

JULIET MITCHELL

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I feel very honoured to discuss the work of Juliet Mitchell.

Juliet Mitchell is a British psychoanalyst and one of the first feminist theorists to reread psychoanalysis as a theory of the social construction of gender within the institution of the patriarchal family. Mitchell's work remains central to the ongoing dialogue between psychoanalysis and feminism. Her original theoretical orientation was strongly influenced by Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud (Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Since then, Mitchell has moved in the direction of object relations theory and has written many original psychoanalytic papers and books, including an edited volume, *Selected Melanie Klein* (1986).

The main tenet of Mitchell's *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003) and her preceding work, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (2000) is that siblings are essential in any social structure. Mitchell tells us that we need a paradigm shift that includes a consideration of the lateral dimension of the sibling relationship as an independent factor in the structuring of the psyche. She argues that the sibling complex contains the key to a more complete understanding of the psychodynamics of hysteria, which had always eluded Freud.

VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL DIMENSION

Mitchell sees the family dimension as acting on two separate planes: the vertical axis, which is the relationship between parents (including their representatives, such as teachers, and adults in general) and children; and the horizontal axis, which includes all sibling (or sibling-like) relationships. The horizontal, or lateral, dimension is woven into the vertical dimension. Psychoanalysis has neglected the concept of laterality.

The lateral dimension explodes on the mental scene of the late toddler, preceding the Oedipus. The toddler is sufficiently separated from the maternal orbit to take in the reality of the other: he may be directly experiencing the birth of a sibling, becoming aware of his own interest in babies, awakening to intrusions of various types into his own dyadic unit, or beginning to pursue sexual researches about the mysteries of parental activity and how babies are made.

Mitchell suggests that it is safer to take refuge in the vertical Oedipal dimension, where the emotional experiences associated to a hierarchical power and incest taboo are more secure. The intensity of impulses directed toward siblings is less modulated by dependency and ambivalence and is therefore less subject to the incest taboo, less moderated by hierarchical power. It is more threatening.

EXPERIENCE OF SIBLINGS

The experience of siblings forces us to confront the fact that we are both similar and different. We see the “other” sibling as a reflection of ourselves. This is a narcissistic reflection: what we love in our siblings is their sameness.

Ambivalence is an inevitable component of the sibling relationship, as it is of all intimate relationships; it includes sexual desire and the impulse to murder. However, the ambivalent, narcissistic love characteristic of the sibling relationship may eventually be transmuted into love of another. “The sibling ambivalence teeters between murderous and sexual wishes. Sibling incest is rare but sexual play between siblings is probably universal” (Robertson, 2010). According to Mitchell, older brothers or sisters feel not only displaced by a new baby but also replaced.

The realization that one is not unique, that someone stands exactly in the same place as oneself and that though one has found a friend, this loss of uniqueness is, at least temporarily, equivalent to annihilation . . . sense of annihilation of the so-called primal scene, the fantasy of the parental intercourse in which one is absent from one’s own conception. (Mitchell, 2003, p. 43)

The child has lost not only her previous self but the mother as the person she was before the new baby was born. So traumatic is this threat of annihilation that it leads older siblings to wish to eliminate their replacement. Because murder is forbidden, it becomes transmuted over time into aggressive play and healthy rivalry.

The new baby registers this threat to its existence from an older sibling and develops a fear of being killed. This response also becomes transformed into hate and love as well as friendship and rivalry. The presence of siblings also confronts children with the realization that they are not unique or even irreplaceable, but ordinary. Jeanine Vivona (2012) was deeply influenced by Mitchell and has referred to this loss of uniqueness as a “universal crisis of non-uniqueness.” For the older child, the crisis may be precipitated by the actual birth of a sibling or may occur when a younger sibling becomes aware that he is not the only child in the family. The crisis of non-uniqueness propels the child to attempt to reclaim a unique position in the family and simultaneously avert recurrence of the original catastrophe by fending off potential rivals. Vivona adds that the efforts children make to regain their feeling of being special with respect to their siblings is an important component in identity formation. To return to Mitchell, this loss of uniqueness is part of what leads the child to feeling annihilated. The development of healthy self-regard depends upon a child’s ability to mourn this loss more or less successfully and accept his ordinariness.

