

Narratives of fathers and sons: 'There is no such thing as a father'

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A long story

The evolutionary story of parenthood took a radical turn as the human species became established. Female apes care for their offspring largely without help from males or other females. In contrast hunter-gatherer people share the care of infants and small children, with considerable variations in paternal involvement.

Our big brains led us to make biological facts into meaningful narratives, a double drama of extended family life. On the one hand growing children desire intimate care from a select number of adults of either sex and, on the other, have a compelling interest in the couple who gave them life.

Distinct from 'the father's role', the paternal function is essentially the interruption of an exclusive mother-child bond; a necessary step in the development of a mature mind. A mother chooses others who will help this process, which may include the child's father. She often regulates the child's relationship with him.

This chapter focuses on the predicament for boys in the context of their parents' relationship, concluding with clinical reflections on the family triangle. Systems therapy provides a stage on which to rehearse narratives of family departures and arrivals: "they have their exits and their entrances.."¹

¹ *As you like it*, II; vii;139

Fathers ancient and modern

Before he was born mother was all around him; all there was. Arriving on the stage the newborn will be met by a number of characters who express an interest in him. From his point of view mother is the most important but he soon gets to know others such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, childminders and mother's partner, usually his father. From a very early age infants are alert not only to the qualities of care they receive from individuals but also to how these people get on with each other. Elegant laboratory studies of three month old children filmed with their parents demonstrate how keenly engaged they are in the couple's relationship: "infants as young as 12 weeks make 'triangular bids' to share their affects with both parents: they rapidly alternate their gaze and affect signals between them" (Fivaz-Depeursinge et al 2007: 18).

Earlier in primate evolution, care of the young was a simpler matter; infant apes would be looked after by mothers with little other help. The male parent might become interested in the infant but mainly through his wish to gain access to its mother. Unlike our ape ancestors, human males provide food for their children, but if they are less good hunters, can take on more childcare instead; always with an eye on the mother (Hewlett 1992a :172-3). "In almost all cases, males devote more effort to mating and females more to parenting" (Betzig & Turke 1992: 126). Our big brains incorporate both biology and culture, which do not always have the same goals.

In modern families mother tends to be the gatekeeper for her child's relationships with others, including father (Hobson et al 2004²; White 1999, Zvara et al 2013). She introduces the father to his child. Of course a father does not have to wait for the invitation but negotiation of the parental partnership is a necessary and crucial step in any family. The pace of this varies across cultures but it is irreducibly complicated. "Essentially, the task for the mother, father and infant involves tolerating the link between two people they desire and which excludes them. This situation cannot be harmonious" (Marks 2002: 95). A baby and a mother are soon interrupted by the attentions of others.

In some places this is immediate. For a newborn baby of the Efé people in central Africa, the child must not be given to the mother until a few hours after the birth. The midwife hands the baby to a circle of other women, many of whom are lactating. "Access to a breast is virtually constant ... the mother tends not to be the sole carer of the infant" (Tronick et al 2007: 111). These infants are never alone, and mother remains the most important caregiver. When no one else can console him, she must.

² "an infant who has experienced sensitive and non-intrusive care may be more likely to turn to another person, whether a stranger or parent, to request things or establish joint attention, whereas one who has not may tend to restrict attention to the non-social world" (Hobson et al, 2004, p478.)

Hrды argues that multiple caregiving (“alloparenting”) is a crucial step in the evolution of modern humans’ capacity for thought, language, mentalisation and conscience; “infants with several attachment figures grow up better able to integrate multiple mental perspectives” (Hrды 2016: 29). Compared to our ape ancestors “the hominim infant’s own mother ceased to be the *sole* source of security, warmth, mobility and nutrition” (Hrды 2016: 23). Mother, ever the gatekeeper, has to make discerning judgements as to who can best be trusted to share parenting with. In modern industrial societies there are typically fewer caregivers but any child, western or Efé, makes his own distinctions between them, based largely on their ability to treat him attentively. If one of these is his father³, he may notice a beard or stubble but has no evidence for the myth of the superior father.

