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THE PSYCHOBIOLOGY OF PARENTHOOD



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The Psychobiology Of Parenthood

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The Psychobiology Of Parenthood

Introduction

The pleasures and pains, the gratifications and frustrations of parenthood are existential components in the adult life of humans. In spite of the ubiquity of its problems, the psychology of parenthood has not been studied systematically. Science progresses slowly. Generations of scientists labor arduously to build the foundation for an insight that a genius formulated long years before. I refer here to a statement of Darwin: "The feeling of pleasure from society is probably an extension of the parental or filial affections, since the social instinct seems to be developed by the young remaining for a long time with their parents" (p. 6). It is obvious that Darwin, the naturalist, arrived at this insight from innumerable, seemingly unrelated observations. Today the verity of this generalization appears evident to students of behavior, whether the objects of observation are human, subhuman mammalians, or the lower levels of the evolutionary scale.

Psychoanalytic theory is (primarily) a biological approach to psychology. Psychoanalytic investigations of various aspects of behavior afforded the framework within which biology, psychology, and sociology as continuum can be explained. This brief essay written in such a broad setting can serve only as an outline. At the same time it intends to show that

parenthood is the focus in which biological, psychological, and cultural factors converge.

More than ever before, parenthood in our age, as it evolves in individuals reared in our culture under the pressure of a rapidly changing civilization, appears removed from its biological sources. Parental behavior, as a culturally molded pattern, and its individual variations, are focal points of psychological and psychiatric studies of children and adults, but the psychodynamic processes of normal parenthood have not been conceptualized, as if taken for granted. Since it was assumed that personality integration is achieved during adolescence, the genetic theory of psychoanalysis does not include the psychodynamic processes of reproduction and parenthood as drive motivations for further development. Yet investigation of the psychosexual functions of women has demonstrated that personality development continues beyond adolescence under the influence of reproductive physiology, and that “parenthood utilizes the same primary processes which operate from infancy in mental growth and development” (Benedek, 1959 p. 389)

Theoretical Considerations

The instinct of survival in the offspring assures the survival of the species. This instinct is considered the organizer of those complex species-specific behavioral patterns through which survival of the species is maintained. The drive organization has three consecutive phases: (1) the sexual drive, which motivates courtship and mating behavior; (2) reproductive physiology, which accounts for the maturation of the germ cells (gametes), sets in motion the processes that maintain the fertilized ovum, supports its maturation, and guides parturition; (3) the care of the offspring, which, although it takes place outside of the mother's body, is a part of the reproductive physiology. Strictly under hormonal control in all species, the care of the offspring in some nonmammalian species is the function of the mate. Mothering behavior of human parents can be modified and divided between the sexes, either by choice or by necessity.

The phasic evolution of female sexuality exposes to investigation the drive organization of the propagative function. In Chapter 28 each phase of the female propagative function is discussed. Here will be pointed out only those aspects of the female drive organization that elucidate the difference between the sexes.

Investigation of the woman's sexual cycle revealed the development of the sexual drive. The psychodynamic tendencies that characterize the phases

of pregenital development are repeated in correlation with the evolution of the gonadal cycle. The pregenital tendencies (oral, anal, and pregenital) are integrated in the mature sexual drive, which reaches its peak at the time of ovulation and regresses again during the premenstrual-menstrual phase. The pregenital tendencies are manifestations of the *primary instincts* that maintain the homeostasis of the organism and secure its growth and maturation so that the *secondary, sexual instinct* can come to the fore at puberty. The slow, phasic evolution of oogenesis in woman exposes the integration of the sexual drive through the psychological manifestations that accompany the hormonal cycle. Although such investigation probably cannot be performed in men, one may assume that man's sexual drive is derived from the pregenital tendencies during development from infancy to puberty.

Characteristic of man's sexual drive is its plasticity. "Sexual energy," its "appetitive strength," and the "intensity of its consummatory behavior" (for the sake of brevity, ethologists' terms are useful) are constitutionally "given" individual characteristics molded by ontogenic development. The regulation of sexual need and activity is central; hormones induce changes in the nervous system by affecting those systems that coordinate arousal and mating behavior. While courtship and mating represent the most accurate coordination of hormones and behavior for all the vertebrate species, this is not wholly true of infrahuman primates. In regard to man, history, as well as current anthropological and cultural changes, masks the hormonal effects

from the physiology of the procreative function.

Women became independent from the limitations of estrus. The factors that promoted this evolutionary fact continued to interact with intraorganismic and environmental conditions and increased the gap between sexuality and procreation. The characteristics of the sexual drive hold true for both sexes. They motivate and integrate the sexual act, which may or may not be in the service of procreation. In women the integration of the psychodynamic tendencies that accompany ovulation indicate that motherhood has an instinctual origin; thus one may speak of “mother instinct” in scientific terms.

But what about man? Man’s role is discharged in one act that does not involve tissue changes beyond the production and deposition of semen. This process is under hormonal control. The innate specificity of the procreative function expresses the fundamental difference between the sexes. The psychophysiological organization of the male serves one act, that of insemination; the psychophysiological organization of the female serves the function of pregnancy and motherhood beyond the mating behavior.

