

THE ROLE OF THE FATHER IN THE SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION PROCESS

From *Separation-Individuation*, ed. J.B. McDevitt and C.F. Settlage, pp. 229-252. New York: International Universities Press, 1971.*

Review of the Literature	2
Methods	5
Over-all Trends	6
The Smiling Response and Recognition of the Father.....	7
The Father in the Practicing Subphase.....	8
Reaction to Male Observers During the Practicing Subphase	8
Differences Between Boys and Girls	10
Father and Male Observer in the Rapprochement Subphase.....	11
The Father in Earliest Play, Imitation, and Dreams.....	13
Conclusions	14
Index of the Mentioned Authors	17
Subject Index	17
Bibliography	18

It is ... difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications, and still more difficult to describe them intelligibly [Freud, 1923, p. 33].

To the psychoanalyst who is involved in direct observation, the early importance of the father for the infant may come as a great surprise. He may not be prepared to see the small infant discriminate between men and women, and even less prepared for the direction the discrimination takes. Indeed, the infant seems to be ready for a relationship with the nonmaternal parent long before the phallic-oedipal phase.

Perhaps what is involved here is a responsiveness to secondary sexual cues. But how are these earliest discriminations and attachments related to the infant's earliest object choices and identifications? The purpose of this paper is to set forth some general lines of thought

* This paper is based on two and one half years of direct observation, and data processing, with Dr. Margaret Mahler as an admired and beloved mentor, and draws as well on the work of all members of the Masters Children's Center staff. In particular, Dr. John B. McDevitt was most helpful in the writing of this paper. However, the inferences and constructions derived from the data are those of the author. The research is supported by N.L.M.H. Grant MH.08238, U.S.P.H.S., Bethesda, Md. This particular substudy was made possible by a research training fellowship grant to the author, from the Medizinisch-Biologische Stipendienstiftung, Basel, Switzerland, under the sponsorship of Professors] de Ajuriaguerra and G. Garrone of the Department of Psychiatry and Child Psychiatry of the University of Geneva, Switzerland.

in this respect, derived from observational material obtained at the Masters Children's Center. The stress here is on the role of the father in the acquisition of ego autonomy, insofar as this line of development can be singled out within the separation-individuation process.

Review of the Literature

Although the relevance of the earliest family relationships for psychoanalytic, psychological and sociological theory is evident, empirical research into that area is still scarce; even less is known about the earliest discriminations between the sexes. In her discussion of *Greenacre's* (1966) paper, *Mahler* (1966b) commends her for "pointing up the gap in our reconstructive and direct observational researches with regard to the father's place in the very young child's intrapsychic development, the father's role in the process of separation-individuation" (p. 9).

Freud (1923) was keenly aware of the difficulties involved in determining the father's role in early intrapsychic development. In a few illuminating but seemingly contradictory statements, he anticipated many aspects of the early relationship to the father.

At the very beginning, in the individual's primitive oral phase, object-cathexis and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other [p. 29]. ... the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother ... on the anaclitic model; the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side [pp. 31-32].

However, with regard to " ... an individual's first identification, his identification with the father in his own prehistory," he adds in a footnote: "Perhaps it would be safer to say 'with the parents' " (p. 31).

Moreover, according to *Mack-Brunswick* (1940), the negative (passive) oedipus complex arises during the preoedipal phase: at least in the boy. Although she mentions the infant's early affection and admiration for the father, she does not consider him to be a significant object (either for libidinal or for aggressive cathexis) before castration becomes an issue. All in all, according to *Mahler* and *Gosliner* (1955), "We tend to think of the father too one-sidedly as a castration figure, a kind of bad mother image- in the preoedipal period" (p. 209). [\231\](#)

Modern psychoanalytic thinking either elaborates on the negative aspects of the preoedipal father, or else it has postulated that he plays a positive role in the construction of a stable object world. Among spokesmen for the former view, *Lewin* (1955) sees the father as the waker, intruding "with the power of the word" into the state of oral bliss with the mother (pp. 195-196). *Lebovici* and *Diatkine* (1954) similarly have him disturbing the intimacy between the one-year-old and his mother (p. 136), and *Diatkine* (1966) derives the readiness for the father relationship genetically from *Spitz's* eight-month anxiety: "Within the negative chaos of the strange, an ambiguous figure soon takes shape – the father, that 'other one' " (p. 78). In this view, the father remains forever tinged with the fear and aggression that are originally attached to strangers.