Mitchell appreciates that there is a positive, loving side to the siblings’ relationship and writes about the lateral bonding between brothers and sisters that she observed in a nursery where she once worked. However, she emphasizes the traumatic and hostile aspects of the relationship out of her belief that they contribute to the prevalence of violence in our society, both individual and collective (Edward, 2011, p. 73).

Given the violence that plagues humankind, some of which is between peoples who are culturally and ethnically related, the idea that we might look to siblings’ relationships to help us understand the plight our world is intriguing (Edward, 2011).

SIBLING TRAUMA

Following Freud, Mitchell suggests that hatred is older than love, especially when it comes to sibling relationships. The hatred between siblings is related to trauma. The universal sibling trauma has the property of unmodulated aggression, primitive splitting of mental representations impervious to subsequent integrative mental capacity, and overall rigidity typical of traumatic experiences (Gilmore, 2011).

According to Mitchell, the trauma is the birth of the sibling, and this trauma is always pre-Oedipal, in contrast to the threat of castration in the Oedipus complex.

The child starts a new demand for self-regulation in relation to his own aggression. The shock of being replaced without the buffer of verticality is

an unimaginable trauma and is inevitably linked to recognition that he is similar to others and thus replaceable by them.

Even before the child turns his attention fully to Oedipal matters, he is unrelentingly exposed to a different and perhaps more personally infuriating primal scene, that of mother and baby in intimate connection. The motivation for aggression and the narcissistic mortification of exclusion are not softened by promises for compensation in the very distant future, but rather poignantly highlight the permanent loss of the very recent past. Being the much-loved little one is now gone forever, even though the toddler remains painfully little in all other ways. Mitchell's discussion of the loss of identity that the sibling arrival (one might almost say [ar]rival!) (Levin, personal communication) entails incorporates this mortification; the adorable little one is now big brother or big sister, an identity that holds few gratifications but multiplies the demand for self-control. Becoming a grown-up is an interminable wait, with dimly perceived pleasures about which the toddler vaguely imagines but has no experience (Gilmore, 2011).

However, one of Mitchell's most important postulates is that the child need not have siblings to have the experience of siblings—one of the inevitable traumas of childhood. The only child always waits for the arrival of siblings and fears what might then happen to her.

Mitchell argues that the trauma of the lateral dimension is a universal experience responsible for much of early childhood psychopathology.

The ambivalence between siblings oscillates between murderous and sexual desires. If sibling incest does occur, Mitchell suggests that it is a continuation of the original sibling trauma occasioned by the incestuous act. Incest also implies the breakdown of the vertical dimension of intrapsychic life, as it links to the horizontal dimension (Robertson, 2010).

LAW OF THE MOTHER: CONCEPT OF SERIALITY

Mitchell tells us that the prohibition of murder and incest comes from the mother, and she calls it "the Law of the Mother." This is a provocative reference to Jacques Lacan's notion of the "Law of the Father," which is the law of castration—the symbolic penalty for trying to stand in the father's place with the mother. Lacan's "Law of the Father" is similar to what he designates "the symbolic" and the child's accession to language. The Lacanian notion of a symbolic order that institutes language similarly positions a prior "imaginary order" that belongs to the mother (Mitchell, 2003, p. 51). The Law of the Mother works in the vertical and the horizontal axis and establishes the concept of seriality: children are the same but different.

The Law of the Mother maintains vertical differentiation between her and her children and lateral differentiation between the siblings.

In her law, the siblings occupy a place that cannot be moved (displaced). According to her law, all siblings can have a turn, and each one has to wait.

In this law

the toddler has to be prevented from trying to carry out its incestuous and murderous wishes, which need to be curtailed and transformed in some way, or displaced into new and different forms. Later they will, for instance, be normatively transformed into conjugal love and fighting the enemy, one the province of woman, the other of man. (Mitchell, 2012, p. 15)

To illustrate the concept of seriality, Mitchell compared it to the paintings of Monet.

The impressionist Claude Monet was one of the first artists to create works in a series. Monet began to explore the same subject repeatedly in what are known today as his series paintings: haystacks, poplar trees, Rouen Cathedral, and other subjects. The same ordinary subject is transformed by observing how the light changes at different times of day and year. Although technically a series of images, there is a sense of time passing, and the images seem to follow a natural sequence. There is a sense of development over time.

