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PSYCHIC GROWTH AND RECIPROCITY;

Psychoanalytical infant observation and socio-cultural factors

Lynda Miller

In this paper I consider the contribution of cultural factors to infant development in different societal contexts which can promote either independence or a sense of belonging. I explore the means by which cultural expectations are communicated from parent to baby, by the positive and negative projective identifications which can help or hinder development.

It is generally accepted today by professionals involved in the study of infants from a variety of theoretical perspectives that the healthy emotional and cognitive development of a baby is dependent upon a nurturing environment at both physical and psychological levels. Recent research in the fields of neuroscience, of developmental psychology and of psychoanalytically informed infant observation studies all point in this direction.

Sue Gerhardt (2004), a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and co-founder of the Oxford Parent-Infant Project brings together findings from the fields of neuroscience, psychology and psychoanalysis. She explains why parental love is essential for healthy brain development in infancy, and how interactions between babies and their parents have a major impact in this respect. Gerhardt writes: “the poorly handled baby develops a more reactive stress response and different biochemical patterns from a well-handled baby”. The psychic growth of a thriving infant can only be convincingly understood in

the context of a dependent, reciprocal relationship between a baby and his primary care-providers, usually, but by no means invariably the parents.

However, in order to attempt to understand the complexity of factors at play in the developmental processes, the differences in temperament between individual babies must also be taken into consideration. Studies like that of Di Cagno (1984) show that the combination of a lively baby with a depressed mother is more likely to promote healthy psychological development in the infant than the combination of placid baby and depressed mother. Obviously, the personality of the mother similarly has an effect on infant development and later I will discuss Likierman's (1998) conceptualisation of the impact of positive maternal projective identifications on the mother-baby relationship.

I would now like to focus upon the significance of cultural factors in psychological development that I think provide a broader framework to our understanding. Firstly I want to consider infants brought up in a middle-class western cultural context and draw attention to current socio-cultural trends that tend to undervalue what we know about the importance of dependency and reciprocity as essential ingredients for healthy infant development.

Pamela Sorensen (2005) of the Under Fives Study Center, Virginia, USA writes about basic cultural assumptions that may underlie parental views of what is important for positive emotional and cognitive development of children in the USA, and I think her ideas are also applicable to some countries in Western Europe. I will use material taken from infant observations presented

in seminars that I have led in both Italy and the UK, which have been carried out using a psychoanalytic framework of thinking.

In her description of North American society, Sorensen (2005) writes: “Americans value autonomy, independence and self reliance ... The imagery associated with this mentality persists and permeates American culture”. Sorensen describes the way in which there has been a surge in the marketing of toys and videos which teach without the need for human contact, adding that “the idea of the autonomous learner is idealised in American culture”. I think that there has been a similar promotion of such toys in western Europe, accompanied by an increase in TV programmes aimed at a very young audience, with a distinctly ‘educational’ emphasis. This cultural trend, in that it encourages independence (or one could argue, pseudo-independence) from a very early age runs in direct opposition to the notion, borne out by scientific research and observation, that dependency on a reliable, protective, receptive care-giver is the salient requirement for sound development.

From a psychoanalytically informed infant observation perspective, Bick’s (1968) concept of “second skin” formation has proved to be a very useful way of thinking about pseudo-independence. Bick describes ways in which babies can attempt to hold themselves together by developing rigid defences in situations of inadequate containment, where dependency needs are unmet.

Wilfred Bion’s (1962) concept of the ‘container and the contained’ provides us with a psychoanalytic model of the mind in which reciprocity is the basis of all

learning, both emotional and cognitive. In this model, the infant's states of mind, his desires and frustrations, are communicated to a receptive and understanding parent, initially at a primitive level then later verbally. The containing parent receives and processes these raw communications in her mind, and conveys them back to the baby, now imbued with meaning and in a tolerable form.

I hope to illustrate, using infant observation material, different modes of reciprocity in play situations, in which the parent is either predominantly receptive and containing in relation to the baby, or by contrast seems to be pushing the baby towards premature independence, tending to deny dependency needs. All the extracts are from observations carried out by students in the UK and in Italy, who are studying infant development by means of careful observation of babies in their own homes on a weekly basis over a two-year period.

The first example is of baby Harriet and her mother Susan, using two extracts of observations, the first from when Harriet was five months old, then at age nine months. In this observation Harriet, at five months, had just awoken from a sleep. The observer wrote:

“Harriet grabbed a rattle and shook it then dropped it and reached for a soft fabric ring that she also shook. The ring didn't make a noise and she dropped it and tried another, larger ring, which did make a noise. As she did this, she looked up at me and smiled, and I felt she was enjoying her newfound skills. Susan rejoined us and told me that the rings were part of a new stacking toy.

