

Beyond the Dyad: Including the Father in Separation-Individuation

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ABSTRACT: As a result of changes in family role distribution generated by the Women's Movement, many fathers are participating more directly in the care of their infants and young children. To be responsive to this change in the ecology of parenting, clinicians must reconsider and update traditional formulations about fatherhood toward an expanded theoretical perspective for learning about and helping families. Using Mahler's phases of separation-individuation as an organizing conceptual framework, the author reviews recent theory and empirical findings regarding the role of the father in preoedipal development and discusses some implications for social work practice.

A Mayan Indian proverb states: "For in the baby lies the future of the world: Mother must hold the baby close so that the baby knows that it is his world; father must take him to the highest hill so that he can see what his world is like" (Collins, 1979, p. 31). Given recent changes in occupational role distribution generated by the Women's Movement and men's increased participation in child rearing, this proverb bears reexamination for the 1980s. The working mother whose partner shares child care may help show the child "what his world is like." And the contemporary father, increasingly rewarded for expressing his nurturant strivings, may "hold the baby close," an experience which researchers believe may have important psychological benefits for the developing child.

Prior to these changes, there existed a theoretical and research blind spot between fathers and their infants and toddlers that made the mother-child dyad the primary focus for knowledge building about preoedipal development. Fathers entered the scene only when their children reached the oedipal phase. As the ecology of parenting began to change in the 1970s, a spate of research conducted by developmental psychologists and psychoanalysts began to delineate the unique role of the father in

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early child development (Abelin, 1971, 1975; Clarke-Stewart, 1977; Lamb, 1975; Lynn, 1974; Parke and Sawin, 1976; Ross, 1979). Although this flurry of research has abated somewhat in the last five years, these studies served to establish the role of the father as a topic worthy of rigorous inquiry. From this base, the literature on the father's relationship to the preoedipal child has reached a new maturity.

Nevertheless, the infiltration of this new knowledge about fatherhood into clinical theory and practice has been slow. Psychodynamic concepts that we teach and apply to the clinical encounter continue to derive from a view of the mother-child dyad as the primary interpersonal catalyst for development. While the overriding importance of the early mother-child relationship cannot be denied, a strictly matrifocal view of parenthood constricts knowledge building about contemporary family life and, ultimately, constricts practice (Lieberman, 1984). Highlighting the involved father's contributions to earliest development can provide an expanded theoretical perspective for learning about and helping families.

Many of the newly emerging psychodynamic formulations about the nurturant father's role in the preoedipal years are based on reconstructive adult analyses, individual child psychotherapies, or an observational research with small, homogeneous samples. The purpose of this article is to review these formulations and to look at the ways in which some rigorously conducted empirical studies support or raise questions about them. The conceptual framework for organizing the review is that of Margaret Mahler and her colleagues (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975). Although new research into infant competencies raises questions about aspects of her theory—particularly in relation to the validity of the normal autistic and symbiotic phases—Mahler's schema for describing precursors to and stages of separation-individuation is by now familiar and widely accepted as a means for describing preoedipal intrapsychic and interpersonal development. Its currency suggests its suitability as an organizing context for reporting theory and related research about the father's role in early child development.

The Normal Autistic Phase: Birth to Three Months

Mahler describes the first few weeks of life as a period when physiological rather than psychological processes dominate, and most of the newborn's time is spent in a half-sleeping, half-awake "autistic" state. The gradual emergence from this vegetative state is believed to be orchestrated in the earliest interactions with the mother, whose instinctual nurturant responsiveness catalyzes beginning differentiation. The instinctive capac-

ity for nurturance in women is believed to derive in part from hormonal changes related to pregnancy and lactation (Benedek, 1949). But both Benedek (1970) and Burlingham (1973) have postulated the existence of seemingly instinctual nurturing responses in fathers as well. Findings from research by Greenberg and Morris (1974) appear to support this contention. Thirty first-time fathers were given a written questionnaire from 48 to 72 hours after their child's birth, and related interviews were conducted. Attempts were made to control for such variables as age, socio-economic status, and occupation. A large percentage of these fathers reported a strong sense of affective relatedness to their newborns, many reporting a profound sense that the baby was "theirs" immediately after birth. An early awareness of distinct physical features, a sense of extreme elation, increased self-esteem, and other feelings combined to constitute a bonding phenomenon that the authors termed "engrossment" (p. 526). This was seen to be a basic biosocial potential in all fathers, triggered in part by their observing normal reflex motor behavior in their infants.