By contrast, *Loewald* (1951) stresses the father's positive role in assisting the budding ego. *Mahler and Gosliner* (1955) develop and substantiate this same idea: "The father ... is a powerful and perhaps necessary support against the threat of re-engulfment of the ego into the whirlpool of the primary undifferentiated symbiotic stage" (pp. 209, 210), perhaps because he is an "uncontaminated"¹ mother substitute. "The inner image of the father has never drawn to itself so much of the unneutralized drive cathexis as has the mother's, and therefore there is less discrepancy between the image of the father and the real father" (p. 200). Thus, "in boys as well as in girls, at around eighteen months (in some cases even much earlier), the father has become an important object" (p. 200). Along her own convergent lines of thinking, *Greenacre* (1957) postulates:

... two periods of ... exhilaration ... characteristic of the latter part of the second year and to the fourth-fifth year (the phallic phase) It may be that the identification ... with a father ... begins at this time [i.e., in the latter part of the second year] and is felt rather regularly due to the combination of the sharpness of the body sensation with the intensity of the sensory sensitivity to the outer world {p. 61}. \232

Mahler (1966b) was already familiar with many observations to be discussed in this paper when she confirmed *Greenacre's* (1966) formulations, and integrated them with her own, in the following words:

The comparative immunity against contamination of the father image ... can be understood fundamentally in the light thrown upon it by Dr. Greenacre – namely [through] the deep-going difference between the processes by which the two images take shape ... the mother image evolves by being first differentiated within the symbiotic dual unity complex and then separated out from it; ... the father image comes toward the child ... "from outer space" as it were ... as something gloriously new and exciting, at just the time when the toddler is experiencing a feverish quest for expansion {pp. 8-9}.

The father thus becomes "the knight in shining armor" (p. 4), and sometimes "the rescuer from the 'bad' mother" (p. 6). Contamination may lead, during the rapprochement subphase, to ambivalent splitting of the mother image: "Splitting of the father image probably is resorted to later than splitting of the mother image" (p. 6).

In the perspective of these contemporary psychoanalytic authors, therefore, the father's first role is to draw and to attract the child into the real world of things and people.² The early positive role of the paternal "part object" was also anticipated by *Melanie Klein* (1934, 1945) and her followers (*Isaacs*, 1945). *Jones* (1933, 1935), as well, was an eloquent spokesman for this view.

Still another school of psychoanalytic thinking – the French structuralists, followers of *Lacan* (1966) – assign a crucial role to the father image in the passage from the preverbal two-way or "binary" relationships ("mirror stage") to the structural level ("register") of symbolic functioning. This structural change is achieved through the mechanism of intrapsychic "triangulation," which foreshadows the later oedipal conflict (*Lang*, 1958). Interestingly, the

¹ As I understand it, this term, borrowed from *Kris* (see *Mahler and Gosliner*, 1955, p. 210, fn. 3), implies that the mother becomes progressively tinged with ambivalence, precisely because she is so intensely cathected with libidinal and aggressive drive energy. This in turn may be partly related to the inevitable conflict between the regressive pull back into symbiotic dedifferentiation, and the "striving for autonomy" (*Spock*, 1963).

² Incidentally, some sociologists (*Parsons and Bales*, 1955) hold a similar view of the "instrumental" role of the father.

inner image of the father (the "name of the father") is thought to be "foreclosed" in "psychotic structures" – i.e., triangulation does not take place (*Leclaire, 1958*).