Apparently Harriet had not liked the toy at first, although Susan wondered if she had been tired, as she had been introduced to it just before her sleep. Susan sat down next to Harriet and by this time Harriet was smiling, laughing and talking, and looking from one of us to the other ... Harriet reached out towards the base of the toy, and Susan passed it to her. Susan then picked up all the stacking pieces putting them near Harriet. Some of the rings made a crunching noise when squeezed, others a rattling noise when shaken.”

In this observation, Susan lets the observer know that Harriet had not initially liked this ‘educational’ toy (stacking rings in order of size) yet she can enjoy playing with it in her own way, when mother left the room.

Here is Harriet again, four months later, aged nine months. The observer wrote:

“Susan picked Harriet up out of her chair and took her over to the enclosure. She sat her down on the sheepskin next to the toy box. Harriet reached into the box and pulled out a beany toy, a dog. Susan found the rabbit that she had bought for Harriet. Harriet held up the dog next to the rabbit before taking the rabbit from her mother. It felt as though she was comparing them. She offered the dog to Susan and then to me, but withdrew her hand almost immediately; Susan said ‘It’s the thought that counts!’ Harriet found an empty tennis ball tube. She banged on the lid, turned it round and used her fingertip to explore the other plastic end. She kept turning it round from one end to the other. She banged it again and Susan gave her the little drums. Harriet copied Susan hitting the drums and then returned to the tennis ball tube.

Eventually, she put it down and found a ball, carefully putting her fingertip onto the valve where the pump would connect.”

In this observation a more reciprocal two-way interaction between mother and baby is demonstrated, involving mirroring and imitation. Maria Rhode (2005), Professor of Child Psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic, differentiates between developmental imitation of this kind, and mimicry which is non-developmental.

Susan allows Harriet the freedom to choose which toys she wants to play with, and in which way, that is not necessarily for the purpose for which they were designed. The play is creative and experimental. Susan follows her daughter's lead, offering similar toys to those Harriet has chosen (the rabbit, the drums) perhaps with an educational intention in that drums are made for banging, tennis ball tubes are not, but Susan joins in with Harriet, interacting with her without coercing or forcing her own agenda. It seems to me that Susan is able to locate her natural wish to educate her child, that is for Harriet to develop emotionally and cognitively, in the reciprocal relationship between parent and baby in which the mother can be sensitive to her infant's need to experiment and to explore, at the same time as leading her onwards by providing a stimulating environment.

In 1988 Meira Likierman, a consultant child psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic, wrote a paper about maternal love and positive projections. She wanted to draw attention to “an aspect of maternal love which has not been emphasized in psycho-analytical theory, and which represents the mother's

projections of her own loving emotions rather than her ability to receive her infant's projected feelings". I would like here to differentiate between the value of positive projections as evidenced in the reciprocal relationship between Susan and Harriet, and negative maternal projections.

Likierman (1988) points out that a mother has a need to express her own loving emotions and to have these valued and confirmed by her baby. She adds that the mother's self-expressive needs in fact contribute to infant development, and that this is part of a mother's function in a reciprocal relationship, alongside her capacities to receive, contain and feed back in a more manageable form, her infant's communications. Returning to the infant observation extract above, Susan needs to participate in her baby's play as a means of expressing her love and her desire for her baby to develop healthily. This is entirely different from a mother's need forcefully to intrude into, direct and control her baby's play, which it can be argued is based on a negative maternal projection.

Of positive projections, Likierman (1988) writes: "the mother's primitive ... love for her infant has the important function of transmitting to it positive feelings which are not his own, and which he has not demanded by crying. They do 'intrude' into him, but offer a pleasure that is not of his own making, an unexpected gift, as it were. It gives the infant an experience of receiving, as opposed to the experience of earning and demanding pleasure".

In the infant observation material that follows, I think it is possible to see a complex mixture of positive and negative projections from the mother, Claudia, towards her baby, Laura.

The observer described this mother as warm and friendly, yet also very needy. The mother talked to the observer about her own feelings to the extent that the task of observation sometimes became very difficult, the observer's attention being torn between mother and baby. Claudia was clearly delighted by her daughter Laura; her intelligence, her impressive capacity to learn and to achieve her milestones early. To the observer Claudia confided that she herself had been a 'a boring baby', apparently her own mother's words, and Claudia was determined that Laura would be quite the opposite.