Similarly, Frodi and Lamb (1978), who monitored psychophysiological responses of mothers and fathers watching a videotape of the smiling and crying of an infant, found that patterns of autonomic arousal and relaxation were indistinguishable for male and female parents. No strictly hormonal mechanism responsible for the responsiveness of mothers was demonstrated.

Finally, Pruett (1983) studied 17 families where fathers were primary caretakers for newborns. Families on public assistance as well as those from blue and white collar and professional occupational groups were represented. From analytically oriented interviews, they concluded that "There appears to be a very literal 'taking in' of these babies by the fathers as a profound psychological event, metaphorically analogous to the physiologic incorporation by the mother of her growing fetus" (p. 269). These father-infant pairs evidenced a "biorhythmic synchrony" reminiscent of that observed in mother-infant pairs.

These observations take on particular significance in light of recent research findings about the wide range of competencies infants exhibit very soon after birth (see Emde, 1981). The evidence suggests that infants are able to discriminate among various stimuli and can elicit varying responses from caretakers within a few days post partum. Given these competencies, infants would seem capable of becoming bonded to caretaking fathers as well as to mothers.

Several child development studies have demonstrated that fathers are as capable of "mothering" as mothers are (see Parke and O'Leary, 1976; Parke and Sawin, 1976). These findings span both socio-economic and ra-

cial populations. But what makes fathering different? Parke and Sawin (1980) attempted to answer this question by conducting longitudinal research more sensitive to some of the differences between fathers' and mothers' behavior with their newborns. Results suggested that mothers spent more time in routine caregiving while fathers engaged in more social stimulation. These findings seem predictive of an aspect of the father's role in later development as active, socializing playmate.

In summary, unstructured observations by psychoanalytic authors and empirically rigorous studies by child development researchers support a view of the father as capable of emotionally responsive, nurturant caregiving during the birth- to three-month period. There are indications that his style leans in the direction of stimulating playfulness in contrast to the mother's quiet caretaking. Of particular interest is the finding in several studies (Parke and O'Leary, 1976; Parke and Sawin, 1976) that his presence lowers the quantitative amount of interaction between mother and infant. The observation of this "second-order" effect (Bronfenbrenner, 1974) during this period suggests that triadic systemic interactions may assume importance in the child's object relations much earlier than previously thought.

The Symbiotic Phase: Three to Five Months

As a forerunner to the separation-individuation phase proper, Mahler postulated a symbiotic phase to describe a state of psychological fusion with the mother. In this phase, the infant functions as though "he and his mother were an omnipotent system—a dual unity within one common boundary" (Mahler et al., 1975, p. 44). Since Mahler contended that the introjection of the functions of an adequately responsive mother forms the core of the evolving self, the cathexis of the mother during this period is believed to be a pivotal psychological achievement.

The thrust of the psychodynamic literature about the father's role in these early months is toward viewing him as sustaining mother-infant symbiosis through providing (Benedek, 1970) and by acting as an "auxiliary ego" for the mother (O'Donoghue, 1978). At least two researchers, however, have suggested that father-infant pairs may have a symbiotic phase of their own. Abelin (1975), one of Mahler's research colleagues, believes that "the father relationship seems to develop side by side with the mother relationship from the earliest weeks on, and to share many of its 'symbiotic' qualities" (p. 298).

