and survivor's guilt. The main thrust of Schellinski's therapeutic approach consists in her belief that that they should be encouraged to find their own true self, hidden as it is under the shadow of the dead people whom they are, often unconsciously, doomed to be replacing.

In this respect, I have found helpful the Jungian concept of *individuation*, which is of central importance to Schellinski's phenomenological descriptions and psychodynamic understanding of these patients' experiences. The self is viewed here as 'a driving force behind a slow process of transformation aiming at the self-actualization of the personality' (p. 14). This process, which 'addresses the inner dividedness of replacement children' (p. 194), is the aspect of individuation which 'allows a replacement child to find out who she or he *really* is, distinct from projections or self-identifications with a deceased child or another member of the family' (p. 15). Replacement children may present with a pseudo-identity and their identification may be precluded by their identification with another person. For those children who believe that they would not have been born if another one had not died,

their ‘existence grounded in the non-existence of another is likely to manifest in feelings of guilt and low self-esteem’ (p. 80).

In her detailed exploration of this existential condition the author also relies upon contributions from analytical sources different from her main approach: such as the theories developed by John Bowlby on ‘Attachment’, by Donald Winnicott on ‘the False Self’ and by André Green on ‘the Dead Mother’, as well as frequently quoting from a variety of seminal studies on this subject, like the article by Cain & Cain (1964) and the book by Porot (1993). However, what predominates in Schellinski’s reflections and in the rich clinical material from her work with adult replacement children is a rather orthodox analytical psychological perspective, even though Jung himself never wrote directly about the replacement child condition.

Probably because of my unfamiliarity with the Jungian language adopted by Schellinski, I found it sometimes difficult to relate to her references to arcane mythologies, to her interpretation of the concepts of *animus* and *anima*, to the somewhat nebulous metaphysical archetypal images of life and death (Eros and Thanatos represented by the colours red and black), to the idea of a ‘true essence’ of the self and of a cathartic emergence of one’s hidden soul from its shadow, to numerological speculations, to the overstretched Christian metaphors of self-sacrifice and resurrection... Not surprisingly, perhaps, I was then left puzzled by some of her statements, rooted in her Jungian orientation, like: ‘I have come to ponder the question whether a self might put at risk an ego that does not incarnate it’ (p. 143).

Our theoretical and clinical differences aside, I find many of Schellinski’s comments valuable, such as those concerning the issue of children mothering their own grieving parents; those about the importance of whether a child replaces one of the same gender or of a different one; and those on whether a newborn is given the same name as the child he or she is intended to replace, or one like René (‘reborn’) with special connotations. Schellinski usefully observes that some replacement children see themselves, and/or are seen by others, not as victims but as *golden* or *miracle* children – a difficult identity to carry around as it may involve meeting unrealistic expectations. Elsewhere I appreciated her comments on creativity as having for many (including the artists, writers and actors listed by her as replacement

children - Egon Schiele, Rainer Maria Rilke and Peter Sellers among many others) an important self-therapeutic function.

Schellinski's *Individuation for Adult Replacement Children. Ways of Coming into Being* is a rich analytical exploration - on the border between existential and clinical - of this field. A field which some of us may consider to be narrower than the one discussed here, or one that we would approach from a different perspective, but one to which Schellinski (with this volume as well as with her dedicated platform at [replacementchildforum.com](http://replacementchildforum.com)) has made a considerable contribution, to be read alongside the already existing psychological, analytical and psychiatric studies on this topic and to the future ones that her work will undoubtedly stimulate.

## REFERENCES

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