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The First Relationship – the Experience of Fundamental Trust as a Foundation for the Development of Faith

Abstract

The article is an important starting point for reflecting upon the emergence and development of fundamental trust through the first, primary relationship between the newborn and the parent. The birth of the first child signifies establishment of a family system, in which the concepts and mechanisms that Relational Family Therapy is built upon, are reflected on a systemic, interpersonal and intrapsychic level. Relational Family Therapy can find a way to resolve painful psychical contents and bring about a relief of the family system. The starting point for the study of the family described in this paper is the method of observing newborn behavior, the Newborn Behavioral Observations System (hereinafter NBO) with elements of Relational Family Therapy, which significantly helps to build a confident parental role and establishes a closer relationship between parents and children, thus forming the foundation for all further relationships.

Keywords

Newborn, observation, the first relationship, Relational Family Therapy.

1. Introduction

For professionals who work with newborns and their parents, the postpartum period is a unique opportunity to accompany parents on a study trip with their newborn. At the same time, this challenging transition period is a major turning point for the whole family,¹ which should be above all beautiful and happy for young parents and newborns, given the nature of the event.

With birth, a new relationship is also born. The first relationship that is given to us as a gift, is the relationship with our parents. It develops intensively in the first days, weeks and years of life. In the words of Selma Fraiberg, working with newborns and children makes you feel like you are in the presence of God. The bonds of love and affection that children and parents weave between each other, as well as the developmental dynamics of the first years, are a great motivating force pointed in the direction of the best possible outcome.²

In recent times, Brazelton has brought about a paradigm shift in the scientific and clinical treatment of children and their development by placing the child at the center of scientific research.³ With his scientific plausibility, he has brought about a radical change of the view and understanding of the child and exploration of his development. He has achieved fundamental shifts with the Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale (hereinafter NBAS) and its shorter version, the Newborn Behavioral Observations System (NBO),⁴ and with scientific findings based on their use. The researchers of early childhood development have repeatedly proven that a newborn has an exceptional repertoire of behaviors, that he competently participates in interactions, and has the ability of self-regulation.

¹ K. Nugent, C. Keefer, S. Minear, L. Johnson, Y. Blanchard, *Understanding newborn behavior and early relationships: the newborn behavioral observations (NBO) system handbook*, London 2007: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, p. 17.

² A. Lieberman, P. Van Horn, *Psychotherapy with infants and young children: repairing the effects of stress and trauma on early attachment*, New York 2008: Guilford Press, p. xi.

³ B. M. Lester, *Transforming the research landscape*, in: B. M. Lester and J. D. Sparrow (Eds.), *Nurturing children and families: building on the legacy of T. Berry Brazelton*, Oxford, Malden 2010: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 3–14.

⁴ T.B. Brazelton, *Neonatal behavioral assessment scale*, London 1973: Spastics International Medical Publications; T.B. Brazelton, K. Nugent, *Neonatal behavioral assessment scale* (3 ed.), London 1995: Mac Keith Press; K. Nugent, C. Keefer, S. Minear, L. Johnson, Y. Blanchard, *Understanding newborn behavior and early relationships: the newborn behavioral observations (NBO) system handbook*, London 2007: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

2. Relational Family Therapy and the First Relationship

Today, understanding man as a being of relationships is a generally accepted psychological paradigm giving rise to new ways of understanding, treating, and exploring man and relationships from birth. The relationship is not only the fundamental psycho-organic motivational force of development, but also the force of therapeutic healing – the relationship being the healing entity.⁵

Family studies have been interdisciplinary throughout history and are still evolving, but they take place in different ways and develop in various directions. The Relational Family paradigm is based on the findings of neurobiological science on the recording of early relationships in the subcortical and right hemisphere brain. This paradigm aims at understanding the so-called right hemisphere communication – physical communication between mother and child – in terms of the child's need for relationship, warmth, security, feelings of being welcome and loved, thus explaining the phenomenon of the child's attachment to the mother who does not meet these needs.⁶ It sees the family as a system and an intersection of history and biology, heredity and education, the continuous and the discontinuous.⁷ As such, it solves the basic dilemma of exclusive or predominant exposure to the effects of either genes or the environment ("nature vs. nurture"). The structure and function of the family system are constantly changing, but the family system contains a clear hierarchy of functions, structures, and boundaries, which is a condition of human development, with unconditionality and fundamental stability being its key positive qualities. In the observation of human development, the family is the most complex unit because, in addition to the diversity of interpersonal