This tenacious notion was invented around ten thousand years ago when humans began to domesticate themselves and the animals and plants nearby. The agricultural revolution marginalized the egalitarian hunter-gather way of life (Ingold 2004, Boehm 2012), our only form of subsistence since the origin of the human species around half a million years ago. Horticulture and farming led to the ownership of land, livestock and stored produce. Settlements became cities and then states headed by increasingly powerful men with wealth, armies and palaces – and gods to match – while previously revered female deities were demoted, along with real women. Believing he had achieved mastery over nature, the patriarch’s creation myths contained wildly improbable tales of anatomical wizardry to prop up his status, inflated to the point that no mother was required. Male deities produced infants from the mouth, belly, forehead, even the penis (Kraemer 1991). By the time of classical Greece, here is Apollo settling an argument over mother-right: “The mother is not the parent of the child/ Which is called hers. She is the nurse who tends the growth/ Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male” (Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* cited by Lerner 1986: 205). From being mother’s consort in relation to their child, historical man was being encouraged to become the owner of both of them.

There are still some people who have not adopted this view of gender differences. The Aka of the Congo Basin share parental care of infants more equally than any other group studied. “Infants sought the proximity of their fathers more often than all “other” [non-maternal] individuals combined” (Hewlett 1992b: 101) The Aka also share hunting and gathering tasks and probably live much as their ancestors did many millennia ago. Their origin myths “have men and women originating from a female fruit” (Hewlett, 1992b: 40). The most equal parenting is evident where the male is relatively poor in resources, such as hunting nets and an extended family of brothers, and is thus more dependent on his partner. Anthropological observation

³ Males experience hormonal changes when their partners have babies A fall in testosterone makes them more maternal. “Findings support the view that neuroendocrine systems in human males evolved to support committed parenting” Weisman et al 2014: 47)

shows how Aka egalitarianism is determined by the context of their lives, not by ideological choice. They have no significant predators or enemies. Variations in paternal involvement are based on estimates of what is best for security and survival (Hewlett1992b: 130). A newborn infant in modern industrial societies may expect the same continuous, collective and intimate care as an Aka or an Efé one – and as all of our ancestors millennia ago – but that is not what he finds. Collective caregiving is less intense, and less common.

In defining fatherhood, biology and culture have long parted company. The modern baby boy's perception of a helpful caregiver who happens to be male is quite different from the man he is expected to become when he grows up (Gilmore 1990). While a father with his newborn boy might be thinking about the prestige this brings him, what the child most values are the essentially maternal qualities of attentiveness to his signals. A short film of a father cradling his premature baby (a girl called Naseera) in his T-shirt – the Kangaroo Method⁴ – shows how sensitively he sings to her, with simple high pitched notes⁵, to which the infant responds with perfect timing until she falls asleep. At this stage gender is of no importance to the child.

Until the early twentieth century in many European countries little boys would be dressed in girls' clothes as if in recognition that they has not yet abandoned their identification with mother⁶.

“In Western European countries, until about 1920, boys would wear dresses until they were 'breeched'. i.e. given their first outfit which included breeches or trousers. Breeching happened from the age of about four to eight-years-old, and varied according to different eras and families. A formal ceremony might also have taken place, to mark the boy's progress from babyhood to boyhood, and sometimes a first haircut was also included.” *Museum of Childhood*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/article/boys-dress/>

⁴ Saskia van Rees and Dr. Richard de Leeuw, *The Kangaroo method* www.stichtinglichaamstaal.nl

⁵ Men talking or singing to babies tend to raise their voices to a female pitch. This happens to be around middle C (Trevarthen 2008).

⁶ “Perhaps the mothers of fifty years ago who dressed and combed their boys as girls intuitively recognized that one had to gratify each phase of the child's development in order to ensure his future maturation. By satisfying the boy's early need to identify with mother, he was better able to make the later step of identifying with father” (Greenson1968: 373).



Charles Darwin (aged 33) and his two year old son William, 1842⁷

Whatever he is wearing, during this time the child finds out for himself – and also because everyone keeps telling him so – that he is a boy, anatomically different from his mother. And then, perhaps provoked by the arrival of a new brother or sister, he begins to work out how babies are made. Only a man and a woman can do that, and he is neither. For that reason alone the father is of great interest to the child. These discoveries add a new preoccupation to his primary obligation to keep track of his closest attachments, who may or may not include his mother and his father. Now he also becomes increasingly curious about the identity of the couple that made him.