The following observation took place when Laura was one and a quarter years old. The observer wrote:

"Laura picked up a toy which was a box with four geometric holes and four geometric squares. With great concentration she picked up a square and tried to put it in a wrong hole, while Claudia was looking at her to see if Laura could do that. She helped Laura to put it in a correct hole and said 'She knows how to put the circle in a correct hole.' Claudia then gave Laura a circle and she placed it correctly."

In discussing this observation the seminar group thought that mother's neediness is reflected in her wish for Laura to perform, to show her

intelligence and to be successful. This could be understood in terms of mother's internal view of herself as the boring baby of a critical mother. A negative maternal projection would arise if mother felt that Laura were a boring baby. This would be intolerable to Claudia, who has constantly to prove to herself and to the observer that this is not so.

The next extract from the observation of Laura is from when she was one and a half years old. The observer wrote:

Mother said, 'Laura, let's go to show J your new pair of shoes'. Laura quickly left Claudia's room, went to her own room and opened the bottom drawer of her chest of drawers and picked up a pair of smart red leather shoes. Claudia proudly said, 'Well done Laura'. Laura tried to put on one shoe. Claudia said 'No Laura, they are too big for you. Don't use them yet, you need to wait longer'."

Mother's need for Laura to be unrealistically clever is also evident; she expects her to understand that the new shoes are too big and that she should not wear them yet, rather than being able to respond to Laura's pleasure in the new shoes.

Here is a final extract from the observation of Laura when she was nearly one and three quarter years old:

"Claudia stood up, turned off the TV and said that she would put on music from a CD. When she turned off the TV Laura started to whimper and Claudia told her that she would have nice music because the Tweenies was boring.

Laura whimpered and stared at her mother. Claudia picked up a big plastic bag that contained building blocks and said 'Let's go to play with this Laura'. Claudia put them on the floor and started to build something with the blocks. Laura looked at her mother's building, trying to do the same. She put her blocks onto Claudia's and her mother said, 'We are building a very high construction'. As the building grew Laura stood up and was still adding blocks when the construction fell on the floor and Laura laughed. She started another one, pushed it over and then repeated the operation. Claudia said, 'Laura, let's try to separate the blocks by colours'. Laura stared at her mother who was teaching her the colours of the blocks. While she was doing this Laura was putting the blocks in the bag and trying to separate them in the same way as her mother, but unsuccessfully."

In this observation an immediate link comes to mind; the Tweenies is Laura's favourite TV programme yet Claudia switches it off and says it is boring. Claudia's anxiety that Laura will be a boring baby, just as her own mother reportedly described Claudia's infancy, drives her to try to make sure that Laura plays educational games that will develop her intellect. Claudia also of course loves her daughter and allows her space to knock the building block tower over and enjoy doing so, but Claudia cannot resist directing and organising her play.

At the end of this extract Laura is trying to imitate her mother. This raises the question as to whether this is a "developmental imitation" (Rhode, 2005) or a kind of conformity brought about through a feeling of being under pressure.

Similarly one could think about whether the mother feels under pressure in relationship to the observer, a pressure to perform as a “good mother”, anxious to please, not boring.

It will be apparent that in neither of the mother-baby reciprocal relationships described above does there exist a pure culture of either positive or negative projections but rather two different mixtures of both. I suggest that it is only problematic for development if negative projections predominate, and especially if prevailing cultural norms foster the tendency in parents to control and pressurize their babies.

A brief comparison of Western and Eastern cultures with regard to parent-infant relationships adds another perspective on different attitudes and practices. Harvey B. Aronson (2004), writing on the subject of the differences between Asian and western culture cites research carried out by the cultural psychologists Markus and Kitayama who identify a strong emphasis on connection, relatedness and interdependence in family patterns in Asian countries. By contrast they found that in North America and in many European countries high value is placed on individuation, a process whereby people strive to achieve autonomy, independence and self-reliance. Aronson quotes an example of this distinction noted by Kim Insoo Berg, family therapist: in Korea, with its emphasis on social connectedness, children are punished by being put outside of the house – an enforced separation from the family, whereas in the West, where the emphasis is on independence, the

favourite punishment of children in our times is to be 'grounded', that is, to be kept inside the home with the family!