⁵ C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in klinična praksa* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2013: Brat Frančišek in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, pp. 15–16; B. Simonič, *Empathetic Parenting and Child Development*, "The Person and the Challenges" Vol. 5 (2015) No 2, pp. 109–121; T. Pate, *Families of Children with Chronic Illness and the Relational Family Model* "The Person and the Challenges" Vol. 5 (2015) No 2, pp. 57–65.

⁶ C. Gostečnik, *Govorica telesa v psihoanalizi* (Vol. 14), Ljubljana 2012: Brat Frančišek; Teološka fakulteta in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut; A. N. Schore, *Affect regulation and the repair of the self* (1 ed.), New York 2003: W.W. Norton.

⁷ K. Kompan Erzar, *Ljubezen umije spomin* (Vol. 8), Ljubljana 2006: Brat Frančišek, Frančiškanski družinski inštitut in Celjska Mohorjeva družba, p. 13.

relations and intergenerational transmissions, it enables an insight into an individual's organic development through the theory of attachment.⁸

3. The First Relationship: Mother-Newborn

The relationship between mother and newborn is established through physical and emotional closeness, which is reflected in the perception and acceptance of the newborn. It begins to develop immediately after birth, with the first physical contact.⁹ The newborn is in an active awake state about one hour after birth and is ready to get to know the faces of the mother and the father, their voices, smell and touch, and for parents this is a time of special sensitivity.¹⁰ The mother's first touch, eye contact, skin-to-skin contact are the signs of a deep emotional connection. These feelings are intensely expressed and continue in the first weeks and months, especially during breastfeeding, changing, touching, caressing and similar physical contact. Such atmosphere establishes a unique lasting relationship consisting of an emotional bond; it is defined as a unique relationship between two people that is specific and lasting. The general consensus refers to "bond" as the emotional bond of parents to the child, while the term "attachment" denotes the bond of the child to the parents.¹¹ Some parents feel a strong connection with the child already in pregnancy, others at birth when they see, sense and feel the child, some a little later.¹²

⁸ K. Kompan Erzar, *Ljubezen umije spomin* (Vol. 8), Ljubljana 2006: Brat Frančišek, Frančiškanski družinski inštitut in Celjska Mohorjeva družba, pp. 13–14.

⁹ M. Skubic, *Integracija metode Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) z elementi relacijske družinske terapije* (magistrsko delo), Univerza v Ljubljani, Teološka fakulteta 2014, p. 90.

¹⁰ P. Farrell, N. Sittlington, *The baby at birth*, in: D. F. Fraser M. A. Cooper (Eds.), *Myles textbook for midwives* (15 ed., pp. 745–761), Edinburgh 2009: Churchill Livingstone Elsevier, pp. 758–759.

¹¹ J. Kennell, S. McGrath, *Starting the process of mother-infant bonding*, »APA Acta Pediatrca« 94 (6) (2005), pp. 775–778.

¹² J. Kennell, *Parent-infant bonding and doula support*, in: K. J. Nugent, B. J. Petruskas and B. T. Brazelton (Eds.), *The newborn as a person: enabling healthy infant development worldwide*, Hoboken 2009: Wiley, pp. 243–244.

Gostečnik¹³ refers to the first relationship as to “the first intimate space” or “the first sacral space,” which the child will always long for if the mother does not establish it with him. This is the so-called “relational child” or “sacral child” who, in normal conditions of development, can unobtrusively seek contact with the world. Normal conditions are, in particular, the mother’s willingness and the ability for the child to calm down next to her body and consequently develop a sense of safe relationship. In contrast, from the very beginning the relationship may be full of disgust and guilt, which the child takes on from parents who are unable to show compassion and love. When emotional reciprocity and harmony is established between the mother and the newborn, the child is also born in a psychological sense, developing the sense of the sacred and perfect.