This raises the question, what about fatherhood? Are men trapped into the social (sociological) role of fatherhood just by the compelling desire for orgasmic discharge, or does there exist in man a primary instinctual tendency

toward being a father, a provider? The biological root of fatherhood is the instinctual drive for survival. The drive organization of species survival has three phases differently employed in the sexes. In phase one both are equal; in phase two the function of the male lasts a short time; in phase three the male of all species is involved for the time necessary for the maturation of the offspring. In *Homo sapiens* man's biological function as provider reaches beyond the maturation of the children; it reaches even beyond the family; it is a source of socioeconomic organizations. Since the biological role of fatherhood is to protect and thereby to provide the territory that secures the survival of the pair bond and their offspring, is there a psychobiological source of the quality that we term fatherliness?

Fatherhood, fatherliness, and providing are parallel to motherhood, motherliness, and nurturing. Fatherhood and motherhood are complementary processes that evolve within the culturally established family structure to safeguard the physical and emotional development of the child. The role of the father and his relationship to his children are further removed from the instinctual roots that make his relationship with his children a mutual developmental experience. Fatherliness, like motherliness, has two sources; one is the biological anlage; the other is rooted in developmental experience. Yet there are differences between the sexes regarding the evolution of these primary attributes of parental behavior. In the development of fatherliness, the biological bisexuality and the male infant's

biological dependence on the mother are primary factors.

Bisexuality is a biological attribute of both sexes. The propagative functions of nonmammalian vertebrates offer striking examples of the different distribution of courtship, preparatory activities, and especially care of the young. In many instances the male takes over the care of the deposited ova or the feeding of the young as the instinctual organization of the species requires. Even in mammals there are examples of the male's participation in the care of the offspring. Nature seems to be able to reach deep into the bisexual propensities to meet the need of adaptive processes in a species. Our knowledge of man's bisexuality is still very limited. Investigation has been impeded by cultural denial. Hormone chemistry has helped but little since androgenic and estrogenic hormones, even progesterone, are closely related compounds; they occur in both sexes; their function in relation to symptoms has not been clarified. In the last decade intensive research has been conducted in relevant fields in an effort to clarify the role of "normal bisexuality" in man. Some level of predisposition may be seen in the varying degrees of aptitude men show in the performance of mothering functions with their own babies. One also observes a great variety in women's skill and aptitude for genuine motherliness. The inhibition of these primarily biological functions may be attributed to the bisexual anlage of woman. The behavioral manifestations of the biological anlage, however, are strongly influenced in both sexes by the developmental process, especially that of the oral-

dependent phase.

Every man's earliest security, as well as his orientation to his world, has been learned through identifications with his mother during infancy. In the normal course of male development this early identification with and dependence upon the mother are surpassed by the developmental identification with the father directed by the innate maleness of the boy. This results not only in the sexual, oedipal competition with the father but also in multiple identifications with the various roles of the father as protector and provider. In the development of the girl the infantile identifications with the mother reinforce the gender anlage and facilitate the normal evolution of female sexuality.^[1]

The primary drive organization of the oral phase, the prerequisite and consequence of the metabolic needs that sustain growth and maturation and lead to differentiation of the procreative function, is the origin of parental tendencies, of motherliness and fatherliness.

Parenthood

The term “parenthood” refers to a psychobiological status of great significance for the individual and for the society in which he lives. Becoming a parent means being a link in the chain of generations. “It is only Homo sapiens who has the distinction and the responsibility for raising children beyond that procreative cycle which produced the particular child to full maturity and adulthood” (Benedek, 1970 p. 119) and so to convey to their children not only what the parents inherited (with the genic code) but also the complex culture with its ethical restrictions and potential gratifications.

In this chapter parenthood is presented from two viewpoints. First, the parents’ interactions will be characterized in relation to the phasic development of the child; second, parenthood will be viewed as a crucial experience during the life cycle.

Marriage and family structures evolved as the consequence of the lengthy dependence of the human child. The family is the psychological field in which the transactional processes between parents and between parents and their children take place. The core of this field is the husband and wife, who bring to their marriage particular personalities as they have developed from infancy in transaction with their own parents, siblings, and other significant persons and events in their environment. Manifold and often tenuous reciprocal adaptations occur in every marriage until the couple is

welded biologically through parenthood. Heterosexual love alone is not a guarantee of a lasting relationship. The ability to maintain a lasting relationship, which secures the permanence of a marriage, depends on the total personality of each partner. It requires of each a self-organization that does not become discouraged by the changing aspects of love as an experience, since it invests the marriage as an institution with (narcissistic) libido. If such self-investment exists, the feedback of being married and being a parent supports the interpersonal relationship between the marital partners through the vicissitudes of marriage. Speaking not of happy but of enduring marriages, it should be emphasized that, stimulated by the ongoing psychodynamic interaction, the personality of each partner achieves another level of integration. The process of mutual maturation gains another dimension through parenthood, through relationship with the child, through communication with each other via the child.

