

# PERSONALITY GOALS AND ROLES OF FAMILY MEMBERS

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The structure of the American family and the personality goals and roles of its members are undergoing tremendous changes. This transformation has accompanied the transition in our society from the rural to the urban way of life.

The profound nature of these economic and social changes is apparent to all and may be documented by citing only a few trends:

1. The growth of large industrial organizations with a parallel decline in proportion of farms and small businesses.
2. The rising status of women resulting from her political and social emancipation.
3. The great increase of enrollment of youth in high schools, colleges and universities.
4. The continuing growth in church membership and paradoxically, the weakening of religious controls over conduct.
5. The increase in family instability as evidenced by the constantly increasing divorce and delinquency rates.

Our interest in this paper is not, however, in an analysis of these vast changes in American society. It is rather in an examination of their impact upon the family. The way in which they have affected its structure, the interpersonal relations and the roles of its members will be taken up under the following heads: 1) The decrease in the authority of the husband and father; 2) The decline in the dominance of grandparents; 3) The down-grading of parents; 4) The irresponsibility of children and the helplessness of parents; and 5) Parental uncertainty.

## 1. DECREASE IN AUTHORITY OF HUSBAND AND FATHER

The farm family was an economic unit of production, with the father as owner and manager. The wife and children had their assigned occupational duties. In the town, the husband and father was proprietor of a shop or small business. His authoritarian position was definitely recognized in American society before the Industrial Revolution.

In the modern city, however, the father and husband has been reduced to the status and role of an employee in a large company or organization employing thousands of workers. His wife has achieved actual or potential economic independence by working before marriage and at least for a short time after, and by resuming employment increasingly in her middle years. The economic, educational, and social emancipation of woman paralleled this growing separation of work from the home.

This rising status of woman in society is accompanied by her rise in influence in the home. Her husband correspondingly has experienced a down-ward movement in his standing both in industry and in the family. The authority relation of husband and wife may be pictured by the analogy of the teeter-totter. In the past in this country the husband's end was up and the wife's down. Now as the wife's has been rising the husband's end has been sinking. At present the general trend is toward an even keel with perhaps the husband's side slightly higher. In many families, however, the wife's end has risen higher than her husband's. In fact, in some families the husband's has struck bottom. The point is that the husband *ipso facto* no longer holds the recognized authority in the family.

The trend is toward equality in authority between husband and wife. In general, the husband still retains a slight lead in dominance. This is true, largely because of tradition and because he is still often the sole economic provider. With the loss of real authority in the family, the husband prizes the symbols of authority. He is nominally recognized as the head. The clever wife senses his attitude and protects his ego by fostering the illusion of his dominance, at least in public.

Children as they grow up are given or take their part in the distribution of authority in the family. There may be even a monthly family council to plan the budget of expenditures or to deal with some pressing problem.

This trend to the equalitarian sharing of authority creates new problems. A husband may enter marriage with the notion that decisions are his alone to make. The wife may believe quite as firmly that they are to be arrived at democratically after discussion. The situation of decentralized authority with children participating is far more complex than when ; as in the past, the husband and father was recognized as dominant.

## 2. DECLINE IN DOMINANCE OF GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents in the past dominated the American scene. The social life of their married children and their grandchildren revolved about them. On Sunday afternoons they gathered for dinner at the ancestral home and passed the afternoon in social visiting.

The grandparents were authorities, counselors, and guides to their children. The adult son sought his father's advice on sowing a crop or buying more land. The married daughter looked to the precepts of her mother on the feeding and rearing of babies. Disobedient children could be awed by appeals to traditional standards embodied in the persons of the grandfather and the grandmother.

Today the prospects of children having living grandparents have doubled with a life increase in the proportion of the population living beyond 65. But their place in the social scheme of things has sharply declined. The farmer son does not consult his father on planting corn. He relies on the scientific advice of the county farm agent. A daughter knows one thing with absolute certainty. The way her mother reared her is not the right way to bring up her own children. She turns instead to the pediatrician or to the latest book on child psychology.

The advance of the medical, psychological, and social sciences has made obsolete the store of wisdom of the elders and thereby contributed to shattering the dominance of the grandparents.

Even grandchildren tend to look at grandparents as baby-sitters out of contact with the social world in which they move. They may consider some grandparents overindulgent as compared with parents and shamelessly exploit them for favors, gifts, and spending money. Otherwise they are likely to regard them as they often do their parents as old-fashioned and out of step with the times.

