SEXTUPLETS
SEXTUPLETS
Study of a sibling group

Linda Root Fortini and Laura Mori
Translated from Italian by Diana Sears
Orginal Title
Fratelli e sorelle coetanei—studio su una gemellarità plurima

KARNAC
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We wish to express our gratitude to the mother and the entire family of the sextuplets for their collaboration in the realization of this research study. We have respected as much as possible the personal privacy of each individual family member in our preparation of this publication.

We also wish to thank our colleagues, friends and relatives whose ideas and thoughts helped us in our investigations on the main themes of the book and in the organization of the material, text revisions, and elaboration of the tables, graphs and figures.
The topic of this book is immensely interesting. Linda Fortini had a unique opportunity to study a family of sextuplets. And she chose a unique method—one based on the psychoanalytic observation of infants and mothers which has not been used with a family of this kind. This book is a record of the development of the family in the first two years, but not only that; in addition there is a quite complex follow-up study of the children into early adulthood using material from interviews and psychological testing. Linda’s aim, together with the assistance of her colleague, Laura Mori, was to explore possible correlations between early infantile experience and later personality development.

The key method is that of psychoanalytic infant observation established by Esther Bick (1964) in the 1950s, and this study is a significant and original addition to the literature on that method of observation. At first the method was to sensitise trainee child psychotherapists and psychoanalysts to their specific field of study—the relatedness between baby and mother (Briggs 2002). However, from early on psychoanalytic infant observation began to produce original research results (Bick 1968), and this has been a growing activity (Reid et al ** 19**, Rustin, et al 19**). The method has been standardised and has its
place beside, and in parallel with, other more experimental methods of investigating mother-infant psychology. It is a naturalistic method in which the observer goes into the normal environment of the subjects of the study; it is a kind of anthropological fieldwork, with both the limitations and advantages of such a method.

Whereas this method has previously been used to investigate apparently normal families and the development of ordinary children, in this study the family is quite extraordinary. This is not just a large family. This is an overwhelming family—albeit without an intention to deprive. Even in ordinary large families, each successive baby does have a more or less exclusive relationship with maternal care, for a period immediately after birth. In this family none of the children ever get that exclusivity.

Everyone knows the stress on the family when a new baby arrives. However, the arrival of six new babies all at once is hard to imagine. One gets the impression of just what an undertaking it is. Two parents are simply not enough, and the extended family has to be called in as recruits, as well as neighbours and more official helpers. As these observations show the overwhelming clamour of neediness from six babies appears to dominate the family, and one’s anxiety on behalf of the needy children makes it difficult to reflect on the impact this makes on the reader. He gapes with admiration and shock at what the impact must have been like for the children themselves, who knew nothing else, and on the rest of the family who, to be realistic, also knew nothing else like it.

The family and its helpers were turned into a dedicated team of carers, but one remains concerned at what level of care could have been provided. This powerful impact of concern no doubt reflects the flood of concern within the family itself. That impact rubs off on the observer and ultimately the reader. In fact, in this method a direct transfer of feelings to the observer inevitably occurs, and thus enables a deeper reflection in terms of personal experiencing through a consideration of the observer’s experience. This quality of being overwhelmed by urgent physical needs is vivid in the observer, but it had no doubt been transferred in turn from the experience of the newborn baby at birth. The observer reflects the unease such that the reader ‘reads’ those feelings as well as the words.

Any baby is confronted with the challenges of a life separate in body and mind, and assaulted by completely new sensations and
mental proto-experiences. At birth a baby’s experience must include that helplessness with the unfamiliarity of its own experiences, and its lack of comprehension of how to satisfy itself. That, after all, is why mothers exist; a baby born into incomprehension and helplessness is in Winnicott’s terms only a part of a whole system, a system that consists of mother and baby together as the unit. Maternal care has not only to give bodily satisfaction in the right way at the right time, it must also do so in a way that addresses the experiences of incomprehension and helplessness. This family had to endure the impact six-fold, throughout an almost indefinite period into the future.

In baby care, the management of psychic functioning is, we know, just as important as the physical satisfaction and care. This study rightly homes in on this. It picks up on the problem of the psychic space that is available for these experiences, and the observations note very intensely the uncomfortable sense of inadequate space. The children crowd each other, and they jostle each other, in ways which seem to express that struggle to find a personal space or territory. It makes the mother think about what it must have been like inside the womb.