What Abelin isolated in the symbiotic phase was a specific early smiling response to the father, occurring about two weeks later than that to

the mother. Also, stranger reactions toward fathers were reported in only three of the 11 infants observed, and then only "rarely." How these phenomena reflect father-infant symbiosis is unclear from the way results are presented. More compelling evidence emerges from the previously reported research by Pruett (1983), whose observations of "biorhythmic synchrony" between primary caretaking fathers and their infants seem suggestive of true symbiotic phenomena.

Pedersen, Anderson, and Cain (1980) employed rigorous time-sampled observational procedures to study 41 traditional families and looked at mother-father-infant as well as father-infant interactions. Findings were that behaviors believed to be intrinsic to mothers and fathers—those which consistently discriminate parents across different groups or social contexts—were more similar than dissimilar at the five-month period (the end of the symbiotic phase). Although there is no specific support for a father-infant "symbiosis," the fact that mother and father behaviors toward their infants seemed undifferentiated raises questions about whether infants' symbiotic attachments might be nonspecific as well.

When mothers, fathers, and infants were observed together, there was a decrease in the rate of both maternal and paternal interactions with the infant, echoing the "second-order" effects reported by Parke and O'Leary (1976) and Parke and Sawin (1976) in the birth- to three-month period. Behaviors such as smiling, vocalizing, looking at the infant, and vigorous play decreased when there was ongoing spouse interaction; yet feeding solids, holding, and rocking were not inhibited when both parents were interacting. Clearly, interpersonal stimuli beyond the boundaries of the dyad influence the infant's experience in the earliest weeks and months of life.

Differentiation: Five to Ten Months

Mahler and her associates have described the gradual emergence from the symbiotic state as a "hatching" process characterized by the infant's more alert sensorium and increased periods of wakefulness. At six months the first motor signals of separation-individuation appear; the infant strains his or her body away from the mother's to scan her face or pull at her hair, ears, or nose. This separation benchmark correlates in age level with the attainment of what Bowlby (1969) labeled "attachment." Attachment theory describes the attainment or maintenance of proximity to the object, and both Bowlby and Ainsworth (1969) believed that attachment is specific to the mother and is instinctually derived. Theoretically, what differentiates attachment from symbiosis is the

infant's dawning awareness of another separate individual outside his or her own boundaries; in other words, the infant has an attachment *to* rather than symbiosis *with* the object.

Michael Lamb (1977b) has employed attachment theory as a framework for exploring father-infant interactions at seven, eight, 12, and 13 months of age. Fortunately he has reported the findings of the seven- and eight-month-olds separately from the older group so that results from ages representative of the differentiation subphase can be considered.

Lamb found no evidence to support the familiar assumption that infants of this age group are uniquely attached to their mothers. In relation to behaviors such as proximity-seeking, touching, approaching, or reaching, infants of both sexes showed no preference for either parent. Additionally, analyses were conducted to determine whether separation and reunion behaviors reflected maternal preferences, as would be predicted by attachment theory and Mahler's work. There were no statistically significant preferences found for either parent. These findings lend support to those of Kotelchuck (1972), who studied separation protest in 144 six-month-old infants and found that they protested when either mothers or fathers left, but not when a female stranger left. This evidence from rigorous studies suggests reformulation of the theory that attachment is instinctually monotropic, or associated with the mother only. By inference, it would appear that infants in this subphase must begin to negotiate differentiation from fathers as well as mothers.

Practicing: Ten to 15 Months

The end of the differentiation subphase is overlapped by the practicing subphase. At this time the infant's interest expands beyond primary caretakers to transitional objects, and the sensory scope widens to include a more complex world of activities and persons. Accompanying the accomplishment of walking are rapidly evolving autonomous ego functions. New motor skills are practiced with elation, with periodic returns to the available parent for reassurance and emotional refueling. Fathers seem to respond with particular enthusiasm to their infants' increased locomotion. And the beginning of the practicing subphase marks the infant's most definite turn toward the father for specific other-than-mother purposes (Abelin, 1975).