As a boy I looked with veneration and awe on my grandfather and grandmother. I addressed them, perhaps a little less formally than many of my friends as "grandpa" and "grandma". It would never have entered my head to have called them "Bill" and "Betty". Today; however, grandparents are often addressed by their grandchildren.

### 3. DOWN-GRADING OF PARENTS

The prestige of parents, like Humpty Dumpty, has had a great fall in the past two generations. And "all the king's horses and all the king's men," I fear, will never be able to put them back on the pedestal again.

The causes for the downgrading of parents are well known to all of us. The progress of science and of education has contributed its part. Whenever a conflict of fact occurs between the opinion of a parent and the pronouncement of teacher, the latter wins out. Each generation of children reaches a higher level of education than the parents. It is little wonder then that the parent loses in the esteem of a son and daughter. One indication of this attitude is the disuse by children of the terms "father" and "mother". Instead they are addressed as "pop" and "mom" and may even be referred to in conversation with their peers as "the old man" and "the old lady".

Even more disastrous to the standing of parents with their children has been the effects of the mass media of communication: the daily paper, the movies, radio, and television. In the rural community of the past and even in the town and urban neighborhoods mother held some distinction. She baked the best cake, or embroidered best, or raised the finest roses. But any such accomplish-

ments today are dwarfed by the glamorous stars of far away Hollywood who take her place as models for her daughter. A small son of the past regarded his father as the embodiment of physical prowess and bravery. But how can he compete today with Rock Hudson, not to speak of Tarzan or Superman of the comics?

As a result the children to a great degree are emancipated from the informal as well as the formal authority of parents. Moving into the vacuum of influence is the control exerted by the teen-age group--a control as absolute or even more absolute than that ever wielded by parents.

A discerning witness of social change has pointed out a significant shift in the relation of adults and children. Formerly grandparents and parents were the center of activities and the children were observers. Today, however, children and youth are the performers and adults have been relegated to the role of observers.

#### 4. IRRESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN AND HELPLESSNESS OF PARENTS

A fourth problem faced by the modern family is the helplessness of parents in view of the irresponsibility of children. Many parents are uneasy in their feeling of lack of control over their children's conduct. The general public, for example, holds parents responsible for juvenile delinquency.

The influence of parents, as we just pointed out, is challenged by that of the adolescent group. All of us are more or less susceptible to the opinions of our peers, but no group to the maximum degree manifested by teen agers. A teen-age culture is developing in this country with its own code of conduct, its language, and its "teen" ways. It has its own heroes like James Dean and Elvis Presley.

All about us are evidences of the irresponsibility of youth. There is no time to catalogue them here. Not only does juvenile crime appear to be increasing but the delinquencies have become more serious. Among the so-called non-delinquents smoking and drinking are extending to wider circles and to younger ages among

adolescents. Venereal disease is increasing among juveniles where it was almost entirely absent earlier. In spite of increasing knowledge of contraception, illegitimate births among high school girls are more numerous than before. Excessive drinking is on the increase in colleges and is extending to the high school age. In recent years "panty" raids have made their appearance on the campus.

The chaperonage formerly exercised by parents over the social life of young people is passe. Courting no longer takes place in the front parlor. For one thing there is no front parlor. The young girl seldom asks the parent's permission before going out on a date. Many mothers are grateful if their daughters are disposed to inform them where and with whom they are dating. The daughter may introduce her escort of the evening to the mother. But he is not likely to be a boy from the neighborhood. Indeed, the daughter's escorts are so numerous that the mother cannot keep their names and faces straight. The automobile has emancipated young people from parental control of their social relations.

Little wonder then that parents feel helpless and unable to cope with the conduct of their children. The great majority of fathers and mothers can only hope that the character-building influences of the home, the school, and the church will help guide their children through the perils of adolescence and youth.

##### 5. PARENTAL UNCERTAINTY

The family of the past was stable. It might be broke by death but seldom by divorce. The enduring nature of marriage "for better or worse until death do us part" was universally recognized.

The majority of marriages still survive. Only one out of four ends in divorce. But others — none know exactly how many — are psychologically broken unions held together because of children, for fear of community opinion, or out of consideration for the other societies past and present, permanence of marriage has been replaced by a realization of the possibility of its disruption.