Until relatively recently these two matters were often regarded as one, as if only mothers and fathers could properly care for a child. Mid-twentieth century family theory was based on typical middle class American households with a housewife mother and father out at work all day. When father came home he played with his children because he did not know them as well as mother did (Hewlett 1992b: 172). On the basis of a short and untypical historical interlude, this version of the ‘father’s role’ was prescribed as something to which the boy should aspire. Though widely challenged today, such notions are still familiar to everyone. And both the existence and the presence of his father remain of great interest to the child.

Generation and gender: the entrance of a third

Despite variations in domestic organization from the hunter-gatherer collective to the lone parent, there is no escaping the significance of sexual difference; “... in every

⁷ This Daguerrotype image of Charles Darwin (aged 33) and his two year old son William in a dress was taken in 1842 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles-Darwin-and-William-Darwin,-1842.png> Darwin’s systematic observations of his infant son were published as “A biographical sketch of an infant” *Mind* 1877;2(7): 285-294.

sociocultural system, gender concepts will be early learned, salient and laden with significance” (Munroe & Munroe 1992: 225). A child of either sex is attached to and identified with mother, and interested in father. Even Efé one year olds, whose care is largely provided by women, will single out their fathers’ activities and conversations for special attention (Morelli & Tronick 1992: 253). The differences between generations and between genders become apparent. Boys and girls explore diverging paths towards sexual identity (Frosh et al 2001), intently observing the people and animals around them.⁸ If a father is to find a proper place in his life, the child has to understand how the man got there, and what he is doing now. A triangular system takes shape. “To Winnicott’s dictum ‘there is no such thing as an infant’ (1960) we may add that there is no such thing as a father without the mother’s relationship to the father” (Etchegoyen 2002: 34).

Taking his cue from Sophocles’ tragedy Sigmund Freud observed how the father’s presence prevents Oedipus’ fate: “The little boy notices that his father stands in his way with his mother” (Freud 1955: 105). At this moment the boy is in a bind: “*You ought to be like this (like your father)... you may not be like this (like your father). That is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative*” (Freud 1961a: 173). It may be hard for modern readers to accept this formulation of the drama, freighted with nineteenth century assumptions about paternal roles, but whatever the family composition the shift from two person to three person relatedness is always a necessary developmental step, with or without a male caregiver. Britton highlights the opening up of mental space that is achieved:

"If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child's mind it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. Given this, we can also envisage being observed. This provides us with a capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves" (Britton 1989: 87).

This kind of process is accelerated in places where children are immediately cared for by many adults. Because they can from an early age see themselves through the eyes of several caregivers – male or female – Efé and Aka children become highly socialised more quickly than typical western ones where, in contrast, the family stage is less crowded, sometimes reduced to only two. Even then a modern lone parent can provide a three dimensional experience for a child, but that depends on her having both internal and external support. A new mother who has been cared for in childhood by collaborative adults will have a partner in mind, if not in the home; “the

⁸ Girls’ identifications, if smoother, are more complex because they have to distinguish themselves from mother’s person but not from her gender. Paternal functions are just as important for girls, but that is another story.

process by which things that happen between people become things that happen within the individual's own mind" (Hobson 2002: 257). And she will also have trusted adult friends who can do some babysitting. The same applies to lone fathers. In any family, maternal and paternal functions will from time to time be carried out by the same person, by different parents (of any gender or sexuality), by grandparents, or by people who are not parents at all.

Children with serious behavioural and emotional disorders tend to have histories in which this kind of containment has not happened. Parental illness, anxiety, depression and conflict undermine their development. When new mothers are depressed and unsupported by partner or parents it is their male children that suffer the most lasting effects, particularly in self-regulation. Some of these boys become dreamy or hyperactive (Morrell & Murray 2003) and continue to have educational difficulties into secondary school age (Hay et al 2001, Murray et al 2010) long after the mother's depression has lifted.

There is interesting research suggesting a specific rather than a systemic third-position link between fathers and their baby boys. Feldman notes sex differences in the rhythms of their intimate contact – that fathers are more in tune with sons, and mothers with daughters. "The coregulation formed between father and son during the first months may be essential environmental inputs that facilitate the formation of self regulatory capacities" (Feldman 2003: 17). In a study of the effects of father-infant interaction on later behavioural problems Ramchandani et al suggest that "boys may be more susceptible to the influence of their father from an early age" (2014: 61). Disengaged and remote fathering of infants was associated with externalising behaviours at one year⁹.