The focus on space makes one think of Esther Bick’s results from the original use of this method. She too found herself focusing down on the experience of space—and its boundaries. Working of course mostly with families with one newborn, it became apparent that skin contact was an essential pre-requisite for developing a sense of completeness. The physical skin represents, and is felt actually to be, the ego boundary. It needs constant stimulus at the outset of life to establish that identity of the self. Swaddling, cuddling and rocking all give that foundational skin stimulus which primes the new little person to feel the boundaries of his space, and thus his sense of self. By feeling bounded by the world, the infant can come to experience the necessary boundary in itself, that makes it feel complete. Moreover, Bick observed that where there is a deficient degree of skin contact and stimulation, the infant resorts to other substitute methods of holding itself together. These ‘second-skin’ phenomena, might be a precocious holding on to a light source, or a noise, or making repetitive noises, or keeping its muscle tone rigid to ‘hold’ himself. The present observations on this jostling and physical play may represent the possibility of appeasing the need for bodily
contact and comfort with others. That is to say, they help each other
to sense their ego-boundaries through skin sensation of each other
in their jostling. How much then do these children gain a comfort
from each other? And this reminds one of Pierre Turquet’s (1975)
idea about the way that individuals use the ‘skin-of-my-neighbour’
to define their own identity in the large group. When the observer,
and the reader, spot the problem of personal space, this may be the
direct transfer to the sensitive observer, which points to the equally
sensitive and profound struggle by the babies to begin the develop-
ment of self, boundary, and identity.

Given the apparent difficulties, intense from the outset of life, it
is surprising that so many of the babies emerged as normal enough
adults. However, two of them, the middle two, conspicuously did
not achieve a normal development. One of the infants suffered par-
ticularly from the lack of exclusivity of maternal care, and the study
shows that he precisely was the one with a slow and inadequate
development, and both mental and emotional deficiencies. Meeting
him again as a young adult he had remained the most dependent on
the family (parents and siblings), had limited social and intellectual
capacities, and had developed a chronic illness in adolescence. Psy-
chological disturbance, it seems, came to be progressively located in
this particular child in contrast to most of the others who seemed to
achieve a freedom to mature normally. This might make us turn to
group dynamic phenomena such as that of ‘scapegoating’. Indeed
with an infant observation of so many infants one might need to be
a group therapist as well as a psychoanalyst to fully comprehend
the phenomena on view. In other words did that child grow up as
the emblem of the disturbance that all of them felt? Understood in
group relations terms, that implies an important and unconscious
emotional role was allotted, and accepted, by the child. So could
that unconscious, emotional role, which sacrificed one, enable oth-
ers to be sufficiently free of disturbance to attain an ordinary enough
personality?

Inevitably, with such an original, logistically difficult and com-
plex study, the observational method was perforce modified. For
instance, after birth the infants were immediately separated from
mother and from each other, by being looked after in the clinical envi-
ronment of an incubator. This complication prevented infant-mother
observation in the normal setting from being established until the
babies were six months of age. One wonders about the impact on the development of sibling relations after the separation, and whether the observations are a record in part of that early PTSD. Despite such limitations, this is a milestone in the observation method, and later researchers are challenged to repeat this, and perhaps to find a way of investigating these earliest moments of separation.

This research study deserves to be widely read. It is pertinent in our contemporary world where assisted conceptions and multiple births are increasingly frequent. It is also a remarkable use of the psychoanalytic observational method as a planned research tool. Linda and her back-up team have given us a first insight into the turmoil of experience in such contemporary families. And she is to be congratulated on her achievement as much as the family she observed are to be congratulated on rearing som many ‘normal’ children.

Bob Hinshelwood


This is a study of an exceptional group of sextuplets who were observed at home on a monthly basis for two-hour visits over a three-year period by Linda Root Fortini, a psychologist who lives and works in Florence, Italy. We remember those meetings more than 20 years ago when we, six participants like the group of sextuplets, discussed the monthly observations. Our group consisted of a paediatrician, a neonatalogist, an auxologist, two psychoanalysts and the author as observer. We all had a common interest in research on child mental development and we followed the traditional methodology of Infant Observation established in 1948 at the Tavistock Clinic by Esther Bick, a psychoanalyst.

In each seminar group, also held at monthly intervals, an observation was read and then discussed in depth by the six group members. There was an attempt to give meaning to the various interactions noted between the children and the mother, the children and the observer, and the children and the other people present in the observations. This particular situation might provide insight into other possible events that could occur in a childhood community and in the relationship between such a community and the
participating adults, including other involved individuals as well as family members.

Thinking back to those many group discussions we are reminded that this was a completely new experience for all of us. There was a totally free and enriching exchange of ideas, many of which had already matured in our various specialized fields of work.

Uniting our different expertise and varied professional experiences, we were able to comprehend this complex family situation that also involved emotional responses in the seminar members who furnished important support to the observer. Although an expert in *Infant Observation* she, too, was faced with a new experience insofar as the method was being applied to a group of babies rather than the usual mother-child dyad. These observational experiences provide the basis for this book.