Uncertainty enters also into the realm of parent-child relations. American parents of earlier generations, like those of othe

the other. The feeling of uncertainty strikes deeper. The idea of societies past and present, know for certainty that their child-rearing practices were right. Today the only certainty of the typical enlightened parent is his uncertainty — uncertainty about the right way to bring up children. Consequently he tends to delay before acting and to consider alternatives. The inner conviction of the rectitude of his behavior has been replaced by a gnawing uncertainty.

In view of our description of trends in the modern family it is understandable that we sometimes view the family of the past with nostalgia. We can sympathize in this fashion with those like Sorokin and Zimmerman who propose to reestablish the institutional family with authority restored to the husband and father, with strict control over the rearing of children, and with the permanence and stability of the family reinstated. But the point is that we cannot do this if we would. The trends creating these changes cannot be reversed. Hitler and Mussolini tried it and failed.

But do we actually want to revert back to the so called "good old days"? Were they so golden as claimed? Or would they be good for us? I think not.

If we look below the surface of things we will see that the main currents of change are moving to a new type of family relations. These will be briefly described in their significance for the emerging society of the atomic age.

1. From authority of husband and father to equality and democracy in the home.

The rise of woman to a position of equality with men is giving the wife and mother a larger measure of influence. She tends to be closer to the children, to sympathize with them, and to represent their point of view and aspirations effectively to her husband. Authority is no longer solely or chiefly in the hands of the husband and father, but is shared more and more equally with the wife and is being participated in by the children.

## 2. The changing role of grandparents.

At present grandparents often pose a dilemma to their married children. They are torn between what they feel they should do to fulfill filial obligations, such as to ask a widowed mother to live with them, and a realization of its probable adverse effects upon the marital relation and upon the development of their children. Fortunately, new conceptions are arising about their mutual relationship adapted to the realities of modern life. Grandparents are asserting their right to live independent lives also. So both sides are settling for what is reciprocally satisfying — the assurance of mutual aid in emergencies, the celebration of holidays and anniversaries together, and the cultivation of vital common interests. Grandparents are not disposed to accept the role of baby sitters, but are eager to enjoy the companionship of their grandchildren.

## 3. Compensations for the loss of status by parents.

The loss of status by parents in the family is a real blow. "Honor thy father and thy mother" is one of the Ten Commandments with the divine promise of long life as a reward. Yet is *honor* what modern parents most desire from their children? And may not an overemphasis on respect prevent the emergence of the kind of relationship of parents with children most favorable for their development?

The institutional family of the past stressed status. The emphasis in the companionship family is upon interpersonal relations. In the shift from marriage arranged by parents to those of free choice by young people the trend has been away from status considerations of economic and social standing to interpersonal relations of companionship and love.

A common slogan of today is that "the father should be a pal to his son". But how many fathers follow this injunction? Recently we made a study of the opinions of fathers and mothers, sons and daughters on the importance to a happy marriage of parents and children being on like pals when doing things together. A much higher proportion of sons and daughters than of fathers and mothers voted for this companionship relations.



#### 4. The teenager in American life.

Parents are helpless when confronted with adolescent irresponsibility. This situation reflects the failure of our institutions to cope with the problem of the role of the teenager in modern society.

The family, the school, the church, industry, and the community all are inclined to deal with the teenager with an ambivalent attitude. The adolescent tends to be treated in certain situations as a child and in others as an adult. On the one hand the period of dependency on parents has increased through legislation against child labor and through the prolongation of schooling. On the other hand, he is expected to make without preparation and with little or no assistance certain vital decisions such as choice of an occupation and the selection of a mate.

Many attempts are being made to solve this perplexing problem. But even where these efforts have been successful they have been remedial like child guidance clinics, rather than preventive. Certain demonstrations look promising such as high school and college programs in family life education and marriage counseling school patrols, formulation of codes of conduct by high school students, panels of adolescents to discuss teen-age problems, committees of parents in neighborhoods with high delinquency rates, 4 H clubs, High Y clubs, and Junior Achievement. All or these should be carefully evaluated as a basis for developing a more comprehensive program.