Exits

In his own mind no child is 'without a father'. If he has no story about him he will make up his own. Some women choose to have children without involving the father after conception. Others find single parenthood preferable after trying to collaborate with paternal or other partners. Increasing numbers of children are conceived by sperm donation, which may entail an anonymous and entirely inactive donor (although he may be later identified, as is now possible in some countries). Danish experience of 'solomors' [solo mothers] is reassuring, yet some mothers still wish to have a partner to share the child with: "I'd still love to meet someone and give my little girl a dad. For me, a father is so much more than a blob of sperm¹⁰" (Russell 2015).

⁹ It was not clear from this study to what extent mothers influenced the father's involvement.

¹⁰ And the source of the spermatozoon that penetrated his biological mother's egg will, in time, inevitably fascinate the child.

Whether they are together or apart, repetitive and unresolved conflict between parents troubles children greatly (Kelly 2000, Booth & Amato 2001) and having parents living together is no guarantee of satisfaction for them¹¹. The triadic play studies mentioned above show how at just a few months old, children witnessing tension between their parents “give up interacting in a triangular way ... in the process of being enlisted to serve the parents’ problematic relationship, rather than to develop their own social competence” (Fivaz-Depeursinge et al 2012: 10). The child is looking after them, rather than the other way round. When parents are separated, careful agreement over contact, education and money is enormously hard work, especially when there are new partnerships, but it is a priceless gift to children if they do not have to feel responsible – like resident marital therapists – for the way their parents get on with each other.

Mother is the gatekeeper of stories about rarely or never seen fathers^{12,13}. If a boy who has no contact with his father hears from his mother only that he is a bad man (perhaps along with all other men) he will feel that he is descended from someone who abandons his children, and does not love him. “Will I become like him?” he asks himself, especially when mother is telling him that he already has. If mother says some good things about her partner, that when they were together there were occasional happy times and that he loved his baby, then the child has the chance of a better father in his mind. This requires brave and active mental work on the mother’s part. She may despise him, or feel nothing for him, but it is possible for a mother to make sense of her ended relationship with the father, much as some parents can make sense of their own parents’ deficits (Steele & Steele 2003).

“The physical availability of the father may be neither sufficient nor necessary for triangulation to evolve. What does seem critical is a situation within which the child can envisage a relationship between the two other, emotionally significant figures” (Target & Fonagy 2002: 57).

These are therapeutic tasks (Dowling and Gorell Barnes 2000). In family consultations with separated parents I have often found that to ask, in front of the children, where the parents first met results in blushing giggles as they recall their romantic beginnings. This part of the story is rarely known to the children, now in the process of getting resigned to their parents’ failure to stay together. The possibility that they might have been conceived out of love is a secret revealed. Children will

¹¹ Living with a father who shows high levels of antisocial behaviour is not good for children (Jaffee et al 2003).

¹² Mother’s relationship with a non-resident father has a strong influence on the quality of the child’s relationship with him (Dunn et al 2004).

¹³ “A father who is dead may be carried within the child’s mind as a very alive figure depending on the mother’s way of talking about the father” (McDougall 1989: 209).

always have a story about their parents' lives and relationships. It is usually better if it bears some resemblance to the truth.

Father waiting in the wings

The triangular core of a modern family is a restless system, something like musical chairs, where there is always a risk that someone will be left out. To keep the process going relationships have to be continually worked at. Many families seen in child mental health clinics have failed to achieve this; the music has stopped for good, with mother's partner excluded. The third point in the triangle remains vague or vacant and the child risks getting stuck an enmeshed relationship with mother. Family therapists of the 1970s referred to this condition as a cross-generational 'marriage' (Whitaker 1977, Palazzoli, et al 1978 ch 15). Haley was the first to describe the 'secret coalition' whose mischief continues to preoccupy systems therapists.

“The term coalition means a process of joint action *against* a third person ... the problem is most severe when the coalition across generations is denied or concealed ... when this act becomes a way of life the family is in trouble” (Haley 1976: 109.)

The most elaborate description of enmeshment is the double bind (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland 1956)¹⁴ which was followed by many variations on the theme¹⁵. What all formulations describe in common is an inflexible bond that undermines development. Children require more than one engaged caregiver.