The carrier of nonverbal communication is empathy. Empathy can be defined in psychoanalytic terms as a psychic energy charge that directs attention, facilitates perception, and furthers integration within the psychic apparatus. In general, empathy enlarges the psychic field of any individual and enables him to encompass in his responsiveness everyone and everything to which he may relate. While empathy itself is unconscious, the empathic response usually appears as an intuitive, spontaneous reaction that often mobilizes affects and motivates responses. In our culture many individuals

are so guarded against their intuitive feelings that they suppress their primary empathic responses even in the most intimate situations, such as sexual interaction, and even in their transactions with their children.

Closest to its biological source is the mother's empathy for her infant. This determines the quality of her motherliness and leads to competent, successful mothering. The adjective "competent" calls attention to another level in the use of empathy. As the child develops and becomes more and more a person in his own right, parental empathy has to undergo intrapsychic elaboration. Empathic response is a direct instinctual or intuitive reaction to the child's need. Empathic understanding is arrived at by a preconscious process of self-reflection that leads the parent to an understanding of the motivations of the child's behavior and at the same time to an understanding of the motivations of his own reaction.

What is said about the empathy of the mother also holds true for the father. Although the father's empathic response to his infant cannot be related directly to his function in procreation, most men do exhibit genuine fatherliness. Fatherliness, like motherliness, is an instinctually rooted character trend that enables the father to act toward his child or toward all children with immediate empathic responsiveness. Fatherliness has early and differing manifestations. It seems to appear in the father's first smile greeting the newborn; it is expressed in his ability to cradle the infant securely; or

later it is displayed in his participation in the care of the infant, in his patience and tolerance of the disturbance and difficulties that naturally arise in rearing a child.

The psychobiology of fatherhood seems to have evaded investigation as if it were hidden by the physiology of male sexuality and by the socioeconomic function of fathers as providers. While biology makes invariable the role played by the mother in the propagation of the species, the role of the father changes with cultural and socioeconomic conditions. Surprising as it may appear, the socioeconomic function of providing as well as the characterological quality of fatherliness are derivatives of the instinct for survival.

Only human parents have two sources of parental behavior. One is rooted in physiology as in any other creature; the other evolves as an expression of the personality that has developed under environmental influences that can modify motherliness and fatherliness. After the child outgrows his infancy, the mother becomes more independent of procreative physiology. Thus the motivational system of parental behavior becomes the same in both parents. Parental behavior is motivated by the response to the actual need of the child, by the situation in which the need arises. The unconscious motivations of parental behavior are rooted in the personality. This colors the meaning of the parental experience and stimulates

anticipations that parents project onto their children often before and more concretely after they are born. Indeed, Freud was right when he stated that the tender love of fond parents for their children originates in the narcissism of the parents, in the libido reservoir that maintains motherliness as well as fatherliness.

It is not possible to outline the normal range of motherliness and fatherliness in action. The limits change from culture to culture, from individual to individual. When we consider motherliness and fatherliness as developmental attainments in close contact with instinctual sources, we become aware of their oscillations. For motherliness and fatherliness appear to fluctuate under affect; they seem to regress and reintegrate in interaction with the child and his total environment.

Infants learn to anticipate the parents' responses faster than adults imagine. The significance of the child's anticipation of the parent's reaction to his behavior has been studied in detail from birth through adolescence. The balance between the child's confident expectation of gratification and his fear of frustration modifies his sense of security with his parents. The reciprocal process in the parent rarely has been studied. It is, or used to be, generally assumed that the adult parent's ego organization is not subject to change under the influence of his object relationship with his infant, with his growing child, and even with his grown-up child. Probably such self-secure, mostly

authoritarian parents still exist in other civilizations. In our culture modern parents cannot even envy the security of the Victorian parent. Soon that generation will be parents whose grandparents were raised by Victorian parents.

The parent's emotional security toward the child, even when expressed as authority, has a double function. It protects the child and insures the parent against being unduly affected by the child's behavior. His authority helps him to repress or deny his fears and negative anticipations about the child and about his own ability to cope and love at the same time. The anticipation of negativistic attitudes in their children makes parents insecure, afraid, and often angry even before the child gives them cause. This mobilizes primitive behavior that, even though it may be appropriate, is followed by a sense of guilt in modern parents. The guilty feelings may increase the insecurity, and so a negative spiral evolves between parents and child.

Fearful insecurity is characteristic of young mothers, especially with their first child or with a child who is not healthy or normal. In patriarchal families fathers usually felt uninvolved with and not responsible for the care of the infant. In the young families of our age fathers feel involved and consider it a duty to help their wives. Not infrequently they prove themselves more secure in handling the newborn than the young mother. This, however, may have a negative effect on the wife, who, feeling inferior in performing this

innate duty, may become depressed and alienated from the child. Such an incidence illustrates that the emotional balance of the family triangle depends on each of the participants, that to provide a satisfactory environment for the growth of the child, the parents' empathic understanding for each other is a prerequisite. Conflicts arising in the primary triangle—father-mother-child—that originate within the parents certainly influence, at least transiently, their behavior toward the child, but this seems secondary in regard to parenthood as a developmental process. This concept refers to those transactional processes between parent and child that, motivated by the phasic libidinal development of the child, reactivate in the parent old conflicts of the same period.