From an extension of the 1977 research reported above, Lamb's findings seem to support Abelin's contention that the father responds specifically to the toddler's greater physical adventurousness. Lamb wanted to learn whether infants' play interactions and physical activities with fa-

thers differed from those with mothers. (In this extension of his study, data from observations of seven- and eight-month-olds were combined with observations of 12- and 13-month-olds, making the findings less applicable to the specific practicing subphase.) Lamb found that mothers and fathers engaged in quite different types of play with their babies. In general, mothers initiated quiet, conventional play like peek-a-boo games and toy play, while fathers initiated physically stimulating, active play. The average response to play with fathers by the babies was significantly more "positive" than that to play with mothers. Also, mothers and fathers held their infants for different reasons: Mothers held for caretaking or restrictive purposes, while fathers held in order to play.

These findings suggest that involved fathers may indeed assist babies differentially in the practicing encounter with the widening world, as Abelin suggests. Also, there is some evidence from a study reported by Spelke and associates (1973) that, in families where fathers' level of caretaking is high, infants may evidence less separation protest during the practicing period. When left alone with a stranger, infants in this study protested later and stopped earlier than infants whose fathers participated less. Involved fathers, therefore, may serve a particularly helpful transitional function at this subphase by fostering a sense of safety in practicing activity.

Rapprochement: 15 to 24 Months

As the child leaves infancy and becomes a toddler, he or she is capable of interacting at a much more sophisticated level than during the practicing subphase. There is more awareness of physical separation from primary objects, and increased separation anxiety becomes apparent. Mahler et al. (1975) believe that, as the toddler becomes more aware of separation, there are attempts to reinvolve the mother in the previous idyllic duality through a rapprochement with her. The good-enough mother at this phase frustrates these attempts, however, and the child's wishes for merger and delusions of omnipotence must be relinquished. A "rapprochement crisis" ensues, with attendant frustration, resentment, and consequent ambivalence. The manner in which parent and toddler negotiate this crisis is believed to be a pivotal determinant of successful ego development. Successful resolution of the crisis allows the toddler to develop a capacity for tolerating ambivalent feelings toward the object and resume the work of separating.

Abelin (1971, 1975) believes that the father acts as a stabilizing agent for the rapprochement child—an island of external reality who remains

uncontaminated by the turmoil of ambivalence ascending in his or her relationship to the mother. In Abelin's subjects, for example, toddlers began to imagine the father in play situations when disappointed in their mothers. This "uncontaminated" father image "may be necessary for an adequate resolution of the ambivalent rapprochement position" (Abelin, 1971, p. 248).

Again, the work of Michael Lamb (1977a) offers some interesting child development parallels to and perspectives on rapprochement theory. In studying 15- to 24-month-old toddlers, Lamb wondered whether they attached themselves more to fathers as they moved into the world beyond mother. Indeed, Lamb found an increase in both attachment and affiliative behaviors toward fathers as compared to mothers. Fathers in this study consistently made themselves more salient during this age period, leading their children to interact with them preferentially. Inasmuch as this salience was responsive to cues from the children, it could be that Lamb was observing some derivatives of the child turning to father for less ambivalently cathected interactions. In Pruett's (1983) study of primary caretaking fathers, however, it was the mothers who appeared to serve the role of helping their children relinquish symbiotic ties to the fathers. Such evidence further dispels a notion that symbiosis is formed exclusively with mothers on the basis of a biologically based monotropy.

