

Psychodynamics and the fateful identity of the replacement child*

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Summary

In the eyes of the parents, "replacement children" take the place of a sibling or other loved one who died before birth or at a very early age, if the parents have not sufficiently mourned the loss. The development of identity is restricted by the fact that the child is constantly compared with the idealised dead sibling and asked to correspond to its unrealistic image. This creates an alien-body-like introject in the self of the replacement child, which corresponds to the haunting ghosts and undead in mythology and leads to a permanent search for the identity of both the dead sibling and the child's own. The introject also makes one feel guilty, a basic guilt, about one's own basic "wrong" way of being and often drives the replacement child for life to achieve an unfamiliar identity that corresponds to the phantasmatic, conscious or hidden ideas of the parents.

The death of a sibling can have very different meanings and effects, depending on whether a relationship with the sibling already existed or not. In the first case, it is the task of the small child, too, to dissolve the relationship through mourning work ("Trauerarbeit", as Freud calls it) in order to come to a sense of one's self, and to reduce or let go of the feeling of guilt that has arisen from aggression and envy, also through the child's death wishes. The more the environment, above all the father and mother, are able to grieve, the more the child is able to do so. The situation is quite different with the death of a sibling at a time when the surviving sibling was not yet born or was so young, perhaps still an infant, that he or she was unable to develop a real relationship with the deceased sibling. The consequences that then arise must have been conveyed to it by the relatives who had a relationship with the deceased child and had not come to terms with the loss sufficiently, so that they use the living child in order not to have to be really (affectively) aware of it. In a way, the living child has to replace the deceased child, it is prescribed the identity of another, implanted, without knowing what is happening to it.

The phenomenon of the "replacement child" exerts a strange fascination, and this is probably due to the fact that the introject that arises in the child has the character of the uncanny. It cannot be grasped, it eludes analysis, it occupies a space in the self that seems strange. The phenomenon of the replacement child is proof that psychic entities can arise in the child in which the child itself and its instincts cannot have had any part, since an event took place before the child's existence and had an effect. The child is "innocent"; and yet it feels guilty - every introject gives rise to feelings of guilt. *amended and translated version of a chapter from: Hirsch, M.: *Schuld und Schuldgefühl - Psychoanalyse von Trauma und Introjekt*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1997

An only child can develop the omnipotent fantasy of having caused the parents to have no more children, even without a sibling having died first. Such a fantasy already gives rise to feelings of guilt, as if all conceivable siblings had been nipped in the bud in a victorious intrauterine battle, as Arlow (1972) reports. If feelings of guilt already arise because of a fantasy of having eliminated other possible siblings, how much more might an actual death cause feelings of guilt, even if it occurred before one's own birth. However, there were no clear messages from the parents. Or there were clear messages, but they had no affective equivalent, as if they had not really existed either. As mere information they are often forgotten again. In a classic work, Cain and Cain (1964) outlined the basic features of the dynamics of the replacement child: The parents' attachment to and longing for the lost child remain intense, and the surrogate child is born into a world of depression and worry. His "existence is to be seen almost exclusively as part of [the parents'] attempt to retain or regain the lost object" (p. 453), and the relationship to him is overshadowed by the image of the lost child. The authors translate the parents' unconscious attitude into a secondary-process-type language, which leads them to an attribution of guilt which then corresponds exactly to the child's later feeling of guilt: "The new child is alive in place of our dead child. It has taken its place. This child is not our dead child, [but] it should be, it is its fault that it is not.... It is responsible for all this, this is entirely its fault." (p. 448, highlighting orig.)