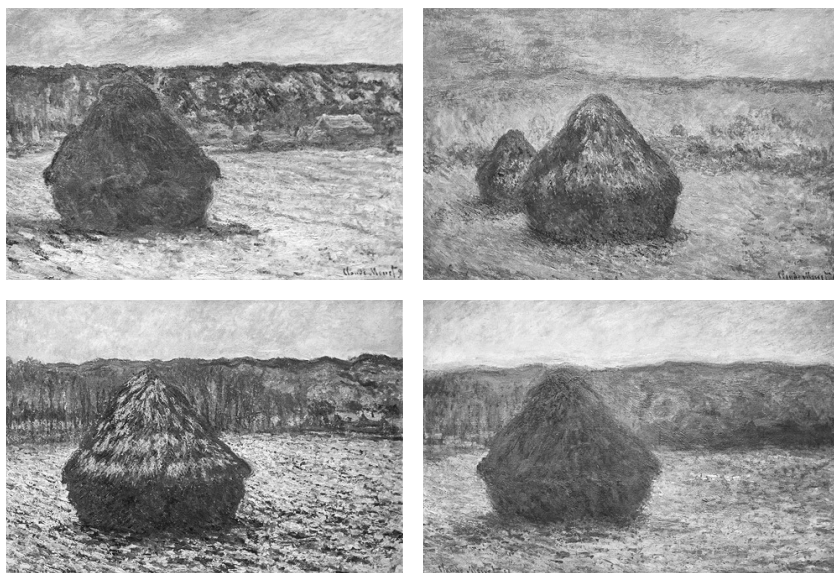
Monet looked at the same thing over and over again. Each time it was different but at the same time it was the same.

As an impressionist painter, Monet was fascinated by light: the warmth of the early morning light, the strong contrast of midday, the golden hour when the sun begins to set, twilight, or the diffused light on a cloudy day.

According to Mitchell, the law of the mother prohibits sexual desires and murderous wishes among siblings. This law states that only parents can have children and that sibling incest is prohibited.

The mother's role is always to negotiate between the children. According to Mitchell, this is a double law. When a sibling comes along, the child wants to be in one of two places. The child feels banished and wants to be either the baby that has replaced it—wants itself back as a baby—or wants to be the mother that has had the baby. There has to be some law specifically prohibiting the child's desire to have a baby.

The Law of the Mother operates both vertically between herself and her children and laterally to differentiate her children one from each other. Vertically her law decrees that children cannot procreate children. By differentiating between her children, the mother and her law allow for the con-



Monet's Haystacks Series (Art Institute, Chicago, permission of Mark Beek)

cept of seriality to be internalized. One is a child in the same position as one's siblings in regard to one's parent or parents, as one's peers in relation to one's teacher or boss, but one is also different: there is room for two, three, four or more . . . Hate for the sibling enables the first move to be made: I hate you, you are not me, is the precondition of seriality. The mother restricts this hate. The mother has enforced, but the lateral relationship itself instigates its own processes of managing sameness through constructing difference. (Mitchell, 2003, p. 35)

Seriality is different from repetition, which is a response to trauma. A new baby comes along who the child thinks is himself. This baby replaces and displaces the child, and that is traumatic. The child feels annihilated. The child begins to recover, and this recovery is achieved through knowing that a part of the child is the same as the baby. Both are in the same kin relationship to the mother, but the child knows that there is something different. "I love you both as much as each other because you are both my beloved children. But you are big, he is little, he is a boy and you're a girl" (Garb & Nixon, 2005, p. 20).

Seriality is also a way of theorizing the compulsive repetition in trauma. The shock of the sibling trauma will also be repeated and has to be reworked through in any future event that displaces a person. If the first or subsequent shock is too great, the trauma is introjected and forms a core



Plate 1, Towards the Tower

of violence within the person (Mitchell, 2003, p. 205). People traumatically, compulsively repeat something; Mitchell suggests it may be a compulsive repetition of the sibling trauma.