My own reconstruction of the early role of the father (*Abelin, in press*) has led me to similar conclusions. In a multidimensional study [\233\](#) of sixteen psychotic children and their families, I observed that etiologic factors on all levels tended to coexist and to converge toward the development of the psychosis – from family dynamics and parental attitudes to genetic and organic factors such as "maturational lag" (*Bender, 1956*). All these factors must be thought of as interfering with some level(s) of structure formation. Indeed, one crucial difference between psychotic children and their nonpsychotic siblings was the inability of the former to apprehend and cathect the father (or the "other" parent) even as a "bad" object. This seemed to parallel their inability to form simultaneous symbolic images of themselves and their objects. According to *Piaget (1937, 1945)*, this step is normally achieved around 18 months, and is of necessity preceded by the sensorimotor schema of the permanent object.

Spitz's (1965) developmental model seemed well suited to encompass most aspects of the data. However, while I agreed with *Spitz* that the "second organizer" (indicated by stranger anxiety) comes about through the cathexis of the specific maternal object (and may represent the prototype of *Piaget's (1937)* sensorimotor object schema), I was led to postulate that the "third organizer" (the first abstraction according to *Spitz*) consists of an early triangulation through "identification with the rival," in *Jacobson's (1964)* sense. Only this triangulation can lead to the formation of a self image; the latter has to be derived from an understanding of the relationship between two cathected external objects ("there must be an I, like him, who wants her"). Triangulation is the mechanism that allows the mental organization to pass from the level of relationships (acted, sensorimotor) to images (represented, symbolic). Once the new level is reached, a *set* of images (including their reciprocal relationships) is present; this set may constitute the dynamic matrix of a "reversible group" (*Piaget, 1947*) and of the symbolic, representation of homogeneous space (including the self) – the matrix of the thinking process per se. I thus defined psychosis as the failure of two successive intrapsychic "organizers": the specific object cathexis (around 8 months), and early triangulation (around 18 months). Conversely, the infant should be ready for the father relationship, at some point between these two developmental landmarks. It is during this period that the father must become the second specific object, different from the first one but equivalent to it.

The study of children without fathers offers a different road toward [\234\](#) similar conclusions. Indeed, data suggest that the father relationship is significantly important in the earliest years of life. When it is lacking, impairment has been shown with regard to such basic ego functions as delay of gratification (*Mischel, 1958*), perception (*Barclay and Cusumano, 1967*), or intelligence (*Glazer and Moynihan, 1963*). Signs of oral fixation have been found to characterize fatherless subjects (*Neubauer, 1960; Yarrow, 1964*), and early separation from the father has been shown to cause greater damage than later separation (*Hetherington, 1966; Siegman, 1966*).

Despite all these indications, the early specific attachment to the father has not been studied nearly so frequently as has the tie with the mother, whether it be in the psychological or in the psychoanalytic literature. In the former, the monograph by *Schaffer and Emerson* (1964) constitutes a remarkable exception. They found that, one month after their "first specific attachment" – at around seven months – infants with a strong tie to their mothers were likely to have selected other specific objects as well; two months later, *most* infants were attached to both father and mother, and by eighteen months nearly *all* of them were.

Stranger reaction (even toward the father) is mentioned by *Ilg and Ames* (1955), especially at 20, 32, and 44 weeks (p. 217). The 28-week-old "particularly likes his father's low voice, which frightened him at an earlier age" (p. 17). But in her intensive study *Mohaczy*³ found a mild stranger reaction to the father only in those rare cases where the latter was not interacting frequently with the infant. As to the question of early sexual discrimination, *Benjamin* (1959) noted that stranger anxiety is more intense toward men than it is toward women.

Psychoanalytic case studies of the first years of life have tended to focus on the mother-child relationship. However, *Sachs* (1962) and *Kleeman* (1966), independently of each other, describe oedipal rivalry in first-born boys before their second birthday. *Kleeman* (1967) also notes the specific quality of the relationship between a little girl and her father: soon after the normal period of mild stranger anxiety to unfamiliar persons, her "peek-a-boo" pattern with him becomes increasingly flirtatious and feminine.