The theory of attachment represents a break with the previous image of parenthood, as the focus has shifted from the child’s behavior to the area of emotion, quality emotional contact and attunement with the child. Erzar and Kompan Erzar¹⁴ write about the instructions of older generations who usually inhibited young parents from indulging in intuitive contact with the child and creating a safe space for his development without losing contact with themselves and their needs.

4. Interaction between Parent and Child as a Space for Growth

“Attachment theory is the first theory of modern human science to evaluate maternal love and show that it is not just the mother’s need or desire for contact with the child nor the child’s need for food and survival: rather, it is their mutual relationship, emotional connection and mutual love; thereby breaking the harmful tradition that attributed negative, uncivilized tendencies to the child and denied the child’s own experience.”¹⁵

In the emotional space between the child and the parent, where the processes of attunement and mutual response take place, the child develops a sense of self, initiative, belonging and security, which is not due to educational rules, external

¹³ C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in klinična praksa* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2013: Brat Frančišek in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, pp. 7–9.

¹⁴ T. Erzar, K. Kompan Erzar, *Teorija navezanosti*, Celje 2011: Celjska Mohorjeva družba, pp. 37–39.

¹⁵ T. Erzar, L.K. Kompan Erzar, *Teorija navezanosti*, Celje 2011: Celjska Mohorjeva družba, p. 7.

control or “setting boundaries”, but rather the result of an internal affective and mental process in which the parents respond to the emotional states of the child without losing contact with themselves and their needs.¹⁶

The birth of a child causes an imbalance in the mother’s system, so this period can also be called a period of crisis.¹⁷ One of the goals of therapeutic treatment of the family is to establish conditions in which a more intense and deeper relationship could be established between the parent and the child. If we define a relationship as a state of connection through mutually determined and formed goals¹⁸ the following elements are the basis for establishing and shaping a healthy relationship: responsiveness, respect, empathy, time and tolerance to mistakes that are inevitable in a close relationship.

From the point of view of Relational Family Therapy, observing a newborn using the NBO method can be a starting point for establishing a trusting and safe relationship with parents and at the same time an opportunity to identify problem areas and blockages that inhibit the functioning of a family system. Recognizing the atmosphere and finding the affect that blocks the functioning of the system during the transition to parenthood is key to establishing balance in the family through the mechanism of affect regulation.¹⁹

5. The Mother-Child Relationship as a Space of Grace

The special, unique and untouchable relationship between mother and child has been confirmed in many ways by modern psychology, which, based on observations of the child’s responses and other forms of behavior, has discovered that he already has an innate desire for a relationship – the child will try to make

¹⁶ M. Skubic, *Integracija metode Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) z elementi relacijske družinske terapije* (magistrsko delo), Univerza v Ljubljani, Teološka fakulteta 2014, p. 98.

¹⁷ N. Bruschweiler-Stern, *A multifocal neonatal intervention*, in: A. J. Sameroff, S. C. McDonough and K. Rosenblum (Eds.), *Treating parent infant relationship problems: strategies for intervention*, New York 2004: Guilford Press, p. 194.

¹⁸ K. Nugent, C. Keefer, S. Minear, L. Johnson, Y. Blanchard, *Understanding newborn behavior and early relationships: the newborn behavioral observations (NBO) system handbook*, London 2007: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, pp. 135–137.

¹⁹ M. Skubic, *Integracija metode Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) z elementi relacijske družinske terapije* (magistrsko delo), Univerza v Ljubljani, Teološka fakulteta 2014, pp. 96–98.

contact, encourage a response in the parents and respond in his own way to their challenges and responses. Stern²⁰ explicitly emphasizes that strong feelings (affects) and important representations become part of an individual's psycho-organic structure, but not only because the child has been breastfed (or fed), changed, and is not tired, but primarily because of the way all these activities have been happening.

Bollas²¹ tried to discover the child's earliest memories and find the most fundamental affects attached to, in them. He discovered that a child's primary awareness is not an awareness of an object but of a relationship. If the mother consciously opens the child to the sacred and thus sees him as someone who is a gift, the child soon feels that he is truly something special.