As I was reading Mitchell, the image that came to mind to illustrate the concept of the Law of the Mother and seriality was the work of the painter Remedios Varo and her triptych *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* of 1961. Varo was born in Spain, named by her mother as a “remedy” to forget an older sibling who had died. During the Spanish Civil War she fled to Paris. She was later forced into exile during the Nazi occupation of France and moved to Mexico City at the end of 1941, where she remained for the rest of her life. Remedios Varo was a major figure of the Surrealist school. As a twentieth-century European woman engaged in psychological exploration, Varo could not help but be influenced by the theories of Freud and Jung (Kaplan, 2000, p. 152). She repeatedly set her characters in situations traditionally linked with women. She “emphasized that hers was a specifically female journey, presented from a woman’s point of view” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 215).

In the first part of the narrative, a group of identical uniformed school-girls are bicycling away from a beehive tower in which they were being held



Plate 2, Embroidering the Earth's Mantle

captive. They are led by a “mother superior” figure and a man from whose bag birds fly out. All the girls follow the “Law of the Mother / Mother Superior.” The girls are all the same but different.

In the central plate the girls are creating their own world through weavings. All are of the same height and build; all dressed the same way, like identical sisters, a sextuplet. We can see the faces of only two of them, though they have their eyes lowered and focused upon their busy hands. The hooded figure reads from the book of instructions or catechism. Each girl works alone, but together they create a landscape with needlework.

Upon closer examination, one can see—upside-down and hidden within one of the folds in the tapestry—that one of the girls has, in Varo’s own words, “embroidered a trick [right into the tapestry] in which one can see her together with her lover.”

For me, the painting depicts the mother on the vertical axis and the daughters on the horizontal axis; the girls seem the same but upon closer look they are different. The daughters are weaving out the surface of the earth under intense supervision (the Law of the Mother). The Law of the



Plate 3, *The Escape*, Remedios Varo, 1961 © 2002 Artists Rights Society, New York

Mother operates both vertically between herself and her children and laterally to differentiate her children one from each other.

Challenging stereotypical associations of women with the devalued and often trivialized domestic realm, Varo appropriated images of household life—knitting, cooking, feeding—as settings for transcendent discoveries and magical creation. In the *Embroidery of Earth's Mantle*, Varo cleverly transformed the art of embroidery (that most genteel of domestic accomplishments, long used to prepare schoolgirls for docile femininity into a godlike act of creation and means of escape). (Kaplan, 2000, p. 217)

In the third plate one of the girls escapes, piloting her own boat-like craft—an umbrella—rebellng against the uniformity of her world and her embroidering. The image of the fleeing couple suggests Varo's own escape to marriage with Lizarraga. The pairing of fantastical and historical elements is common in Varo's work; she combines her actual escape with an escape through the imagination. To free herself from the strict environment and from the anonymity of being one of many, the girl in the

painting connives to flee the tower that isolates her from the life she is expected to live (Kaplan, 2000, p. 21). As a woman living within confinements (both in her childhood and in her adult life as a female painter in the male-dominated Surrealist field), Varo's escape through imagination was a strong part of her life.

GENDER VS. SEXUALITY

Psychoanalysis continues to challenge our thinking about gender and sexuality. Mitchell uses the term *gender* from what arises from the *lateral complex* as distinct from "sexual difference" that arises from the *vertical Oedipus complex* (Mitchell, 2003, p. 23).

Gender differences appear before sex differences. Only with puberty and the reality of reproduction does sexual difference consolidate. Mitchell distinguishes gender and sexual difference along non-reproductive and reproductive lines.

The ending of the Oedipus complex through the threat of castration makes girls and boys equal yet different, subject to a sexual division based on the presence or absence of the phallus. The symbolization of lateral sameness and difference does not depend on an absence of a sexual organ. Children note the differences, but there is no trauma related to it. The difference of sexual organs becomes major with the genital and reproductive possibilities of adolescence. Boys and girls must also accept another absence, the fact that as children they can't give birth to babies.