Methods

The methodology for the research study on normal separation-individuation has been discussed in detail by *Pine and Furer* (1963). Briefly, this was an intensive naturalistic study of 14 children (including four pair of siblings) from the first months of life until three years of age, and their 10 mothers. During the four years of data collection, the mother-child pairs who lived in the neighbourhood of the Masters Children's Center were seen two to three times weekly, for two or more hours each time, in a nursery-type setting. The physical layout, with two separate playrooms, was uniquely suited for the recording of the spontaneous approach-distancing behaviors between child and mother, as well as toward a variety of other more or less familiar animate and inanimate goals. While the Center became almost an extension of the home of our subjects, it nevertheless provided a uniform and comparable environment for all of them.

There were participant and nonparticipant (from behind a one-way mirror) observers, who coordinated their efforts regularly so as to provide a stereoscopic and more reliable picture of the child's functioning. The participant observation was the most valuable of the research tools employed in that it represented an equivalent of the psychoanalytic method

³ The author gratefully acknowledges to refer to unpublished data presented by Dr. I. Mohaczy to the psychiatric staff of the Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City, on April 11, 1968.

for the preverbal level: all behavioral "associations" were given free-floating attention; the observers' spontaneous reactions were not acted out, yet they were taken carefully into account.

This enormous inflow of raw data was recast continuously into monthly categories and summaries of categories. In addition, during the later stages of processing, monthly information on each mother-child pair was abstracted according to ten areas of relevance to the separation-individuation process. Even though these areas did emerge as the most significant ones (confirming and expanding *Mahler's* views), unexpected trends were not permitted to escape our attention. One of these was to become the focus of this paper; but many others could just as easily be extracted from this unique and well-organized set of data.

The present exploratory substudy is focused on: (1) any information about the father-child relationship; (2) specific reactions to male observers⁴; (3) the father in early imitation, play, and dreams. It is limited essentially to the first two years of life—that is, up to the passing of the rapprochement subphase and the beginning of object constancy, in *Hartmann's* (1952) sense.

The subjects were eleven children (four of them girls):⁵ Information provided by mothers about the father and his relationship with the child was quite detailed, and usually offered spontaneously. In addition, each father was interviewed at least twice by the Center staff; one home visit was made with the father present; and two "father days" were organized at the Center, which provided us with some surprising insights. The participation of several male psychiatrists made it possible to observe a large number of selective reactions to men. This constitutes the most reliable source of information on which this paper is based. All of the relevant data could be found in two of the seventeen monthly categories ("reactions to people other than father and mother," and "father and other family members"). This rendered them manageable for a single researcher.

The author processed the data obtained in several steps. This resulted in a table of ratings,⁶ the relevant trends of which are summarized below. In addition, selected case material is presented to illustrate the qualitative aspects of the data.⁷

Over-all Trends

All of our subjects evidenced the general characteristics of the sub-phases of the separation-individuation process described by *Mahler* (1965, 1966a) and *Mahler and La Perriere* (1965).

⁴ Frequently, direct or indirect information about reactions to other men were also obtained. These tended to be consistently similar to the observed reactions to male investigators.

⁵ Three children of the main study were eliminated because they had left the Center when I joined it, and because insufficient relevant data had been recorded about them.

⁶ Seven-point ratings for 11 children on six items over 13 age periods. The table provides an overview, but is not suitable for statistical analysis of the data.

⁷ Complete narrative summaries of every child's development in the areas under study are available at the Masters Children's Center, New York City.

The Smiling Response and Recognition of the Father

Precursors of attachment to the father emerged during the symbiotic phase, lagging slightly behind similar reactions of joy and excitement toward mother and siblings. For example, all but one of the infants recognized their fathers with happy smiles before six months and, with the exception of this one case, they were strongly attached to the father by nine months. The amount of father-infant interaction seemed to influence the time of onset and the intensity of the attachment at this level.