A complex answer to the question of why early relationships shape people so strongly is offered by the Relational Family paradigm, which defines the family as a psycho-organic or sacral space where, from the very beginning, a child seeks another (i.e. a parent), a way to be in a relationship with this person, how to become attached to them, and is formed next to the parents and receives recognition from them. For a very long time, the child is highly dependent on the parents, on contact and interaction with them; this becomes the child's emotional need and at the same time an obvious condition of his physical survival.

Bollas²² defines the most primary environment as a "transformational object" or as a transformational object-relation where the child can learn to transform an experience into information about himself and the world surrounding him into which he was born. The search for a transformational object is based primarily on positive experiencing of the caring mother-child relationship, where there is a natural longing to re-experience something positive. In this state the child learns from the mother who he is and what he is – he learns to be in his own body and when he listens to his body, he always feels the mother's presence and her tenderness – in theological language we could say that it is a special grace, which re-creates relationships.

²⁰ D. Stern, *The present moment in psychotherapy and everyday life*, New York 2004: W.W. Norton, pp. 29–30.

²¹ C. Bollas, *The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*, Abingdon 2018: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, pp. 15–17.

²² C. Bollas, *The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*, Abingdon 2018: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, pp. 3–6.

6. Moral and Spiritual Development in a Child in the First Year of Life

The child grows and develops both physically and mentally, so it is important to shed light on the emergence of spiritual and moral development in the child, relying on the importance of a healthy relationship between parents or within the family, which is a prerequisite for laying the foundations for the child's spiritual and moral development.

Theories of moral development address the question of how man learns about what is right and wrong, and how he internalizes principles so that he can use them in forming his thoughts and decisions.²³ James W. Fowler, born in 1940, is considered to be the leading theorist of man's spiritual development and his beliefs. He built his knowledge on the heritage of his predecessors, Gordon Allport and David Ellkind. Allport argued that the initial human condition is nonbelieving, and that a person acquires or achieves faith to become an integrated part of his personality. According to Allport, newborns are psychologically unformed, and they are significantly influenced by the culture of the environment on religious matters. David Elkind believed that faith is a natural result of mental development, the result of the interaction of the biological roots, of intellectual growth and an individual's experience. Otherwise, Elkind did not give much attention to the development of belief in the first stage of the Piaget scale.²⁴

A theory by Ronald Goldman, who argued that religious thinking does not differ from non-religious in manner and method, and that it therefore passes a similar developmental path as general cognitive development, was confirmed several times. Lawrence Kohlberg found that a certain level of moral growth must be achieved before a parallel stage of religious development can occur, thus establishing a link between morality and the development of faith. In his psychosocial developmental theory of eight stages, Erik Erikson emphasizes that infancy is a period when a person develops fundamental trust or distrust. The development of personal faith is thus rooted in the very first period of human physical and mental development, and the fundamental trust

²³ J. Aldridge, J. Box, *Moral and affective dimensions of childhood*, in: D. Ratcliff (Ed.), *Handbook of children's religious education*, Birmingham 1992: Religious Education Press, p. 82.

²⁴ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta, pp. 259–261.

gained at that time helps to live from faith.²⁵ The experience of fundamental trust is not only the basis for the development of faith: it is a precondition for the development of a healthy personality. A loving mother, who gives her child what he needs, creates certainty and confidence in him. To the child, the mother represents “an almost bodily belief that she is trustworthy, that she can satisfy him and satisfy his needs.” Along with a responsive, loving and caring mother, the child learns to trust her, as well as develop a fundamental sense of self-confidence and trust in the world around him. In later life, therefore, this reliable and trustworthy mother can be replaced by other figures e.g. God, society, or the Church.²⁶ A properly lived period of infancy creates the basis for the development of one’s faith, which is, by its nature, based on personal trust, and its effects extend to other, very different layers and attitudes of one’s personality.²⁷

Fowler carried out the most extensive study of faith and its development. The developmental model of faith according to Fowler has seven stages.²⁸ He argues that faith begins in a relationship because it involves trusting someone, believing in someone, counting on someone, dependence on someone²⁹ and that a person always believes within a relationship. Faith, as trust, is marked by devotion, surrender and loyalty.

