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The fatherhood constellation: exploring the representational world of new fathers of pre-oedipal infants

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Abstract

This thesis represents a turn to the father himself, as a figure in his own right. It highlights the lack of research on fathers, as well as the tendency of the psychological and psychoanalytic literature to focus on the mother, and on the roles that fathers perform for their infants. In an attempt to cast light on fathers' experiences of emergent fatherhood, this research study explored the representational world of new fathers of preoedipal infants. Semi-structured research interviews were conducted with seven white, middle-class, South African fathers of small children, and they were analysed through a psychoanalytic research technique. The research method undertaken in this study led to the collection of rich data about new fathers' experiences of fatherhood; it also revealed how an analysis of the research method itself can offer insight into both fathers' experiences of fatherhood and fatherhood research. These findings are presented in the form of a paper in the methodology section, together with the more general aspects of the research design. The thesis then proceeds with a paper that discusses how the father has been 'forgotten', not only in the literature, but also in his own mind. 'Remembering' the father or, more aptly, the 'conception' of the father takes place when the father sees himself in the eyes of his infant, and experiences his infant as being actively responsive to him. The process of reorganisation of the father's representational world during his emergent fatherhood is then explored in two papers, which examine the possible nature of the fatherhood constellation and the fatherhood trilogy, drawing on Stern's work on the motherhood constellation. Together, all three papers highlight that becoming a father is not a smooth process. It is characterised by feelings of exclusion, anxiety, self-doubt and uncertainty about one's position in relation to the mother-infant dyad. Self-representation as a father is informed by conscious and unconscious intergenerational, intragenerational, matrilineal, patrilineal, Oedipal, social, cultural and historical facets of emergent fatherhood. The papers, therefore, suggest that fatherhood may be overdetermined and that the representation of absence may be a key step towards the father finding presence in his own mind. The project concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and clinical implications of an understanding of fatherhood which situates the father on the outside of the mother-infant dyad, and as having to struggle to find representation of himself as a father in his own mind.

Keywords: Fathers, fatherhood constellation, mental representations, psychoanalytic research interview, thirdness