The transactional processes of early infancy can be easily conceptualized since in the mother and child they originate in primary biological needs; in the father they probably originate in the formidable adaptational task of becoming and being a father.

Based upon the model of reciprocal interaction between parent and child during the oral phase of development, we may generalize that the spiral of transactions in each phase of development can be interpreted on two levels of motivation in terms of each participant. The parent's behavior is determined unconsciously by his developmental past and consciously by his immediate reaction to the needs and behavior of the child. By incorporating

the many traces of the parent's behavior, the infant learns and so acquires a past that enables him to anticipate the parent's response to his behavior. This introduces a third aspect into the motivational pattern, namely, anticipation of the emotional course of future experiences. This motivational pattern is not yet existent in the young infant, but it becomes noticeable early in the second quarter of the first year; from this time on it evolves to facilitate the child's orientation to and interaction with his environment. It is rarely observed how much irritability of the parents toward each other, stimulated by inefficiency of the mother or by unavailability of the father's help, influences the development of the infant; even less investigated is how much the infant's thriving compensates for the emotional stress between the parents.

Is there any psychoanalytic evidence that would support the thesis that the child, being the object of the parent's drive, has, psychologically speaking, a similar function in the psychic structure of the parent? Does the child, evoking and maintaining reciprocal intrapsychic processes in the parent, become instrumental in the further developmental integration of the parent? Observations and psychoanalytic investigations yield positive and negative examples of the intrapsychic processes of the parent in reaction to the child.

Imitation is a well-studied aspect of the parent's interaction with the child. The imitating child holds up a mirror image to the parent. Thus the parent may recognize and even say to himself or to the child, "This is your

father; this is me in you.” If the child’s imitative behavior shows the positive aspect of their relationship, the parent will like what he sees and consequently will feel that both child and parent are lovable. Imitation then reinforces the positive balance of identifications. It can also happen that the child shocks the parent by exposing the representation of hostile experience in the past or in the present. In this event the parent feels the child’s rejection and withdraws from him, even if just for a moment, since the unloved self equals the unloved, unlovable child. Imitation externalizes what has been internalized from infancy. It exposes not only the child’s identification with the “omnipotent” parent but also his anger because of frustrations imposed upon him by the parent. The parent’s responses to the hostile imitation of the child is a record of his acceptance of the growing independence of the child with whom he identifies in the process. It should not be forgotten that any manifestation of the child’s positive identification with a parent reassures that parent: “I am a good father”; “I am a good mother.”

Normally the child’s idealization of the parent gives the parent gratification. There is no need to describe how fathers respond to the admiration of their sons or to the flirtation of their three- to four-year-old daughters. Just as obvious is the mother’s pleasure in her daughter’s wish to become like her or in her son’s promise to marry her because she is the best, the most beautiful mother.

Much has been written about the oedipal child, but, except for the actually seductive, pathogenic behavior of parents, very little has been written about the parents' participation in the development of the normal oedipal phase. This may be explained by many parents' restrained physical contact with the child of that age, by the tendency to hide, to forget, actually to repress libidinal impulses that were more freely expressed with the younger child. On the other side are those parents who, under cultural influences, assume that any sexual control is inhibiting to the child's psychosexual development. This mistaken rationalization allows them to expose their children to undue sexual stimulation, yet such parents often have to struggle with their own conflicts and with the psychological consequences of their laxity during later phases of their parenthood.

Psychoanalytic investigations have revealed that parents anticipate the child's failure in the area of their own developmental conflicts. Unconscious as the motivating conflict remains, the symptom is remembered. Well known to all of us is the parent who, because he or she was enuretic as a child, concentrates anxiously on the toilet training of the child. Even if this has been successfully achieved at an early age, such parents anticipate a relapse, especially when the child approaches the age at which their own relapse occurred. One may generalize that, unaware as parents usually are of the repressed conflicts of their childhood, the transactional processes evolve relatively smoothly until the child reaches the developmental level in which

the parent becomes insecure in his response to the child's behavior. The anxious behavior of the parent is instrumental in conveying to the child the parent's own fixation.^[2] The fear that a childhood symptom may be repeated by the child does not necessarily lead to anticipation that this will occur. Looking back at the childhood symptom from the security of his adulthood, the parent relives with the child his own conflict, now without fear. In the successful interactions with the child, the parent resolves his own developmental conflict, with an addition to his self-esteem: "I am a good parent."