Most of the fathers participated actively in the care of the infants. Stranger reaction toward the father was very rare. It was reported in only three infants, in whom it occurred before the age of six months, and then only very occasionally – for example, in states of discomfort, or after several days of separation. By nine months, five infants were even said to "prefer" their fathers. One girl had purportedly "always preferred her father"; but there was no way for us to substantiate this report, and her relationship with her mother appeared to be close and happy. In two other infants, however, the preference for the father was clear-cut and had already begun prior to the sixth month. In these latter cases, the mutual cueing between mother and infant had been unsatisfactory.

Peter had always been a tense and jerky baby, startling at the slightest noise; no adequate mutual cueing had been established with the mother during his earliest months. During his sixth month, he would coo and gurgle as soon as he heard his father's voice.⁸ He relaxed better in father's arms than in mother's. During the following month, he showed violent reactions upon seeing the faces of strangers – that is, of anyone except his parents, but especially men. By that time, the previous auditory startle had subsided, as if the visual modality were now taking the lead. As soon as he was able to crawl, busy exploration replaced the stranger reaction,⁹ and he would approach male observers with a special warmth and trustfulness. He has since remained very much attached to his father.

Harriet was a well-endowed and sociable baby who had at first enjoyed a close symbiotic relationship with her mother. When she was four to five months old, however, the mother weaned Harriet from the breast; she seemed to be depressed and to show little empathy for the baby. Harriet learned progressively not to expect adequate responses from her mother.

She avoided visual engagement and appeared to be impervious to separations. By six months, her responses to people were passive and rather unspecific. She directed her friendliest smiles toward her brother or other toddlers, and foremost at her own mirror image. For many months, simple sensory stimuli continued to be an important source of pleasure, and during the practicing subphase she seemed most interested in inanimate objects or, at best, do Us.

Her growing attachment to her father was reported for the first time at seven months. Her earliest stranger reactions, after eight months, were seen only in response to male observers.

⁸ A specific, positive reaction to father's voice was reported in several instances during the differentiation subphase, and may be a component of the maturational father Anlage. See also Ilg and Ames (1955, p. 17).

⁹ Mastery of the stranger reaction may be related to the maturation of locomotor apparatuses, which permits an active dosage and timing of approach and exploration.

We might speculate that her father had become her first specific object.¹⁰ After 10 months, by an early mechanism of splitting, she reestablished some attachment to her mother on a primitive, bodily level, while the visual Gestalt of the maternal face remained foreclosed. After 12 months, it was evident that her only confident tie was with her father, whom she clearly preferred to her mother.

From her ninth month on, it was observed that she often sought comfort from a paper cup. This appeared to be associated with her greatest pleasure – sharing a drink with her father in the evening. After 15 months, she would use this cup to initiate contact with male observers, while her coyly downcast or fleetingly searching eyes still revealed the earlier disappointments, her lack of "basic trust."

It was a dramatic turn, at around 20 months, when she was able to approach a female observer as a mother substitute and to express her increasing awareness of her phase-specific rapprochement need for mother. Finally, after her twenty-first month, Harriet seemed never to be able to get enough of her mother's lap, and expressed her basic fantasy wish, to be her mother's "little baby." In spite of the disquieting narcissistic aspects in her early development, Harriet seemed from then on to develop much as does any bright and sweet little girl. We doubt whether this would have been the case had the father not been emotionally available during the first two years of her life.

The Father in the Practicing Subphase

This is the time when the infant can take his mother and the familiar objects of maternal space for granted and begins to master the instruments of exploration and conquest. Unfamiliarity and novelty, which would have been frightening a few weeks earlier, now constitute a powerful source of attraction for him. The mother is "home base," to which the toddler returns for periodic "libidinal refueling" (Mahler, 1963, p. 314).