A young man, Beatus C., had been in analytical therapy for a long time; he suffered from a severe chronic inflammatory bowel disease. He made a soft, "feminine" impression, and his first name, Beatus, was quite unusual for a male first name in the area he came from; people immediately thought whether he should have been a "Beate". The intestinal disease made it nearly impossible for him to live; with all his strength and the help of therapy, he was able to work his way laboriously from exam to exam in his studies, he could not travel, could not take on jobs, always had to see doctors, whom, however, he played off against each other all too often. His other great difficulty lay in his relationships with girls, which were either, though rarely enough, of a companionable character or these were relationships of longing for unattainable love objects whom he desired from afar without ever speaking to them. The fundamental character of what amounted to his life-limiting force made Mr. C. and his therapist despondent and perplexed, again and again; it was as if all the quite convincing psychodynamic and family-dynamic factors could not develop any changing power. As *mere information*, Mr. C. had stated in the preliminary talks that his parents had had a first child who had died before his birth – he seldom remembered this during the years of therapy, and even the therapist did not find a proper connection between the patients' restricted life and this unknown-known death. The thought suggested itself that Mr C. should have replaced a

girl, but the parents reported, after he had asked them, that the lost child had been a boy. Mr. C. wondered if the parents had been incapable of having a boy at all or if, because of the death of the first boy, they might have unconsciously believed that he was also at risk because of his gender, so that they treated him more like a girl. "Why did it hit me like that (with the disease), why not my sisters? They've all got their driving licence, they're whizzing around and they're in relationships!" When did his illness start, someone in the group asked. Right after he started studying at a state university instead of a church university, against his parents' wishes, in order to be near the girl his parents had rejected. But he had never had a "real" girlfriend, he had never slept with a woman.

As if it was the male identity that made the separation so dangerous; real progress in therapy will probably depend on whether the heavy feelings of guilt about wanting to live as a man and separate himself can be experienced together with the attendant affect and fear, anger (at the obstructive parents) and mourning (over the dead sibling) which should actually have been processed by the parents.

Similarly, Cournut (1988, p. 76) reports "analyses stagnating until an unknown or unrecognised death was revealed [...] occurring before the patient's latency period, close in time to his birth or even before, not concerning the father or mother, but a grandparent or older sibling who died early." From remarks made in passing such as, "I think my mother had a son before me, but he died before I was born, I didn't know him" (ibid., p. 77), Cournut concludes "that there was a dead person wandering around that nobody wanted to know about." (ibid., p. 76)

The mother of one patient, Angelica, had told her when she was a child that she had had a stillbirth seven years before she was born, it should have been a boy... In times of regression, this dead brother takes on a rare quality of reality in the patient's experience: "My brother is in my head, there are three of us...", namely she herself is connected with the mother in an illusionary image of the brother's existence. She imagines him, talks to him. Then again she has the fantasy that there were only two on a bench and that she, as the youngest sibling, had sat down on one side so that the dead sibling had fallen down on the other. The parents had said they had not mourned, it had been war anyway (1949, four years after the end of the Second World War !). The patient puts herself in the mother's place, carrying something dead in her body, something cold, how horrible.

The birth of a child is always a loss, namely that of a pregnancy, as if a part of the mother's body is lost, but in return the mother gets a child. In a stillbirth, the mother gets nothing. If the parents cannot mourn, the dead child must remain somewhere, it seems to continue to exist like a ghost in the imagination of the siblings born after it.

On closer examination of the phenomenon of the surrogate child, the uncanny arises from incomprehensible connections and coincidences of fates of different people who are completely independent of each other, but whose common factor is a dead child, a sibling who died before birth or in the first months of life.

Françoise, a patient of Serge Lebovici (1988, p. 55) reveals to the analyst "that she was born exactly one year to the day after the stillbirth of a sister named Françoise; since she was fatefully born as a replacement for her dead sister, she was given the same first name. She had done what was proper: she had taken the exact place of her dead sister and had been nothing more than her substitute; she had therefore no right to an identity of her own."

Nágera (1967, p. 10) reports on Vincent van Gogh: "On 30 March 1852 the first child of their marriage was born. It was named Vincent Willem van Gogh, but was unfortunately born dead. As fate would have it, their second child was born exactly on the same day of the same month, only one year later. It too was named Vincent Willem van Gogh, after the stillborn child. [...] It was Vincent's fate to come into the world without an identity of his own. He was a replacement for his dead brother; proof of this is that his parents gave him the same name."