Each parent has to deal in his own way with the positive as well as the negative revelations of himself in the child. "It is the individually varying degree of confidence in oneself and in the child which enables the parent not to overemphasize the positive and not be overwhelmed by the negative aspects of the self as it is exposed through the child" (Benedek, 1970 p. 131). With the help of the positive manifestations of the child's development, the parents' confidence in their child grows and with it grows the conviction that they are achieving the goal of their existence. In terms of dynamic psychology this means that while the parents consciously try to help the child achieve his developmental goal, they cannot help dealing unconsciously with their own conflicts, and thus they achieve a new level of maturation themselves.

Parenthood during the Life Cycle³

Parenthood implies continual adaptation to physiological and psychological changes within the self, parallel to and in transaction with changes in the child and his expanding world. In discussing the limitless variations of conflicts recurring during the life cycle of the parents, it is helpful to conceptualize parenthood as a process that has an early, a middle, and a late phase. With each child all parents live through these three phases, which necessarily overlap. Parents can be in the late phase of parenthood with their oldest child and at the same time be young parents with their youngest child.

Parenthood as an experience is more in focus during the early phase, which Kestenberg refers to as “total parenthood.” The parent’s involvement with and responsibility for the child is almost exclusive during infancy. The reciprocal psychodynamic interactions are most significant during infancy and the separation-individuation phase. But even in these early years there are exceptions to total parenthood. In many cultures mothers have helpers within the kinship; in our society the upper classes may have maids, nurses, or governesses who take over the duties of the mother; in other situations mothers go to work and therefore need helpers. Besides these, nursery school and kindergarten shorten the period of “total parenthood.” But before school age the child’s developmental needs for expansion are basically under

parental surveillance.

The beginning of school in Western civilization coincides with the age and maturational level to which Freud attributed the end of the oedipal phase. With this the mental development achieves the ability to incorporate the expanding environment of classroom, teacher, and classmates. School, a socially regulated partial separation of parents from their children, facilitates the repression of the Oedipus complex; this induces the latency period. Kestenberg states, "*Latency stands out as a time of part-time parenthood!*" (p. 305), meaning by this only the diminishing activities involved in childrearing. Yet it is worthwhile to mention that fortunately this separation evolves slowly, since otherwise it would activate fear or negativistic reactions in the parents against the growing independence of the child and against those who promote it. Usually the second and third child replenishes the libidinal supplies of the parents (more that of the mother than the father) when the first child reaches school age.

One could discuss the reciprocal developmental processes from the viewpoint of the parents' psychological separation from the child. Such conceptualization, however, does not cover parenthood during the life cycle. Conceptualizing parenthood according to its early, middle, and late phases affords the opportunity to organize the most frequent problems of parenthood as they change in time, keeping in focus the transactional

processes between the generations.

Parents are total parents with each of their children and live through the early phase of parenthood with each of them until and through various stretches of their adolescence. The overlapping phases of parenthood, however, may cross the boundaries between generations. It is not infrequent that a young grandmother is at the same time a young mother. Paradoxes of family lineage may thus occur. The baby of the grandmother is the aunt or uncle of the child born to a son or daughter.

In the early phase of parenthood the mutuality of the ongoing processes of identification-separation dominates the psychic economy of the parent-child relationship. The shift in these processes pushes the child in the direction of separation, the parents toward holding on.

During the preoedipal and oedipal phase the evolution of the dominant libidinal conflict and the corresponding ego growth activate unconsciously motivated, characteristic responses in the parents. Normally these responses quickly disappear under the pressure of the newly arising developmental trends in the child. Secure in their love for the child, parents rarely feel responsible for his passing problems. All that happens seems to be open to the empathic understanding of the parents; therefore, they respond with the feeling that it is natural, that the child will outgrow it.

School age often disturbs the security of the parents. School represents authority for the parents as it did when they were children. School means to parents that their child's behavior, his performance at work and at play will be exposed to scrutiny, and thus the parents themselves feel exposed. In order to diminish their disconcerting feeling of responsibility and also their (probably) hurt narcissism, parents eagerly supervise the various sources of extrafamilial influences that their children experience. Their vigilance is often biased by prejudices and preconceived ideas. Playmates and neighbors are judged. Television programs are considered welcome entertainment; their influence upon the child—good or bad—usually cannot be assessed by the parents.

Yet parents observe with concern that their children are growing up faster than they did themselves. Very often they seem to want to slow down the tempo of externalization that characterizes the growth of the latency child. On the one hand, they would like to hang on to the past when they felt that they knew everything about the child; on the other hand, they have to weigh the child's competitive achievement with their ambition that he should perform on every level with adequate competence. But modern parents are wrought with apprehensions regarding educational aims.

While they conscientiously strive to bring up independent, secure, and efficient individuals, they refrain from applying controls lest the child become

inhibited through punishment and grow up to hate them.

These conflicting problems of modern parents are pointed out here to illustrate the difference in the educational tasks of parents of preschool children and parents of latency children and adolescents. The preschool child evokes in the parents empathic, affective, goal-directed responses to behavior that is a manifestation of a maturing individual. Whereas with young children the parents' developmental past refers prevalently to unconscious processes, in response to latency children and adolescents, parents remember their own behavior and its consequences. Conscientious parents' emotional responses to the problems set by their children of that age are motivated by reaction formation to the actual or psychological consequences of their own experience.