During this subphase, the relationship with the father acquired a quality quite different from that with the mother. He became the "other," the "different" parent, not just the secondary mothering figure. When he returned home after work, he was often greeted with greater joy and excitement than the mother had evoked all day. Frequently the fathers seemed to be more attuned than the mothers to the wild exuberance of the new little person, and mutual games of running and throwing would develop between the two. The father became associated with the specific practicing modes of upright position, dexterity, brightness, and intensity of sensations-with a special quality of elation and discovery. At times of distress, fatigue, or need, however, or at night, most of the infants would turn once again to the symbiotic mother for physical and emotional comforting.

Reaction to Male Observers During the Practicing Subphase

The curiosity that is associated with the practicing subphase seemed to culminate in a peculiar fascination with and attraction toward male observers. Yet no single line or factor

¹⁰ The relevant lines of development are followed here into later stages, which will be discussed in the corresponding sections of the paper.

could be derived from the data; there were fluctuations and recapitulations in any one child, as well as great differences among them. The various paths from the symbiotic mother to the not yet familiar male observer provided one reflection of the complex developments of this subphase. The object world was expanding stepwise; siblings and father were only the first outposts in the widening practicing space "over there," while mother was still somehow part of the unfocused "here" (walking is movement away from mother).

As an aside, it must be made explicit here that, from the first months of life on, the most enthusiastic responses of the babies were evoked by their siblings or by other small children. A pre-established familiarity seemed to exist between them, along with an immediate urge to imitate and to follow. By contrast, the adult male might at first appear overwhelming for the infant by virtue of his mere size or strength, or the quality of his voice. Whatever the reason, interest in the siblings paralleled or preceded interest in the father. Later, a similar sequence of interest was observed, this time from other children to the male ob- |240| servers. By then, father was no longer an outpost, but a safe way-station on the journey into the outer world.

A more violent stranger reaction toward men than toward women often preceded trustful interest in men. Observations such as this one have led our research group at the Center to think that the "stranger reaction" might actually be a "stranger conflict": temptation lurking behind anxiety. The child cannot yet alternate smoothly between the safety of the familiar and the disquieting fascination with the new, between approach and avoidance; and he cannot yet dose the overwhelming influx of fresh impressions with careful "soundings" and comparisons. Months later, an intense quality of awe was sometimes observed in the initial reaction of some infants to male observers, and often a conflict arose between loyalty toward the mother and attraction toward the glamorous "other over there." This was like a recapitulation and a clarification of the original selective stranger conflict with men: the man is the *different* one, the *alternative*.

He is different from women, to be sure; but he is also different from father. Those infants who had become the most strongly and most specifically attached to their fathers during the differentiation subphase showed the most conspicuous stranger conflict with other men (this was seen most consistently in the girls). In these cases, the problem may have been not that the men were too different from the familiar model, but rather that they were *too similar* to it. Fear of confusing the two might thus represent another aspect of stranger anxiety: the difficulty (and the thrill) being to *master both similarities and differences*, within ever new types of relationships. This process has both cognitive and libidinal aspects, inseparably intertwined.

In some infants, however, it was noteworthy that this fear of confusion was most intense with potential mother substitutes. For several months, maintaining mother's specificity seemed to remain a crucial problem for them. Women were avoided systematically, while superficial engagements with male observers were found to be more acceptable – to both mother and child.

In the waning stages of the stranger conflict, the male adult definitely represented a most exciting source of attraction. Before their first birthday, eight infants had already displayed a "very positive" interest in the male observers, and five of them (four boys) had shown a definite preference for them. Often the male observers clearly represented father substitutes. "That's exactly the game he learned with his daddy last Sunday," a mother would exclaim; or else the toddler himself would longingly vocalize "da-da" when a male observer left the room.

In two, and possibly three, cases, the infant's push toward new objects seemed to be inhibited altogether. In these cases the mother was unconsciously discouraging the infant's initiatives toward third objects. She would not "designate" such objects through her active example; instead, she would seduce her child into some interaction with herself, whenever he felt like moving away. Some mothers had selective conflicts themselves about relating to men, and this too was reflected in the infants' behavior. In their case, "prohibitions" against the father relationship could be inferred only indirectly. With such infants, however, the developmental push toward different objects was all the more impressive to observe.