We hope that this observational study of the formation of the individual personalities in a group of sextuplets, within the context of a very unusual sibling group and the family itself, will confirm Esther Bick’s method as a research tool in the field of infant development. We are aware that this is uncharted territory, but know that we have used valid tools, which, almost to our surprise, we were able to apply usefully and correctly.

After 15 years had elapsed since the completion of the original observations, Linda Root Fortini called in her colleague Laura Mori and together they began a new phase of investigation, renewing the study on the development of the sextuplets by following them from their 18th to their 21st birthday. They followed the study aware of the originality of the project and its conclusions over the lives of the sextuplets documented in this book, which is based principally on the use of observation as a research tool.

Chapter two is dedicated to the elaboration of the most significant observations and relative inferences that arose in the 31 discussions that took place in the first three years of the sextuplets’ lives. There is an integration of this information with an overview of the pre-history or pre-infancy of this sibling group.

However, the observer’s work during the sextuplets’ first three years remained unfinished until the two authors managed to give form to the extensive, detailed documentation, with all the various rhythms of life and the relational modes of this rare sibling group consisting of six same-aged children interacting
with each other, their mother and other relatives present in the observations.

In chapter three the archives of that period provide the information for the psychodynamic profiles of the sextuplets. These profiles represent a model for the study of the children’s psycho-affective development and a valid contribution to research projects based on Infant Observation, both the studies already published as well as the work in other countries described by Dina Vallino in her book Essere Neonati (To Be a Baby) (2004).

We find particularly interesting the separate longitudinal narratives regarding each individual sextuplet. These narratives help to distinguish each child’s personality traits and facilitate the task of remembering each sextuplet individually. We read how they were perceived by the observer as based on her first impressions (see Fig. 1) that were both suggestive and pertinent to the evolutional paths described in the profiles of each child.

It is, however, in chapter four, entitled “Being in Six”, that the experiences of both the observer and the discussion group find a new possibility to study in depth the history of this unusual sibling group through the individuation and interpretation of the mother/baby/sextuplet-group relationships. It is in this chapter that the two authors explain many important related aspects of the biological community that is the object of their study. They integrated descriptive, observational, listening, psychodynamic, and theoretical points of view with the different stages of development of the sextuplet group. This resulted in an interpretative vertex of the organizational processes of relational life in the first three years.

In our opinion this chapter re-confirms the validity of Esther Bick’s well-defined Infant Observation method in this unusual situation. It also demonstrates the usefulness of the model in its containing function for all the specific aspects of this sextuplet group. Such an observational study stimulates thoughts and hypotheses regarding the group life of siblings—a topic that to date has not been sufficiently studied.

We gave wholehearted support to the observer’s proposal to carry out a follow-up of this family group after the 15-year lapse, a project comprising follow-up home visits as well as administration of intellectual evaluation tests, socio-relational questionnaires, drawings, and written self-presentsations prepared by the siblings. We were all...
motivated by a certain degree of curiosity, an important incentive in any research situation, and our minds were attentive and open to new, unexpected findings.

Thus we too found ourselves in that home, in the living room with the mother, the other relatives and the sextuplets. All of them are now young adults, each with his own personal history and particular interests, aspirations, tendencies. Each sextuplet now clearly has an individual identity, yet the six young adults are still all together as a very united group. Over the years this sibling community has transformed itself from a purely biological community into a functional community with continual relational exchanges within the group and with the outside world.

Recently, increased attention has been given to the importance of sibling experiences in the development of individual identity, including a review of the literature on this topic (D. Vallino; L. Mori). The contributions of the present study on sextuplets have led us to reflect further on certain theories regarding the sibling paradigm and the so-called sibling complex. We have noted the many other facts besides birth order which have a determining influence on the lives of the individuals in a sibling group.

We agree with our two colleagues that there are more elements of continuity than discontinuity in the comparisons between the infant profiles and the later ones. We have seen that already at the beginning of the observations there were premonitory signs of certain disturbances of development of important relational significance. These signs were evidenced in the follow-up after 15 years and predictive of areas of psychological discomfort and evolitional crises.

A follow-up aims at verifying previous findings, insofar as one looks for further information, re-examining in depth and continuing to explore the research material. In this study it was a question of acquiring further knowledge, quality- and quantity-wise, about the sextuplets. The information presented in this book is abundant and noteworthy, but we believe that it is precisely the information supplied by the follow-up that makes it so remarkable. The new input allows us to look back and reconsider the original observation experience, the work done before, including all our group discussions re-elaborating the observations. The result is an ample vision, a reflection après-coup on the complex infant/early childhood phase in the life of the sextuplets.
We wish to conclude these personal comments pointing out that the life of a group of six same-age siblings, which began over 20 years ago in that maternal womb with so many emotions and great courage (which truly needs to be said!), is still present today inside a sort of nest-like womb in that home to which the observer returned.

Gina Ferrara Mori and Franco Mori
Florence, Italy