This model seems to apply mainly to those parents whose developmental past justifies their wish to provide their children with better conditions than they themselves had. However, there are many parents who, raised by permissive parents, grew up with the advantages of an affluent society. They, too, want to bring up their children to become productive, capable, contented adults. Can one formulate the educational task of such parents? It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the transactional phenomena that set normative goals for the children of such parents by holding parental ambition within limits realistically measured by the capacity

of the growing individual.

An essay on the psychobiology of parenthood should concentrate on parental reactions to the sexuality of their children. A half century ago one could have responded to such a request with a simple statement. The puritanical sexual mores invested in the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western civilization deny the existence of sexuality in human beings until marriage. Now parents observe the sexuality of their children and usually deal with it according to the state of their own conflicts. They are not too disturbed to observe a young child playing with his genitals. The father who threatens a three-year-old child that he will "Cut it off" is becoming rare. During the boy's latency fathers usually are more concerned with the son's athletic ability and with his general manliness than with his sexual behavior. With the increasing sexual freedom among adolescents, fathers become concerned when their 16- to 18-year-old son is not sexually active. On the same basis they feel differently toward their daughter. As they suppress their own libidinal interest toward their daughters, they assume that girls are blissfully innocent. Mothers are different. Being more aware of their defensiveness against sexual impulses, they often become suspicious when children, even of the same sex, play together behind closed doors and are too quiet. Mothers are intent on protecting their children, the daughters more than the sons. Their worries become intensified when the period of dating begins and rarely cease until the daughter lands safely in marriage. Regarding their sons, their worries are

different in degree, but not in kind.

In general, one may say that women who feel positively about their femininity and enjoy sexuality are usually less envious and less suspicious of their daughters' sexual lives. They trust their children since they trust themselves and their own experiences. In their intuitive confidence in the power of their own personalities, they feel they have conveyed to the children their own value system and what is in accordance with it is anticipated without anxiety. However, such mothers are also shocked sometimes by disappointment. Self-confident parents have such an intrinsic need to trust their children, to assume that "what should not happen cannot happen," that they are often blind to the obvious. There are parents who want to be even more modern; they convince themselves that this is "her life," and that they want her to "live it fully." They are shocked by the realization that they have deceived themselves; the daughter's pregnancy becomes their personal shame; the disappointment in the daughter is their own failure. The middle-aged mother might respond with a serious depression to an event whose emotional significance she has denied. Even parents who trust their children and enjoy their confidence are left in the dark about the most important experiences of their children. This probably must be so. If it is sincere, sexuality is a private experience between two individuals; it is least communicable to parents.

Mothers whose behavior toward their children is characterized by intrusive vigilance have usually repressed their own sexuality and had neurotic conflicts. Women having little or no confidence in their femininity usually convey their insecurity to their children. When the period of dating comes, they realize that their daughters are not popular, their sons are not going out with girls. The insecure mother relives her own adolescence with pangs of waiting, of being left out, of being alone. Such mothers suffer more than fathers from the inferiority feelings of their children. They begin to push their adolescent children; they advise and scheme in order to help. Painfully aware of the well-meant but unbearable concern, the adolescent tries to escape. For daughters as well as for sons, college or work away from home appears to be the best way to find relief. This often leads to emancipation of the daughter and the son; it permits new experiences away from the watchful eye at home.

Fathers are helpful by being more tolerant of the daughter's lack of popularity. The more usual complaint of daughters about their father is that he scrutinizes the boys too closely, criticizes them frankly, and often tries to scare them away. One can say that fathers have a double standard regarding their adolescent children's sexuality. They watch with Argus eyes over the virginity of their daughters, but unconsciously identify with their son's experience; they smile at the young girl with whom the son is in love as long as there are no consequences. For father, traditionally, propriety ends when

the son comes home downhearted to announce that the girl is pregnant.

The variations of individual experiences of the *middle phase of parenthood* are many, but the main characteristic is the parent's involvement in and preoccupation with the children's sexual life. Whether this be traditional courtship under the watchful eyes of parents, or the now frequent series of love affairs leading to consecutive promiscuity before marriage, it is all to culminate in marriage. Whether the parents' marriage is happy, just tolerable, or a cauldron of explosive emotions, no matter how deeply the marital struggles of the parents influence their children, all of the past is forgotten and the future appears rosy in the light of a new marriage. Except when difference in race, religion, and social status seems irreconcilable, both sets of parents unite in their hope that the children will live happily ever after.

With a child's marriage the immediate responsibility of parenthood for the child discontinues. The parents cease to be closest of kin by law, since the new husband and wife, even if they have known each other for only a short time, become next of kin. Parents feel this first probably when the wedding is over and they come home to rest. Then they begin to feel and rationalize about their sudden sadness. These parents may still be young people, living in the unity of early parenthood with their younger children, yet they have entered the late phase of parenthood with the newly married child.