The following case may illustrate some of the complex developments of the practicing subphase. Daniel¹¹ showed not the slightest stranger reaction to father. In his eighth and ninth months, he would greet women with great friendliness, while subjecting men to a sober "customs inspection".¹² After the age of nine months, when he was able to crawl, his cautious approach behavior to a male visitor revealed his latent curiosity. However, he would from time to time check back to his mother or father with a big smile, as if he needed the comparison or the support. After 10 months, he approached any male adult with confidence but tended to turn away from women. At this time, apparently, his mother had more specificity for him than his father: he had just learned to call her "ma-ma." Six days later, his father had caught up in this respect: when he was again confronted with a male and a female visitor, Daniel buried his face in his mother's lap, checked back and forth between father and male visitor, smiled at father, and then clearly said "da-da." At 13 months – the height of the practicing subphase – Daniel again followed male adults enthusiastically, even if he was not very familiar with them.

Differences Between Boys and Girls

In spite of the small number of cases, some differences emerged between boys and girls. The girls attached themselves earlier and more intensely to their fathers, and two of them even "preferred" him to the mother as early as from the seventh month on. Possibly, the father had been, at least tangentially, included within the symbiotic orbit and thus retained a symbiotic tinge for the girls. While being so fond of their fathers, however, the girls were particularly wary of other men during the differentiation subphase. On the

¹¹ Daniel was not a subject of the study, but his case condenses what we also observed at the Masters Children's Center.

¹² See Mahler and McDevitt (1968) for a description of this reaction, which may be one way of coping with stranger conflict.

whole, they maintained closer and more specific ties to both parents and were more guarded toward strangers than were the boys.

The boys tended to crawl after peers or approach male observers earlier than the girls, and by one year most boys actually showed more interest in male than in female observers. This trend of sexual preference was reversed in relation to the parents. All the girls were reported to "prefer" their fathers to their mothers as the practicing period progressed. Only two of the boys "preferred" the father, and three were still clearly more attached to their mothers by 16 months.

At the height of this subphase, between 14 and 16 months, the girls had also definitely become attracted toward the male observers. Often, it was felt that there was some "feminine" quality of coyness and self-consciousness in their approach (this might reveal a slightly different way to master the stranger conflict). Sometimes a little girl would quite surprisingly climb into the lap of an *ad hoc* father substitute and mold affectionately into his body and hug and kiss him. Male members of the professional staff were altogether impressed – and sometimes flattered. These trends can be mentioned only briefly here; they deserve to be explored and discussed further, and correlated with other known early differences in all areas of development.

Father and Male Observer in the Rapprochement Subphase

The cathectic and structural shifts underlying the rapprochement subphase cannot be discussed fully here. Suffice it to say that they eventuate in the symbolic representation of the self in its painful separateness from the maternal object ("I want mommy").

Rapprochement, among our subjects, was regularly preceded by a transitional period, during which the ingredients of practicing were diversified and exaggerated, as if they might in that way help to counteract the child's growing awareness of separateness and of helplessness. For example, the toddlers became expert at getting attention from adults. Often they grew quite subtly provocative; or else they would [|243|](#)

perform acrobatics, or clown, or dance for a public as large as possible. At home, they liked to have both parents around them at the same time. These ways of getting continuous attention seemed most exquisitely suited to sustain the toddler's now threatened feeling of omnipotence. However, the toddlers also tried to play one adult against the other, apparently as a way of dealing with their growing ambivalence (which crystallized around the mother).

At 17 months, Mark had just learned to use one parent against the other. On the occasion of a home visit, he clung to mother at first, and then approached the male observer cautiously; but once he was settled comfortably between the latter's knees, he began to hit his mother from this new vantage point, without any apparent reason. After some time, he reversed the roles. The mother said that he had recently contrived this strategy, using it between her and her husband.