Joachim Küchenhoff (1991, p. 42) reports on Salvador Dalí: "Dalí's parents had a first son, Salvador Dalí di Domenech. This son died at the age of 21 months [...] [and there] was born in the same house and in the same bed the second Salvador; only nine months and 10 days separate the death of the first son from the birth of the second. For the parents, the deceased first child plays an incessant role, his picture hangs above the marriage bed, the parents constantly compare both sons. [...] 'They compared the children anew every day. They used the same clothes and gave them the same games. They treated him as if he were the other, and Dalí had the impression that he didn't exist at all'. Dalí reports these incessant allusions to the brother in everyday life: [...] Every time he left, his mother told him, 'Put on a cap if you don't want to die like your brother from meningitis.'"

Nelly Wolffheim (1989, p. 8) reports on the poet Hans Henny Jahn: "But more decisive for his psychological development is that he identified with a figure, [...] namely with his own brother, Gustav Robert Jahn, born in 1891, who died in August 1893, a good year before Jahn was born."

William Niederland (1967, p. 70) reports on Heinrich Schliemann: "The one secret – in the churchyard of Neu-Buckow – referred to the fact that a certain Heinrich Schliemann lay buried there, who had died when the Heinrich we know was three months old. This was so: In March 1822, an eight-year older brother, called Heinrich, died in Neu-Buckow and was buried in the cemetery there, where an inscription carved on the gravestone clearly

expressed in language the parents' grief at the death of their beloved son Heinrich Schliemann. Our Heinrich Schliemann, i.e. the second of this name, was born in January 1822. Despite my continued correspondence [...] and further attempts in this direction, it has not yet been possible to ascertain how it came about in 1822 that the parents named the two brothers the same." (I think that after the death of the older brother, the parents simply named the newborn after him at the age of 3 months, as he had not been baptised before).

Almost always, the temporal relationship between the death of the sibling and the conception of the replacement child alone indicates the parents' intention. The naming of four of the five cited cases drastically proves the replacement identity. And in the fifth case, that of Hans Henny Jahnn, the names of the dead and living siblings are also aligned; his biographer writes: "It is revealing that Jahnn took this dreamed-of identity with the dead brother to such an extent that he gave him [...] his own name, [...] always speaking of him as Hans Jahn, as can be seen from diary entries since 1913. I know – I will never rest there, there is already a Hans Jahn resting there! It could be me, because on the gravestone it only says: 'Here rests Hans Jahn'. – It could be me, but it's my brother..." (Wolffheim 1989, p. 8f., highlighting original).

Schliemann also proceeds to usurping an identity: „His intensive efforts to reconstitute his missing brother, are visible in his making his father Adolpf into his ‚brother‘ in many of his letters he refers thus to his father.“ (Niederland 1967, p. 68)

The grave of the deceased sibling haunts the survivors in three of the accounts. "The grave of this dead brother was near the entrance to his father's church in Zundert. Vincent probably saw this grave at least every Sunday. It must have made a peculiar impression on him to see his name on the brother's gravestone." (Nägera 1967, p. 10) Hans Henny Jahnn stands at his brother's grave: "And I can think that I have been buried for a long time. I stand at my grave and see the writing: 'Here rests Hans Jahn' and think that his power does not rest, but creates great things." (Wolffheim 1989, p. 8, highlighting original) And Schliemann stands before his brother's grave as before a riddle: "What is thus still unexplained for us today must have been one of the great and frightening mysteries of his youth for the surviving boy Heinrich, after he had learned to read and found his own name carved into the gravestone as a death inscription during visits to the graveyard of his deceased brother. He was apparently never quite sure whether he was the dead Heinrich in the grave or the living Heinrich outside the grave." (Niederland 1967, p. 70, highlighting orig.) Nothing is more obvious than to assume, as Niederland does, that this riddle was a first one in his life, and which was finally consecrated to solving the riddles of humanity, the motor for "his restless activity, work

mania, creating, travelling, earning money, learning languages, writing, excavating, bringing the hidden and the disappeared to light, reading and deciphering inscriptions." (ibid., p. 71) – "He was above all concerned with the unearthing [*Enterdung*] [...] of what was buried and thought lost, to bring it back to the light of day and thus to restore the past, the dead, to take it out of the earth and make it 'new' or 'alive'." (ibid., p. 68)

And the desire to excavate fits the character of the hidden, the introject, the "life in the grave" (Skogstad 1990), in the "crypt" (Abraham and Torok 1976), in the tomb. Since losses that are not grieved losses are leading to an introject, a foreign body in the self that causes self-esteem degradation and feelings of guilt like an alien program. In the context of our subject matter, parental trauma is implanted in the surviving child, in a transgenerational transmission.