In cultures in which the young wife customarily has to leave her parental home to live in the parental home of her husband, the marriage of the daughter represents an almost complete separation. The mother has neither the right nor the opportunity to remain involved with her daughter. In our civilization it is still not uncommon that both sets of parents of the young couple live close to each other, are neighbors or friends, that the young people had known each other from childhood. Marriage in such a situation does not involve such sharp separation, does not require such a difficult adjustment. In our present culture, when neither social nor geographic boundaries restrict the choice of a mate, marriage often implies separation of parents from their children, which may activate a critical phase of parenthood.

In any case the marriage of a child represents a new adaptational task for the parents; they have to encompass the husband of the daughter or the wife of the son, not only in their own family, but also in their own psychic system as an object of their love. Psychologically this occurs through the identifications with their own child. The object relationship to the in-laws remains shaky for a time. The ambivalence easily flares up, rationalized by the parental concern for the happiness of their child. Just as when the child first went to school, parental narcissism makes them see the fault in the other rather than in their own child. Yet the young couple can “fight it out” and settle the differences more easily when the conflict remains their own

problem and does not spread in circles like pebbles thrown in a pond. In this respect mothers are more often at fault than fathers.

Mothers often cannot relax their influence on their daughters; they identify with the married daughter or son and want to be involved in, or at least informed about, every detail of their life. Whether we see the problem from the point of view of the young husband or the wife, the mother is almost always the “in-law,” the often feared, critical investigator of one partner of the marriage. Yet today one sees very definite changes in this respect. As long as daughters grew up in families in which they owed devoted dependence to their mothers, even when married, they accepted the mother’s opinion with unquestioning deference. Such “good” mothers were the “feared mothers-in-law,” the butt of jokes, ridicule, and hidden or open hatred. Now the more self-reliant woman’s husband does not need to fear that his wife has to side with her mother. Mother-in-law jokes have almost disappeared from magazines, indicating a significant change in the structure of the family and in the relationship between the generations.

The example of mothers who cannot psychically separate from their married children shows the more universal psychological problem of the late phase of parenthood. The slogan “generation gap” is not affixed to the adaptational problems of the late phase of parenthood, for obvious reasons. But there are some factors that seem to justify a comparison. One of the

characteristics of the late phase of parenthood is the emotional consequence of the married children's alienation from their parents. Whether the parents are middle-aged or older, the child who becomes a parent does not have the same psychological relationship with the parent; his psychic structure has changed. More than the deepening relationship with the spouse, parenthood does change the psychic structure of the young parent. The parents of married children have to adapt to their not being needed as they were before; this reduces the parents' self-esteem. This generation gap does not cause vehement upheaval, since it is not stirred by the maturation of adolescence, but by slow evolution of the late phase of parenthood. The gap between generations, which began with marriage and parenthood of the young generation, now deepens because of the physiological factors of aging. The psychophysiological reactions to "change of life" in women intensify the mother's emotional reactions and make her aware of all that which "hurts" in aging, even without severe, clinical depression. Yet her sensitivity increases the rift between the generations.

Fathers usually do not get into similar troubles of alienation at such a relatively early age as mothers. One reason for this is that fathers maintain more distance from the interpersonal problems of the family. As long as the father's ability to work is not diminished, aging has a mellowing effect on his attitude toward his children. In the disquieting experience of alienation from their married children, normal, healthy fathers frequently function as

negotiators, trying to make peace and avoid a rift. The late phase of parenthood arrives later for fathers than for mothers, or it seems so because at that age level fathers become more interested and therefore more involved with their families than they were previously.

Before the last phase of actual “childless parenthood” arrives, late parenthood brings about the gratification of the life cycle, *grandparenthood*.

Psychoanalysis of both men and women whose married children are childless, whether voluntarily or because of infertility, reveals disappointment and frustration, and also the source of the anxiety caused by this condition. Sometimes these individuals have guilt feelings and blame themselves for wishing for something beyond their ken. The somatic correlations of such depressive states originate in the wish to survive in the grandchildren.

There is a noticeable difference in the attitude of the prospective grandparents toward the pregnancy of the daughter. Fathers do not identify with the experience of pregnancy as do mothers. Prospective grandmothers remember what their mothers told them about the pleasurable or frightening experience of delivery and lactation. The prospective grandmother, reliving her own pregnancies in identification with her daughter, in her wish to protect her daughter, may convey her anxiety to the pregnant woman. Such

anxious overidentification of the prospective grandmother, however, often interferes with the actual bliss of grandparenthood.

Grandparenthood is parenthood one step removed. It is a new lease on life since grandmothers as well as grandfathers relive the memories of the early phases of their own parenthood in observing the growth and development of the grandchildren. Relieved from the immediate stress of motherhood and the responsibilities of fatherhood, grandparents appear to enjoy their grandchildren more than they enjoyed their own children. Since they do not have the responsibility for rearing the child toward an unknown goal, their love is not burdened by doubts and anxieties; they project the hope of the fulfillment of their narcissistic self-image to their grandchildren.