In Asian countries, except in large modern cities where Western values increasingly tend to predominate, the involvement of the extended family in child rearing is in stark contrast to the nuclear family of the West. In an infant observation carried out in London, a student presented to the seminar group her observations of a family in which a white English woman had married an Indian man, who felt strongly that their children should be raised in a manner that incorporated traditional Indian family values. His parents arrived from India shortly before the birth of their first child, a son, and stayed with the new parents for six months in their tiny apartment. The grandmother played a dominant role in nurturing the baby and the seminar group empathised with the mother, who seemed to be doing her best to manage the situation, yet clearly found it difficult. She would retreat to another room to breast-feed her son as if making a bid for privacy and this was the only time she had alone with him. The weekly observations were filled with accounts of grandmother cuddling and playing with the baby, whilst mother cooked traditional Indian meals for the family, and returned part-time to work in order to pay the rent (her husband was a student).

When the grandparents returned to India the seminar group breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that at last the mother would be able to get to know her baby. This indeed was the case and the baby seemed to have made a close bond with his mother in his early life, despite spending so much time with his

grandmother. Then father announced that he would be taking the little boy to India for six weeks, so that he could be with his grandparents and extended family for his first birthday. Mother would have to stay behind to earn money. Again the seminar group felt very concerned about the impact of this separation on mother and baby as if both mother's and baby's emotional needs were being given little consideration at the expense of the predominant cultural values of the father.

During the six week absence the observer visited the mother who missed her son and her husband very much and seemed depressed. This would not be usual practice in an infant observation and suggested that the observer was sympathetic to the mother's predicament and possibly judgemental about the father. The seminar group anticipated that the re-uniting of mother and baby after the trip might give rise to complex, perhaps conflicting feelings. We wondered if the little boy would be confused in light of the attachments he had made to his mother and to his grandmother, and whether the loss of each of them in turn would leave him unsure about who was his main caregiver. It was a salutary experience for the seminar group to find that on his return to London this little boy had no difficulty in re-establishing a close, loving relationship with his mother, but had reportedly also loved being with his extended family in India. Doubtlessly he had missed both his mother and his grandmother when separated from them, but this did not have a detrimental effect on his capacity to sustain a secure attachment. It led the seminar group to question whether we had made culture-bound assumptions about what is optimal for infant development.

M. Leng (2005) gives a moving account of filming an infant observation in a Hindu family in rural Nepal. This formed part of a research project led by Lynn Barnett based on cross-cultural observation videos and studying emotional development. Leng writes: "individual identity remains a Western concept and family identities in Nepalese culture differ from those in the West". She describes the way in which the baby, a girl, was usually held by members of the extended family and she writes: "Hindu child rearing is reliant on the support of the extended family and other family members are readily on hand to hold the baby. She grew to be a very sociable baby and her stimulation came from being touched, held and included." Leng reflects on the mother's role in this traditional village community: "To the extent that individual identity remains a Western concept, I had never felt her to be the maternal centre around which this family gathered."

This baby was the fourth girl in a family with as yet no boys, so her birth would be seen as inauspicious in a society where sons are valued more than daughters. This may have been a factor in the mother's observed depression following the birth. Here it seemed that a baby could benefit from the warmth and liveliness of the extended family that may also be a support for a depressed mother.

As a final example of cultural differences in the child-parent relationship I will turn to a biographical source. In his autobiography "Freedom in Exile" the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet describes a painful and unhappy period of his

life when aged three years he had to leave his parents and his family home, in accord with cultural expectations, to begin life in a monastery. He writes: “It is very hard for a small child to be separated from his parents,” but later he adds “When I was very young, I developed a close attachment to the Master of the Kitchen. So strong was it that he had to be in my sight at all times, even if it was only the bottom of his robe visible through a doorway or under the curtains which served as doors inside Tibetan houses. Luckily, he tolerated my behaviour. He was a very kind and simple man, and almost completely bald. He was not a very good storyteller, nor an enthusiastic playmate, but this did not matter one bit. I have often wondered since about our relationship. I see it now as being like the bond between a kitten or some small animal and the person who feeds it. I sometimes think that the act of bringing food is one of the basic roots of all relationships.”

In conclusion, attachment considered in a non-Western cultural context needs to include the model of the child in a large extended family and even in a monastic community. This can be interestingly contrasted with attachment patterns in the nuclear family and single parent family characteristic of Western society. Returning to the main theme of this paper, psychic growth and reciprocity, it can be argued that a flexible use of the term attachment needs to be adopted in order to encompass child-rearing practices of other cultures. Furthermore, in the more affluent parts of the USA and of Western Europe, attention needs to be given to the phenomenon of “pseudo-independence” arising out a culturally endorsed situation in which

independent learning is promoted by parents at the expense of adequately meeting an infant's dependency needs.

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