The Early Triangulation Hypothesis

Several child development studies mentioned earlier have pointed out the existence of indirect, or "second order" effects, referring to one parent's influence on the child through interactions with the other. A psychodynamic correlate to this systemic perspective is found in Abelin's (1975) work. He has hypothesized a phenomenon called "early triangulation" that becomes organized at about 18 months. At this point, "Perceiving himself in the double mirror provided by the parents and responding to their relationship as a couple, a toddler passes beyond the stage of sensed symbiotic yearnings to an articulation of a wish in identification and potential rivalry with the one parent for the other" (Ross, 1979, p. 324). Abelin believes that the child can recognize himself or herself as separate only in an experience of being outside a dyad. For boys, this translates to an inner construction—"There must be an I like him wanting her"—a precursor to the oedipus complex that heralds the beginnings of core gender identity. For girls, this triangulation—"There must be an I like her wanting him"—is believed to form somewhat later, following an extended period when a sibling or other child is viewed as the primary rival for the mother's love (Abelin, 1980).

Basing his hypothesis on Piaget's ideas, Abelin believes that this cognitive ability to internalize an image of one libidinally cathected object desiring another is a pivotal psychic organizer that catalyzes the transition from sensorimotor to symbolic thought. This is believed to be a visually mediated process—the child “sees” another interacting with mother. Findings from a pivotal longitudinal child development study offer some fascinating correlates to this largely hypothetical formulation. In studying the development of representational thought in infants between nine and 36 months of age, Brooks-Gunn and Lewis (1975) found that, at 15 months, only 25% of the subjects labeled a picture of their fathers correctly. But at 18 months, 100% labeled fathers' pictures without error. In contrast, mothers were not labeled at all until infants were 18 months old; and the mother label was not used correctly with consistency until the child was 24 months old. In this sample, children looked at pictures of fathers for longer time periods than they did pictures of mothers; and the word “daddy” preceded “mommy” in the sequential development of speech. Brooks-Gunn and Lewis assert that, through a process termed “transitivity,” the infant's labeling of the father is facilitated by the mother who may refer to him in his absence during the course of the day. Further, the internal representation of the father is facilitated by “distancing” occasioned by his more frequent absence from home in traditionally structured families. Cognitively and emotionally, an ability to “see,” identify, and put language with the father representation would appear to derive from his role as “fascinating other”—as the object at greater distance, perhaps “uncontaminated” by the complex ambivalence associated with the mother. These findings do suggest that the evolving ability to differentiate crucial objects takes a quantum leap at 18 months. If, as Abelin suggests, separation-individuation proper cannot proceed until such differentiation is accomplished, then the father's presence (or at least an ability for the mother to represent the father in palpable ways) is essential to the internalization of self-representations that prepare the way for the development of object constancy.

Toward Object Constancy: 24 to 36 Months and Beyond

By age two, the developing toddler negotiates the separation process equipped with increased speech capabilities, expanded play capacity, and a growing ability to delay gratification. Gradually, mastery in areas such as toilet training prepares the way for later autonomy and self-reliance. In the normally developing child the firm establishment of self-soothing

capabilities, via the gradual internalization of transitional object functions, assists the consolidation of object constancy.

Research by Clarke-Stewart (1977) suggests that, in this subphase, fathers increase an earlier tendency to engage in stimulating and playful activity with their children. By the time his child is 30 months of age, the father emerges as primary playmate. His play style is less mediated by toys than is the mother's, involving more direct social interaction.

From related research with 14 traditionally structured families, Clarke-Stewart (1980) has concluded that there is something uniquely "masculine" in the father's play style during this subphase. His play seems vigorous, abrupt, and at times met with "negative affect" in children. These findings appear to support observations by Weissman (1963), an analyst, who theorized that fathers' play with their preoedipal children can serve to gratify their own pregenital unneutralized aggressive drives. From reconstructive work with adults, he found that occasional father-initiated "over-stimulating and ego-traumatizing" play had negative psychological effects, derivatives of which appeared in subsequent adult character difficulties (p. 129). Clarke-Stewart's (1980) results also support Burlingham's (1972) observations that the more stimulating play style of the father may arouse discomfort and anxiety in his child.

The Clarke-Stewart data indicate that, in triadic mother-father-child observations, mothers initiated less talk and play with their children when they were alone with them than when fathers were present. This "second-order effect" of father's playful style echoes those of earlier subphases.