The indulgence of grandparents toward grandchildren has its psychodynamic (instinctual) motivation. If the relationship between the grandparents and the child's parents is not burdened by jealousy and hostility, open or suppressed, the grandparents can feel free to love their grandchildren. This does not mean just giving candy and toys or playing with them. The love of grandparents gives the child a sense of security, in being loved without always deserving it. What does the grandparent receive in return? A loving glance from a happy child, a trusting hand, an actual appeal for help; whatever it is, it is a message to the grandparent that he or she is needed, wanted, loved. Grandparents accept gratefully the reassurance from

the child that they were, and still are, good parents.

Grandchildren, however, grow up and grow away from grandparents. As they reach adolescence, their attitude appears to reach that postambivalent phase of object relationship that Karl Abraham described as characteristic of maturity. The ambivalence of adolescence, the rebellion of youth are directed toward the parents, who are the objects of their conflicting instinctual drives. The relationship with the grandparents is never so highly charged; therefore, the grandparents become the recipients of considerate and indulgent behavior by the maturing individuals, who, in the awareness of their strength, see the weakness of the doting grandparents even earlier than might be justified. The grandparents respond to the manifestations of the protective, somehow even condescending love of their grandchildren as balm for whatever wounds old age inflicts upon them.

Grandparenthood is, however, not the same for everyone. There are differences depending on the personalities of the interacting individuals belonging to three generations. The emotional content of grandparenthood and the expectations of the young parents in regard to them depend upon the cultural and socioeconomic changes in the family structure.

Of the many factors that influence the emotional meaning of grandparenthood, the chronological age of the grandparents is probably the

most significant. Experience of grandparenthood has different emotional colorings if the grandparents are young, still in possession of their procreative capacities. It is obvious that the involvement of grandparents in such families overshadows their emotional need for grandchildren. This need seems urgent when the grandparents are well over their procreative period and they have had to wait a long time for grandchildren.

Old age, if not hastened by illness, arrives slowly, bringing with it the adaptive tasks of aging itself. From the multitude of these tasks, only those will be mentioned that influence intrafamilial relationships and consequently the status and function of the elderly parent in the family. In order to put this in a psychodynamic frame of reference, the overall psychodynamic character of each major phase of the life cycle is pointed out: (1) from infancy through adolescence the vector of metabolic and psychological processes is self-directed, i.e., receptive; (2) during the reproductive period the vector is expressed in the object-directed, expansive, giving attitude of parenthood; (3) as the supply of vital energies declines with aging, the positive, extraverted tendencies slowly become outweighed by the energy-conserving, restricting, self-directed tendencies of old age. These unconscious factors bring about the psychological (often psychiatric) manifestations (symptoms) of old age; they motivate also the psychological processes that bring about the age-determined changes between parents and their children.

The style of aging depends more on the personality pattern than on chronological age. Since aging reduces the libidinal expansiveness of the individual, the hostile components of the character become more pronounced. This explains the domineering, know-it-all behavior of many aging mothers and grandmothers, who become embittered if the younger generation does not follow suit as they did earlier. When the pattern and course of the psychodynamic processes of the parent are known, it is not difficult to establish the distortions caused by the involitional processes of the parent and understand with sympathy the influence that old age exerts within the family.

There is no doubt about the specific blend of narcissism in the aged. Since it cannot draw upon fresh resources of libido, it enlarges the remaining resource by identification with the young and by rekindling the memories of past gratifications. Current frustrations increase preoccupation with memories of youthful experiences. Being engrossed in what one was often becomes irritating, even to the grandchildren, let alone to their parents. But this irritation means increased frustration and makes increasing demands in the senescent. The senescent person's ability for empathy with the younger generation diminishes. The defenses of the self-centered personality become more tenacious so that the younger generation's complaints about the egotism of the old are justified. The solace offered by the younger generation usually does not satisfy the senescent since he unconsciously wishes and, in

some ways, consciously demands that his children and grandchildren remove the burdens of his age and make him unaware of his weakness. Many manifestations of “nonparenthood” with “nonchildren” can be described and explained; they all illustrate the complete turn of the cycle. As one time the parent was the need-fulfilling object of the child; now the “adult child” or the middle- aged child is the need-fulfilling object of the aged parent. The old parent, however, clings to the status of being a parent. Originating in the instinct for survival in the offspring, parenthood establishes a sense of identity that integrates the biological and social functions of the personality.

Being a parent is at the center of a normal parent’s self-concept. In old age, removed from his procreative period by two generations, he clings to his adult children and seeks in them the psychic images they once had been and therefore will always remain, his children. Supplied by memories of past experiences, parenthood is timeless. In the sense of intrapsychic processes, parenthood ends when memory is lost and psychic images fade out.

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Notes

- [1] First emphasized by psychoanalysts, this fact has been confirmed by investigations of ethologists. Recently the studies by Harlow are the most widely known.
- [2] Adelaide Johnson described this process as the “etiology of fixation.”
- [3] Material in this section has been drawn extensively from my Chapter 8 with the same title in *Parenthood: Its Psychology and Psychopathology*, edited by E. J. Anthony and myself (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 167-183.