#### 5. The uncertainties of modern marriage have their values.

At first sight, uncertainty in marriage as in life creates anxiety. But uncertainty can also be a challenge to solving a problem. There was a time when the question for the girl before marriage was how to get a husband. Now the big problem comes after marriage; how to hold a husband. This popular crude paradox conceals the more profound meaning of uncertainty in marriage. Marriage in the past was static. But modern marriage is a dynamic process of interpersonal development. The element of uncertainty can be turned to advantage once this point is grasped and acted upon.

The relation of husband and wife should not be taken for granted. It is, or should be, a process of interaction in which each new situation is grasped as an opportunity for joint participation in its mastery.

Uncertainty in the relation of parents and children appears also at first glance to be entirely emotionally upsetting. Yet the reaction of the child to the uncertainty of the parent may prepare him for meeting today's uncertain world

One of the most interesting results of the recent collaboration of psychiatrists and anthropologists has been the formulation of the theory of the basic personality structure. As a sociologist I am not prepared or competent to pass judgment upon all the specifics of weaning and toilet training practices, etc. as they may affect personality development. But regardless of specifics I feel persuaded of the fact and importance of the formation of the basic personality structure in the sense described by Erik Erikson.<sup>1</sup> He points out that parents by their attitudes and behavior in child rearing "systematically though unconsciously establish in the infant's nervous system the basic grammar of their culture's pattern. The very ministrations that help the newborn to survive thus helps his culture to survive in him and — if history will have it — through him." This childhood conditioning, although not consciously purposive, prepares individuals for the significant life activities of their society.

Three experiences seem to me to be moulding the basic personality structure of the American child to fit him for the emerging society of the future.

The first of these is uncertainty about child-rearing practices on the part of his parents. This attitude prepares the child for life in a world of uncertainty, if not of perpetual emergencies. He is challenged to be flexible and creative in meeting new situations.

The second of these is familiarity of the child with technology. The young child's acquaintance with automobiles, airplanes, and

1) In Clyde Kluckhohn and H. A. Murray (editors), *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, p. 180.

television continually amazes me. All this is favorable preparation for the campaign now under way to recruit the most talented children for science and engineering if America is to continue and maintain its new role of world leadership.

The third is the effect of the nursery school upon children. Its profound significance can hardly be overestimated. For the first time in American history very young children of the same age are brought together in association. Thus early in life is created a situation favorable to the development of what David Riesman terms "the otherdirected personality" or William H. Whyte has denominated "the organization man".

I share the admiration of these gentlemen for the virtues of the inner-directed man and the non-conforming independent. But I am convinced that the times that created these admirable characters have gone by. The new type of man who can cope with the life of today must be one who can play on the team. He must also have initiative, flexibility, and creativeness required by a constantly changing situation. He must possess, in addition to a liberal education, mastery of a specialty and an understanding of science and technology.

The problems of the personality development of family members in modern society arise largely because of the survivals of outmoded sentiments, ideas, and patterns of behavior. They are no longer appropriate in urban society and they conflict with the trends toward a companionship-democratic form of husband-wife, parent-child relation.

In the companionship-democratic family new roles and personality goals are developing for its members. The father is still the symbol of strength, but not as an authority and a disciplinarian as in the old sense. He becomes the leader in leisure-time activities, particularly those out of doors. He is a companion and adult playmate of his children.

The wife and mother has insight and understanding of family relations. She perceives and ministers to the personality needs of her husband and children. She is often a mediator, interpreting the wishes and aspirations of the children to their father.

In the modern companionship family husband and wife tend to take reversible roles. This is especially true when the wife also works outside the home. There are now classes of instruction in the care of the baby for expectant fathers as well as for expectant mothers. Husbands help with the housework. The old sharp line of distinction between what activities are masculine and what are feminine is disappearing. Although these duties in the home largely overlap, still there does generally remain a division of labor which is not traditional but the result of agreement.

Children are no longer subject to the arbitrary authority of parents. The old ordering-and-forbidding technique is on its way out. Discipline tends to be of the permissive type. Parents by discussion try to win the consent of the child. Family authority is shared with the children. Their part in it increases as they grow older. There is growing recognition of the policy that the irresponsibility of youth cannot be countered by repression. It can be controlled best by granting responsibility.

In conclusion, our main thesis may be restated. A new ideology to replace the old is the prerequisite to a reorganization of our culture and social institutions which will provide conditions for the fullest personality development of modern man. This is the great task of the National Council of Family Relations and all other organizations devoted to family life education, marriage, and family counseling.

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