Psychoanalytic writers have viewed the father's other major role at this stage as introducing the child to the world. Father defines society, and "is a symbol of purpose, goal and determination" (Solomon, 1978, p. 252). In traditional families, he is "the one who goes and returns" (Keleman, 1959, p. 358). Clarke-Stewart (1980) reports that paternal behavior appears to have a particularly salient influence on children's social development. This finding suggests confirmation of a trend beginning in earliest infancy and unfolding into the third year. In contrast to the soothing ministrations of mothers which reinforce proximal engagement, fathers' stimulating, arousing play-oriented activities with their children appear to reinforce engagement-with-the-world and help set the stage for later social comfort and competence. The more familiar role of the father in sex role identification and moral development becomes apparent after age four (Kohlberg and Zigler, 1967); but the relationship that makes the father's later contributions possible derives from his crucial role in the preoedipal period.

A Composite Sketch

From looking at psychodynamic theory and some related empirical findings on the role of the father in the separation-individuation process, a composite sketch begins to emerge. The father, increasingly a participant in aspects of childbirth preparation and delivery, appears to experience a profound positive affective response to his newborn infant. This resembles a bonding phenomenon, particularly in primary caretaking fathers whose interactions with their infants take on a biorhythmic synchrony similar to that seen in mother-infant dyads. In the infant's earliest months, the involved father offers not only emotional support and sustenance to the mother, but also provides nurturant caretaking. Even at this early stage, however, this caretaking has a more playful, stimulating quality than does that of the mother.

During the symbiotic phase, there appears to be a strong attachment between infants and their fathers. While there is no firm evidence that a true father-infant symbiosis develops, some observational findings suggest this. In the practicing subphase, the father appears to respond to the infant's increased motor skills with heightened stimulating activity, especially play. This trend continues into rapprochement, when he may make himself more available while the child works through ambivalence toward the mother. In families where father is the primary caretaker, there may be role reversal, with the mother as "fascinating other" who helps dilute the strong ambivalence toward him. Also, as the child becomes cognitively capable of perceiving interaction between father and mother, a "triangulation" occurs that fosters the development of symbolic thought and consolidates core gender identity.

As object constancy coalesces, the father assists in the transition to socio-affective relationships beyond the family. All these interactions are mediated by "second-order effects" which derive from complex systemic interactions among mother, father, and child.

Some Implications for Social Work Practice

The employment of social workers in hospitals, child guidance clinics, family agencies, child welfare settings, and courts makes them available to fathers of infants and young children. Evidence from earliest infancy suggests that fathers would be amenable to preventive interventions designed to enhance their parenting skills. Both in evaluation and intervention, clinicians can help parents learn about and maximize the unique contributions of fathers to child development. In non-traditional families,

attention to role sharing or reversal and consequent variations in children's primary attachments can help in planning context-responsive interventions.

In taking developmental histories on children being considered for treatment, the involved father may provide a unique perspective that can be missed when gathering information from the mother exclusively. And when difficulties residual to incomplete separation-individuation appear in the evaluation of children and adolescents, treatment can be planned so as to support fathers in providing "practicing" opportunities and/or other interventions reflective of the father's unique role. In instances where the father is uninvolved or unavailable, the clinician can enhance intervention through an awareness of unique paternal functions and contributions. A single mother, for example, can be helped to develop her role flexibility so as to provide parenting dimensions usually provided by fathers.

Conclusion

In this synthesis of recent psychodynamic theory and related empirical findings, an attempt has been made to answer the question: What role does the involved father play in the psychological birth of the human infant? Conclusions drawn take on particular importance as the new nurturant father takes a more salient role in childrearing and becomes, thereby, an increasingly significant influence in helping his children negotiate separation-individuation. This dimension of the rapidly changing ecology of parenting provides the prospect for expanding and exciting research and practice horizons.

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