Niederland (1967) and Pollock (1978) point out that in such cases of visible traumatic loss, one root of creativity lies in the moment of reparation. This is already a far step beyond a psychoanalytic theory of creativity whose basis is the sublimation of instinct forces. But in my opinion, another moment is added: that of rebellion against the implantation or attribution of the alien identity, an attempt at liberation and self-discovery similar to Jahn's "arbitrary" changes of names. "Very early on, the idea emerges in Dalí that he wants to be a genius or is already a genius. 'Nothing but immortality could have sufficed for a boy who had to make a heroic effort day after day, hour after hour, to prove to himself his unique personality'." (Küchenhoff 1991, p. 42) He had to be a genius in order not to be nothing, I would add. Even as a child, "he possessed a despotic power over his parents. Dalí's parents lived in a kind of disgust that an inconsiderate remark could trigger a crisis of anger in their son, which in their imagination had to bring him illness or death. Therefore, his craziest desires had to be satisfied." (ibid., p. 43)

It is also reported that van Gogh "had a strange, unusual, eccentric behaviour and was occasionally punished for it." (Nágera 1967, p. 15) And of his artwork, Nágera writes (ibid., p. 41) "that he had to wage a constant struggle to find an identity for himself in his life, an identity in his art, a unique style that could, he later says, distinguish him from all others and make his works, even if unsigned, recognizable." He found this unique identity through his art at the end of his life, but could not live it, had to put an end to his life. Schliemann's tireless creative drive also gave him a unique unmistakable identity, through "a creative achievement that brought him the longed-for and deserved world fame." (Niederland 1967, p. 72)

Rebellion is that one force that must be superhumanly great, so to speak, in order to defeat the introject that hinders life, as we assume it to be the case with respect to the creativity of great artists. But even there, the victory will never be a complete one, will always mean a

struggle, an up and down, because again and again the other force, that of the introject, the attribution (to the replacement child) that allows no identity of its own, will rise up. And therefore it will be a wavering, an oscillation between rebellion against and submission to this force. In the therapy of a replacement child reported by Abend (1986), two opposing fantasies could be worked out: The child had to be perfect in order to maintain the assumed standards of the parents, who measured him against the idealised sibling, so that he would not be abandoned. At the same time, he thought he had to be different from the sibling, so that he could avoid the fate of the dead brother. In the aforementioned accounts of the outstanding creative personalities, there are of course also incursions of identity doubts, of despair: Hans Henny Jahnn "has, for whatever reason, become absorbed in the role of the replacement child and attached to it the most dissolute fantasies. In his daydreams he always imagined constellations in which he was someone else than in reality." (Wolffheim 1989, p. 13) It is reported about Dalí: "He realises that he lives only for appearances, since a part of him is the deceased brother, who is still present in him, but who always eludes him and signifies a void in himself." (Küchenhoff 1991, p. 43) Van Gogh's greatest self-doubts and difficulties in life have become known through the extensive correspondence with his brother Theo, until he put an end to his life by suicide.

Two elements form the core of the psychodynamics of the "replacement child": on the one hand, the parents cannot mourn the loss and they idealise the lost child; on the other hand, they ascribe a replacement function to the new child and constantly measure it against the idealised image of the dead child. Vamik Volkan (1976, p. 118) refers to another author: "Poznanski (1972) argues that this situation already amounts to a syndrome; the new child in such cases automatically has a 'history' and inherits a set of (usually idealised) expectations generated by the deceased child. Poznanski states: 'The replacement of one child by another allows the parents to partially [deny] the death of the first child. The replacement child then acts as a barrier to the recognition of a death by the parents, since a real child exists who is a replacement. Thus, the first stages of grief are prematurely blocked, and the process of mourning continues indefinitely, with the replacement child constantly acting as a vehicle for parental pain' (p. 1193)."