Boys are more vulnerable to developmental stress than girls. Besides the extra effects on boys of perinatal depression and anxiety, almost anything that can go wrong from conception onwards is more likely to harm the male offspring. Mortality from any cause (including, in adolescence, suicide), autism, hyperactivity, clumsiness/dyspraxia, conduct disorders, specific learning difficulties, and tics are all much commoner in boys, who lag behind girls by around 10% in GCSE exam results each year (Kraemer 2000). Because of this fragility boys take up more of the time of child mental health services (while girls predominate in adolescent clinics). Whatever the underlying problem, the resilience of the containing triad significantly determines the

¹⁴ “The double bind was originally a feature of a two-person relationship but, within a few years, Haley had extended its remit beyond psychosis, and added a third person. His identification of the ‘perverse triangle’ (Haley, 1967) was described by Hoffman as ‘Haley’s leap from a fascination with communication to a fascination with structures’ (Hoffman 1981: 112). This was a paradigm shift that brought the Oedipus complex into the heart of systems theory. While consistently scornful of psychoanalysis, Haley described how the child has a special relationship with one parent, which excludes the other. ...The systems revolution had reinvented the Oedipal triangle but in a form that was no longer recognisable.” (Kraemer 2008: 152-3).

¹⁵ Maternal impingement (Winnicott 1960), anxious attachment (Bowlby 1973), invisible loyalty and parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark 1973), enmeshment (Minuchin et al 1978), Expressed Emotion (Leff & Vaughn 1985), unresolved/preoccupied (Patrick et al 1994) or disorganised attachment (Solomon & George 2011), and role reversal (Macfie et al 2008).

outcome. Clinically a case can be made for the hypothesis *that many younger boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties have powerfully enmeshed relationships with their mothers from which the third (father or other) is to some extent excluded.*

Ben, a bright and articulate child aged 8 frustrates his parents terribly, mother more than father. He was referred because of poor coordination and learning problems. He had already had psychological and psychiatric assessments, and was seen to be very intelligent but with specific spelling and reading difficulties and borderline ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). At mother's request he had not received medication for this. Everything he is asked to do generates a self righteous tantrum. His mother pleads with him and the noise increases. Father tries to intervene but mother keeps him away, saying he is too harsh. While the boy has his own weekly individual sessions with a psychoanalytic child psychotherapist¹⁶, work with the parental couple uncovers a familiar story. Mother and baby did not have a good start together. Ben was born after a long labour, and was often ill as an infant. Mother felt oppressed by his demands. Men in her family of origin always had problems. Her brother was clumsy and dyslexic and could not hold down a job, and her father died in uncertain circumstances, possibly by suicide, when she was very young. Ben's father's own father was distant and autocratic and his mother favoured his sister over him. The couple are loyal but it has been a struggle for them to work together with this child, especially since his younger brother, who had a much happier start, was born. Ben is furiously jealous, accusing both parents of loving his brother more than him.

In his weekly sessions Ben demonstrates his frustration at not being able to make things happen his way. He is very competitive with the therapist, wanting to sit in her chair. He declares that he is in the Trojan horse and that she is being invaded by him. She experiences this as his strong desire to get inside a maternal figure. He is enraged when she comments on his omnipotence and tapes up her mouth to silence her. He is very engaged in his therapy, but its effectiveness depends also on our active encouragement in parent sessions of their need to change the way they manage Ben's outbursts.

The child's therapist and I worked two-monthly with the parents together. These sessions were lively and friendly. All four of us in the room have different nationalities. Mother's imitation of Ben's whining and her pleading responses vividly enacts their enmeshed relationship, demonstrating how Ben is aroused - even sexually - by her reaction to him. In the meantime, having at first insisted that Ben should have special education, she now becomes convinced that all his symptoms are

¹⁶ Salomonsson describes psychoanalytic work with a boy who has attention deficits: "nobody knows which of the neurobiological findings are primary to the patient's psychic set-up and which of them are secondary to remote psychological events" (2004 p130).

due to ADHD, which she expects me as a psychiatrist to treat. I said that she wanted me to be a powerful doctor who can fix things at the stroke of a pen¹⁷. This is not a paternal function but a magical solution. Both mother's dead father and father's remote one have left empty spaces in their minds; neither has a childhood recollection of effective parental partnerships. I suggested to mother that rather than seeking an omnipotent patriarch in me she would be better off with her partner, Ben's father, sitting right next to her. Our goal was to help them discover how a child can be calmed when he sees that his parents are working together for him, rather than undermining each other.