This, however, does not differentiate them along lateral gender but only along generational lines and by identification intergenerationally with the same-sex parent. Laterally, the fact that the reproductive aspect of their sexuality is parthenogenetic means that no loss or absence is entailed—as each child imaginatively can produce a baby on its own, there need be no heterosexuality. Sexed reproduction entails that each sex appears to offer what the other has not got. This is not so with sibling sexuality. (Mitchell, 2003, p. 25)

When siblings are sex partners, the relationship is not a reproductive one but sexual play. Melanie Klein observed that infantile sibling sexual play was common and often persisted into latency and adolescence. Because she considers that such lateral sexuality is about guilt and anxiety in *relation to the parent*, Klein believes that such behaviour can range from the damaging to the helpful—it can intensify or mitigate the guilt/anxiety. In other words, the guilt and anxiety is not about the sibling relationship itself (Mitchell, 2003, p. 82). The fact that boys like to play with boys on the playground is a pairing relationship, not a sexually differentiated one.

Similarly, women like to work with women, men like to work with men, and men like to fight with men while women like to knit with women, like in the painting of Remedios Varo. Gender relationships use gender difference as a pairing within the seriality.

CONCLUSIONS

Juliet Mitchell has been one of the first feminists to reread psychoanalysis and has challenged classic psychoanalytic theory. Classic psychoanalysis has been dominated by a vertical model of descent or ascent: mother or father to child or child to parent. Modern psychoanalytic theories focus in one way or another on the mother–child dyad but don't take into account the siblings (lateral model).

Mitchell promotes the understanding of the forgotten siblings in an original way and introduces the provocative idea that the sibling experience is traumatic versus beneficial for the development of the individual. She argues that we need a paradigm shift that includes the lateral dimension of the siblings in the structuring of the psyche. The child's traumatic discovery of her "non-uniqueness" or even being ordinary is part of what leads to feeling annihilated (Mitchell, 2003, p. 72). The development of healthy self-regard depends upon a child's ability to more or less successfully mourn this loss and accept his ordinariness.

Crucially, the child need not have siblings to experience the sibling trauma, because the only child always expects the arrival of a sibling and fears what may happen then. Single children may wonder whether their parents didn't love them enough to have another child.

Mitchell's paradigm shift is based on lateral relationships of love and sexuality or hate and war. The arrival and presence of a sibling is traumatic and the response to trauma is violence. There is a fundamental desire to murder the sibling. This violence must be turned into love—but the possibility of love is already there in the love for oneself—narcissism. "Loving one's sibling like oneself is neither exactly narcissism nor object-love. It is narcissism transmuted by a hatred that has been overcome" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 36). This entails a different dimension to psychoanalytic theory.

Mitchell distinguishes "gender" and "sexual difference" along non-reproductive and reproductive lines. In relation to reproduction, male and female are psychically polarized (sexual difference is a mark of polarity); they are thought of in binary terms, which are naturalized as two parents. In non-reproductive relationships the term *gender* is not binary. Gender is not a binary construction.

Mitchell makes the distinction between the trauma of the castration complex (Law of the Father) versus the painful realization that children cannot give birth to babies (Law of the Mother). Sexual difference is the cultural representation of two opposite sexes for reproduction.

One of the most interesting ideas is that siblings provide a way for learning to love and hate the same person. Siblings might be replaced by friends and enemies from among peer groups, and therefore she emphasizes the hostile and traumatic aspects of these relationships, as they might be important for understanding the interpretation of violence and power in our times.

There remains some identification with the violence of the traumatic experience so that throughout life, rages of that echo or repeat of the experience will be added to already existent aggression and may erupt in personal violence or be channeled into socially legitimated killing. (Mitchell, 2012, p. 12)

She deepens the idea of sibling rivalry, as in the ubiquity of profound aggression encoded in the notion that each child suffers a profound loss of uniqueness when the next is born.

Mitchell (2003) has theorized that the crisis of non-uniqueness may be resolved as individuals accept their places in a social series, in lateral relationships that recognize both similarity and difference, the human condition of being “different but equal” with respect to siblings and peers. Identification with the actual or idealized sibling may move the child toward this resolution or may be used as a defence against aggressive feelings toward the sibling, thus forestalling resolution (p. 128).

Immersing myself in the ideas of Juliet Mitchell and working on this project with “Puentes” (Bridges) taught me to think differently in working with my patients; the siblings are always present in our sessions.

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