Hans Henny Jahnn writes similarly in his notes: *"My dead brother died two or three years before I was born. The mother told me much about her most beloved. [...] The mother was inconsolable, her despair was only relieved when the decision was made that another child should come. [...] I was given the same name as the dead child, [...]. but I contradicted in every respect the cherished expectations, which is why the mother's grief was not overcome by me."* (Wolffheim 1989, p. 9f., highlighting original) Jahnn also describes the introjective nature of a fundamental debt from which he suffers: *"My blood went round in me, and I knew*

that it was not my blood, that nothing belonged to me, but everything to him who lay buried there. [...] I was convinced that I carried his soul, an alien soul, which now approached its true body and wanted to go out into the grave. [...] At that time I already knew the secret of my conception, that I should be what he was, and I realised that his joyful soul had come to an ugly, a disgusting, deformed body." (Wolffheim 1989, p.8, highlighting original) Here one finds an example of splitting between the idealised object (the "joyful soul") and the negative side, including the rage that should actually be directed at the dead sibling, projected onto one's own "ugly... body".

A striking example of the parents' inability to realise death is given by Chiland (1988, p. 147). In a case of male-to-female transsexualism of a man who was a replacement child, the dead child had been a girl. In this case, I understand the desire for gender reassignment again as rebellion: I want to determine my identity myself!, and at the same time as submission: To give the girl back to the parents. In a much-noticed television programme about transsexuality, there was a "detailed report about a transsexual man tending towards womanhood, Jacques, called Jackie, who had become Marie-Ange, as well as about his wife and his parents. At the mention of the death of a little daughter, Claudine, the parents were still crying, 40 years after the event. They had had the little girl before Marie-Ange was born and lost her. When asked what they had thought when they learned of their son's problem, of his surgical transformation into a daughter, they both replied. The father said: 'I thought the main thing was that Marie-Ange was there.' And the mother said: 'That she's alive.' A little later the mother added: 'It was like a blow with a club, because I wasn't prepared for it; I didn't cry, I don't cry easily. But I immediately thought: this is terrible for Marie-Ange, but she is still here.... Because Claudine is dead, but Marie-Ange is there.' And she started to cry."

Pollock (1978) lists the parents' reactions after the loss: withdrawal, guilt, overprotection and controlling the surviving child. But the overprotection, even pampering, is not for the living child but for the dead child, as Dalí must have noticed (see above Küchenhoff 1991, p. 43). The most important thing is the parents' not being able to grieve. In a slightly different context, Cournut (1988, p. 79) says of his patient: "Alban did not weep for his mother, but wept in her place, for her and on her behalf." André Green (1983, p. 213, highlighting original) has created the image of the "dead mother", an introjection of a mother who could not really grieve, and whose empty depression is taken over by her child. *"The essential feature of this depression is that it takes place in the presence of the object, which in turn is completely taken up by mourning."* (By grief here, however, is not meant real grief, but rather empty depression). The causes of depression are various, but "it should be emphatically stressed [...] that the early death of a child weighs most heavily." (ibid.) The absence of the parents' grief causes the formation of the introject in the child – from this follows that the

consequences of loss in siblings can be overcome by the parents' retroactive grieving (Pollock 1978, p. 480). In an example by Volkan (1976), a replacement child is given a doll with a porcelain head by her mother, which she is told not to play with because the head might break. The patient comes to understand that it is the dead child and also she herself who are supposed to be so fragile, she relives in therapy her earlier relationship with her depressed mother "and shows an intense and appropriate emotional response." (p. 118)

Such an introject causes feelings of guilt, which can be called survivor guilt. Furthermore, feelings of guilt arise because matching the idealised image of the dead sibling can never be achieved. Feelings of guilt also arise especially when there is an urge to leave the introjected system of the replacement child, which would give the parents back their pain. The dilemma is: Not only does the child live guilt-ridden by submission, because he accepts the order he cannot fulfil, but rebellion against it also makes him feel guilty. For identificatory submission to the introject of the dead sibling means living a death, being dead alive. But the rebellion, the liberation and separation from the introject, from the imposed identity, would in turn bring a death, that of the dead sibling, which would then first have to be realised, perceived, because the survivor's function of helping with the denial would be removed. In my opinion, the refusal would not only be a murder of the dead sibling, so to speak, but also an attack on the parents, since the surviving child must assume that they cannot endure the realisation of death because they need the replacement child so much. This is why the guilt of living a separate, self-determined life is so great according to Arnold Modell's (1965) concept of separation guilt and the "right to a life of one's own." In relation to parents needing the child for a specific purpose, the replacement child suffers also from a separation guilt feeling.

