On the Infant's Meaning for the Parent: A Study of Four Mother-Daughter Pairs

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ABSTRACT: Four mother-daughter pairs were systematically followed from the third trimester of pregnancy through the first eight months postpartum by semistructured interviews and by naturalistic observations in the hospital, home and office. These individual case reports illustrate how the psychological meaning of the pregnancy and fetus/infant appeared to have shaped the neonatal perceptions, early mother-infant relationships, and seemed to correlate with specific mothering behaviors. The prenatal psychological factors, and the resultant meaning and perception of the infant, are also discussed as potential risk indicators and/or foci of therapeutic interventions.

Broussard suggests that the maternal perception of the newborn, whether positive or negative, correlates with the subsequent mother-child relationship and with the emotional development of the child.

In this study we attempted to trace and illustrate the prenatal sources and psychodynamics of some of the neonatal perceptions, as well as their concordance with the early mother-infant relationship and with the actual parenting behavior as an observable dimension of that perception and relationship. Our cases also suggest how some of the negative, conflictual perceptions might be affected by the infant's sex, and transformed or muted with the help of early interventions.
Method

Volunteer couples were recruited through the Lamaze classes during the third trimester of pregnancy for the longitudinal following of early infant development and parenting according to a protocol that has been used for years in our program. An enriched version of this protocol entailed more in-depth interviews regarding parental feelings, fantasies and dreams, as well as a questionnaire on early memories. The clinicians had weekly contact with the mother. During developmental testing of the infant (4, 16, 28 weeks) and during office interviews (12 and 20 weeks) the mother-infant interactions were observed through a one-way mirror.

Thus, the data of this study are derived from the prenatal and postnatal interviews, and naturalistic observations in the hospital, home and office. All thematic data are organized and reported according to three time periods: prenatal period, neonatal period (the first postnatal month), and early infancy (between one and eight months postpartum). For this report we have selected cases with female infants only in order to reduce the variables in the sample.

Case 1

Ms. A. is 30 years old and is the oldest of five siblings. She often functioned as a surrogate mother to her younger siblings. When Mrs. A. was 14 years old, one of her younger brothers, Dan, died at 10 months of age of a congenital heart disease. Ms. A. met her husband, Barry, while they were in college. They have been married for five years. Ms. A. had been adamant about becoming pregnant before she was 30. When Barry started graduate studies, they lived apart for a year. She conceived during one of her husband’s visits home, and joined him shortly before the delivery.

The pregnancy was uncomplicated, but the labor had to be induced three weeks after due date. Cindy weighed 2600 grams at birth, and had APGAR scores of 9 and 9. Mother and infant left the hospital on the third postnatal day. Ms. A.’s mother came to stay with them until Cindy was 10 days old.

Ms. A. soon developed manifest psychological problems in her relationship with Cindy, and intervention was indicated. She started weekly individual sessions, with Cindy present, five weeks postpartum. When Cindy was 14 weeks old, Ms. A., feeling better, decided to discontinue the sessions. However, within a few weeks significant tensions surfaced between her and her husband. Weekly conjoint intervention sessions were held, with Cindy present, from the time Cindy was about 5 months until she was 8 months of age. At this point the treatment had to be terminated because Barry graduated, and got a job in another state.

Prenatal Period

Ms. A.’s first thought was that the pregnancy would make her husband very happy. For her, it was a “wonderful experience.” She liked the attention she received. A small baby in the house would be exciting. “I will probably be a