The first experience of faith, according to Fowler³⁰, is the experience of birth, when society welcomes the newborn human being with the loyalty and trust of the people who take care of him. This allows him the first experience of fidelity

²⁵ E. Erikson, *Identity and the life cycle*, New York 1980: W.W. Norton, pp. 42–66.

²⁶ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta, pp. 33–34.

²⁷ C. Brusselmans, J. O’Donohoe, J. Fowler, A. Vergote, *Toward moral and religious maturity*, Morristown 1980: Silver Burdett Co, pp. 24–85.

²⁸ J. Fowler, *Becoming adult, becoming christian: adult development and christian faith*, San Francisco 2000: Jossey-Bass Publishers; J. Fowler, *Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges*, »International Journal for the Psychology of Religion« (2001) 11(3), pp. 159–172; J. Fowler, *Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges*, »International Journal for the Psychology of Religion« (2001) 11(3), pp. 159–172.

²⁹ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta, p. 292.

³⁰ J. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, New York 1995: Harper One, p. 53.

and reliability and the first experience of faith.³¹ When a child begins to trust and depends on his parents' permanence and care, he experiences that he is trustworthy, able to trust, surrender to others and strive for loyalty – mutual fundamental loyalty and trust are essential for a child's development. With an increasing connection with one's own family and the reliability of relationships within it, the child learns religious ethos of the family.³² Fowler's theory of the developmental stages of belief emphasizes that personal growth and the growth of personal faith are part of human development.³³ The first stage, the stage of primordial faith, appears in the first months of life, and its key element is the establishment of a fundamental confidence that the child will receive care and attention. Undifferentiated belief ends at the age of four, when even before the development of concepts and words to name them, the child's belief emerges in a way that the child unconsciously shapes his mood in relation to the world.³⁴ It is a primary belief marked by a kind of pre-image of God.³⁵ "The pre-image of God is conveyed to us through understanding eyes and approving smiles,³⁶" "The quality of the relationship and the power of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) develop precisely in this early period and create (or weaken) the basis for later religious development.³⁷" It should be added that some authors warn that a child's primordial trust, and thus the basis of faith, is conceived as early as in the period before birth,³⁸ which means that the experience of a child's fundamental trust is the foundation for the development of faith.

³¹ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta; J. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, New York 1995: Harper One.

³² J. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, New York 1995: Harper One, pp. 16–17.

³³ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta, p. 312.

³⁴ J. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, New York 1995: Harper One, pp. 117–119.

³⁵ E. Prijatelj, *Psihološka dinamika rasti v veri* (Vol. 15), Ljubljana 2008: Slomškova založba in Teološka fakulteta, pp. 315–316.

³⁶ J. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, New York 1995: Harper One, p. 121.

³⁷ C. Brusselmans, J. O'Donohoe, J. Fowler, A. Vergote, *Toward moral and religious maturity*, Morristown 1980: Silver Burdett Co., p. 144.

³⁸ B. Newman, P. Newman, *Development through life: a psychosocial approach* (11 ed.), »Cengage Learning« (2011), pp. 122–127.

7. Conclusion

At the heart of the paper is the child's early development, as its quality is recognized as a key factor in the development of morals and beliefs. In a way, the child is always left "at the mercy of parents" and/or other adults. Therefore, the development of the sacral, which is an essential part of religious education, is very important. The child feels that he is not alone or that he is not just a "toy in parental affective complications." In the constellation of family relations, the sacral space or the space of grace also appears for the first time. God enters the sacral environment of interpersonal relationships, as all important human relationships are necessarily conflicted and need the grace of salvation. The nature of family relationships is a fundamental space in which the newborn develops and into which grace can enter and re-create or transform behavioral patterns, no matter how hurtful they are. The experience of fundamental trust, which is the most frequently emphasized factor in the religious, moral and general development in this period, is, perhaps surprisingly, an essential element of the parent-child relationship.

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