Sometimes there is the fantasy that the dead sibling has been killed, and I think that in this fantasy the murderous rage at parents who are responsible for hindering the replacement child's identity formation, finds its projective expression.

In the context of sibling rivalry, a patient of Muslim origin reports that he had an older brother who died at birth. During the pregnancy with this first child, the mother had dreamt that he would only live for three days. Until a few years ago, she had celebrated every birthday of this child like a festival and baked cakes, she had been sad and had urged the children to be sad too. Now he had the fantasy that the mother had killed the first son because she had not got along with the father at that time, as if he had been a rival of the father. He himself, on the other hand, was very much loved by his mother after his father went to Germany alone as a guest worker. He was also the one who stayed alive. Here, the oedipal fear of punishment flows into the survivor's guilt.

Another patient, Lisa, reports that she had been on holiday in her parents' homeland. She had found the home town, but not the plot of land and therefore not the grave of the dead brother who was supposed to have been buried there at that time. However, she had thought that she probably wished that the child had been killed, because then it would be proven that she was loved more by her mother, since she was still alive. – In the case reported by Cournut (1988, p. 87), too, the fantasy of the killing comes out unexpectedly: "Nora [the patient] complains of her 'dry' mind and cold body. The emptiness that is inherent in her she recognises as one that she [...] 'actively brings about herself'. 'I condemn myself for possessing only replacement objects [...], no real relationships'. Interpretation: 'No doubt your mother told herself the same thing after her brother died.' Immediate answer from Nora: 'But she didn't kill him!...' Rebuttal: 'Who said anything about killing?'"

The consequences of the introjection of the dead sibling by no means always consist of rebellion and creativity as a sign of great effort to determine life for oneself; much more often the life-impeding element is likely to be stronger because of the subjugation, the identification with the dead sibling. Often the two important areas, professional identity and partner relationships ("loving and working", as Freud already put it), are affected to a greater or lesser extent. The patient Lisa noticed at some point that she had been with many boys named Wolfgang, like her deceased brother. She always had younger partners and had to hide these relationships. "The younger men are like my little brother," she says; her brother was eight years older, but since he died as a small child, she carries the image of the "little brother" inside her. This is probably also the reason why she never managed to turn a relationship into a long-lasting bond and to start a family. – The patient already mentioned, Angelica, went into extreme panic when she was supposed to start her first job as a teacher. It meant for her to step out of the family bond for good. It also meant leaving behind her brother who had died before she was born, cutting off the connection to him as well, by threatening to become completely independent.

Finally, a case vignette in which the introject of the dead sibling also has an effect on the next generation: Viola had fallen ill with pneumonia at the age of six weeks, for a few days she could not make a sound, and had already received the last rites. But then she stayed alive. The first-born son of the parents had also fallen ill with pneumonia at the age of six weeks and died. She related this to the fact that she had suffered from severe asthma attacks since puberty until today, which was like a continuation of the pneumonia, like a connection with the dead brother. She has a "helper syndrome", she says, why does she always have to save a man? Maybe because otherwise she is worth nothing: "What other value do I have?" She had the feeling early on that her parents didn't want her to be there. She was not supposed to be there, but her brother was. The father in particular was very

upset that his beloved son had died, even Hanna, her daughter, was supposed to take the place of this deceased son for the father, he had firmly expected his grandchild to be a boy. Once he really played with Hanna, which he had never done with her, the patient, and suddenly it slipped out: "Oh, if only you were a boy!" – She always meets men who are in big trouble, alcoholics, addicts... Her father was easy-going, pleasant, talkative when he had a drink. She doesn't know whether she wants to save her father, or her dead brother, in order to thus save herself.

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