“..for a three-foot tyrant to be taller than the rest of the family members, [he] has to be standing on the shoulders of one of the adults. In all cases, the therapist may safely assume that the spouses disqualify each other, which leaves the triangulated tyrant in a position of power that is frightening to [him] as well as to the family” (Minuchin & Fishman 1981: 58).

The difference between a play in the theatre and family therapeutic process is that the role of the villain is minimised in therapy. Obviously Ben was a prime candidate for this part, but as witnesses we could as well have selected either parent, mother for being too emotional and inconsistent and father for giving way to mother, and holding back¹⁸. As they had already come to these conclusions themselves, it was better to take their side as a struggling parental couple, and blame nobody. To remind her of the Oedipal drama we had rehearsed in our meetings, I gave mother a pair of children's scissors from the play box in my room, to cut the umbilical cord¹⁹.

After a few more sessions father could join mother at centre stage in his son's life and within months Ben was getting gold stars for effort at school. It became clearer to what extent he had specific spelling and reading difficulties, which needed equally specific help. But he was far less troubled and troubling. His therapy continued, and in his play he became more preoccupied with his masculinity and rivalry with his father.

Drawing a line

'Drawing a line' describes the setting of a boundary. Amongst prehuman primates the male beats the bounds of the band to keep out intruders. In humans, protecting the family is a traditional paternal role, but there is also a line to be drawn through the

¹⁷ There is a revealing study showing how the psychosocial aspects of hyperactivity are downplayed by clinicians now that it is seen as a biological condition. Prescription is privileged over psychotherapy. "Clinicians under-detect psychosocial problems if they believe that the diagnosis is hyperkinetic disorder and they therefore presume a biological aetiology" (Overmeyer et al 1999: 262).

¹⁸ Ben might have singled out his younger brother as the source of his frustration, though he has his parents to blame for producing him.

¹⁹ She was amused and took them everywhere with her, until they were confiscated at an airport security check. My symbolic gesture might have been better addressed to the father.

middle of it. Making a distinction is the beginning of logical thought and of morality. The patriarchal Abrahamic God creates the world by marking the boundaries between sky and earth and between night and day. Gregory Bateson frames the “thunderous prose” of the opening verses of Genesis as a *scientific statement about order* (1973: 29): “... and God divided the light from the darkness ... and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament” (*Genesis* I: 4,7). Bateson saw this as the essence of mind; that knowledge is news of difference. Again it needs emphasising that this is not something only men (or God) can do. Patriarchy expropriated logic as its own invention, as if before God there had been no such thing.

The line that has to be drawn in families marks the difference between generations. The Oedipal struggle is not so much a symmetrical contest between father and son for mother’s love as one in which a truth has to be established, namely that the boy is not the sexual partner of the mother: “... the absence of the satisfaction hoped for, the continued denial of the desired baby, must in the end lead the small lover to turn away from his hopeless longing” (Freud 1961b: 34). Babies can't make babies. Whoever imparts it, the paternal function promotes this realisation. Boys I have failed to help in clinical practice did not get this message. Between them the mother and father managed to stifle it, leaving child and mother to consume each other with intrusive thoughts and actions. However disguised, seduction and the blurring of boundaries are essential elements of this tragedy.

This catastrophe is a familiar scenario in child mental health clinics. Culture, social class, education, intelligence and money are no protection. A particularly destructive cycle occurs when the mother has been sexually abused in childhood. She grows up feeling contaminated and has no trust in men. Yet she forms a partnership with one, and they have a child. The couple’s relationship breaks down. The boy child takes the father’s place by sleeping with mother, or by fighting with her. I have met many such parents whose courage I admire, but whose ability to keep their actual child in mind is limited. Instead he is experienced through a veil of projections from past relationships, and treated accordingly. This is a dilemma for family therapists. It is possible to engage parents in therapy who might never get any help in their own right, yet not be able to repair generations of loss, betrayal and disappointment. Forty years ago Selma Fraiberg coined the phrase ‘ghosts in the nursery’ to describe the persecutory experiences of new parents, in particular mothers²⁰, when confronted with their baby’s desires and demands.

“The intruders from the past have taken up residence in the nursery, claiming tradition and rights of ownership. They have been present at the christening for two or more generations. While no one has issued

²⁰ A father may have his own ghosts too and rarely any opportunity to reflect on them (Walters, 1997).

an invitation, the ghosts take up residence and conduct the rehearsal of the family tragedy from a tattered script” (Fraiberg et al 1975: 388).

What breaks through at this fragile moment in the mother’s life is her recollection of the care she received a generation before, when she herself was an infant (see also Fonagy et al 1993). If that was good enough then the flashbacks are helpful, as if her caregivers were with her now, supporting her. If it was disturbing, for example if her mother was rejecting or intrusive, then her view of her baby is taken over by these terrors, so that he is no longer an innocent and lovable child but someone with an intimidating grudge against her.²¹ Disorganised attachments are formed when parents both frighten the infant and are frightened of him. More than girls, boys in this situation may later become domineering and punitive towards their parents (Solomon & George 2011: 44, Liotti 2011: 388). Such distortions of the infant’s intentions need prompt and intensive treatment (Jones 2006).

Back to the beginning

Rather than wait until the family tragedy has entered another repetitive cycle it is better to draw a line between past and future at the beginning of a new act. Whoever in the family is available, the perinatal period is the point in the life cycle where a paternal, therapeutic function should be exercised (Olds 2006, Myers et al 2014). A public health service such as the NHS is in an ideal position to surround pregnant women and their partners with multidisciplinary teams that can pick up distress and disease before they take their toll on the family to come. There is a great deal of evidence for the ill effects of perinatal anxiety and depression on the child’s long term health and development (eg O’Donnell et al 2014, Bauer et al 2014) but, despite some pioneering projects²², there are still no universal services to prevent them (Kraemer 2015). All new families need looking after, including parents without major stresses who would welcome the chance to share childcare for part of the day. Besides making therapy available (Hutchings et al 2007) children’s centres, as in the visionary Sure Start programme (Glass 1999), could revive aspects of the preagricultural gatherings of different families and generations that infants still expect in their early years.

There is no such thing as a prescribed role for a father, but there is a job to be done. From the child’s perspective, once he knows the facts of life, he would prefer to have good care from the people that made him, whose relationship he monitors from an early age. But it is also a fact of life that parents may separate, or die, in which case he will be even more discriminating about the partnership that takes over, in the hope that they will not let him assume responsibility for it.

²¹ A woman in this situation is unlikely to trust her parents to support her.

²² N E London Perinatal parent infant mental health service (PPIMHS), www.nelft.nhs.uk/services-bdhvrbwf-ppimhs

Epilogue: the therapist as actor

Although Ben's story was not tragic it was painful enough. His mother expected us to blame her for causing his difficulties, as if she were drawing him into intimate fights for her own purposes. This was a tempting hypothesis to make in the heat of the moment, but in systems therapy it is a poor strategy²³, because it implies that someone in the family benefits from the persistence of the symptom. While quite possibly true, this would put the responsibility for change squarely on mother, leaving father and son with no parts to play. If the therapist takes a position against one side – as the audience at the play might – the other side is exonerated. Palazzoli and her colleagues in Milan refined systemic technique so that every person in the family would feel acknowledged and understood, and none blamed. "The end result of the successive alliances is that the therapist is allied with everyone and no one at the same time" (Palazzoli et al, 1980: 11). This is 'positive connotation'; the effort to see how each individual in the system plays an equal part in maintaining the problem. Therapists can then offer the family an alternative hypothesis, touching unconscious terrors and desires behind the symptom. In doing so we also change our own perception of the family's way of relating. "While [positive connotation] is often taken to be similar to the strategy of positive reframing ... actually it is much closer to a restructuring of the therapist's consciousness" (Boscolo et al 1987: 7). The discipline required to do this is not unlike the actor's method as he gets into a state of mind that he cannot yet quite believe in. It may seem wrong to think of a therapist as acting, which implies being false. Yet to get past ordinary reactions of sympathy and blame family therapists have to work in a manner that is both genuine and also unexpected.

*"In ordinary life truth is what really exists, what a person really knows. Whereas on the stage it consists of something that is not actually in existence but which could happen ... Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues"
(Stanislavski 1937: 129, 130.)*

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²³ In psychoanalytic therapy there is time, and a need, to challenge head on destructive motives arising, for example, from jealousy and envy, as in Ben's therapy. In work with families more strategic and indirect methods are usually required to avoid shaming one family member in the presence of others.

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