The *rapprochement subphase proper* was often ushered in by a rather violent crisis. The real mother became unable to keep up with her idealized "all-giving" image. Indeed, she consistently seemed to evoke in the toddler the regressive, unfulfillable fantasy wish to be a helpless baby, fed and cared for exclusively by her (this might well be the first form of a self image). She thus aroused intense feelings of frustration and resentment. The whining demandingness and dinging of this subphase has been described by *Mahler (1965, 1966a; Mahler and La Perriere, 1965)*, who links it to the "splitting of the mother image" (1966b).

This regressive imagery and intense ambivalence appeared specifically linked to the mother image. Meanwhile, the father continued to be taken for granted; he represented a stable island of external reality, carrying over his role from the lost practicing paradise. He was indeed not yet "contaminated," and surely there was still "less discrepancy between the image of the father and the real father" (*Mahler and Gosliner, 1955, p. 200*). We might say that, while the specific libidinal relationship with the father was undoubtedly well established, the construction of a specific cathected mental image of the father lagged behind that of the mother. Most of the toddlers were so ambivalently involved with their mothers that they "simply did not have much time" to spare for their fathers. In some cases, however, seemingly in an effort to evade the threat of re-engulfment, the toddler turned almost exclusively to the father for a period of time, and appeared to ignore the mother. Most toddlers continued to seek attention more eagerly from male than female observers.

The question of *rivalry* deserves to be dealt with in a separate paper; a brief outline of our observations will nevertheless be given here, inasmuch as rivalry may play a crucial role in precipitating the intrapsychic shifts of the *rapprochement* crisis, and because the early role of the father as a rival must be considered in this context.

During the practicing subphase, rivalry progressively replaced separation and stranger situations as the principal source of distress and conflict – perhaps because it is itself a combination of the two situations. Most often, however, the rival was another child, and the reactions were short-lived and limited to specific situations. Later, toward the end of this subphase, the toddlers would create some form of interference when two adults, by interacting with each other, neglected them.

Even during the height of the *rapprochement* subphase, however, when the toddler was desperately wooing his mother, the father was rarely felt as representing a rival, but rather as a less ambivalent alternative. Occasional reactions of jealousy could be directed toward either parent. Consistent jealousy of an oedipal type did not emerge until the second half of the third year. By that time complex developments in symbolic self and object representations and in psychosexual stages had already taken place.

Are we therefore to conclude that, in the "average expectable" family environment, the father is not typically experienced as a rival during the separation-individuation process (but that *peers* typically are)? Although our data tend to support such a general conclusion, it may not be altogether warranted. In this area perhaps more than in others, the data may be unreliable, or the families atypical. For example, nearly all the infants studied happened to have older siblings, who soon became their rivals par excellence. Yet, among other

children known to the author, there were several first-born boys who showed early reactions of rivalry toward their fathers.

At the height of the practicing sub phase, Daniel protested violently when his father kissed his mother; he tried to separate them physically, whereupon he got himself picked up by his mother, and from that vantage point said "bye-bye" to his father. This was a recurrent pattern. A few weeks later, he [|245|](#) engaged a female visitor seductively, and reacted similarly when her husband hugged her. [See also footnote 11.]

We might thus assume that the situation of rivalry constitutes a developmental constant more so than the person of the rival, and that the rival is never a stranger intruding from nowhere, but is instead, initially, an attractive figure from out of the world of the practicing toddler.

The Father in Earliest Play, Imitation, and Dreams

We believe with *Piaget* (1945) that the function of symbolization emerges during the middle of the second year out of imitation, being first delayed and then internalized. Make-believe play, verbal signs, and mental images are among the varied forms in which the symbolic function manifests itself. As mentioned before, rapprochement may have to do with the formation of the earliest mental images of the self and of mother, which are precipitated by way of important shifts in libidinal economy. Similarly, the specific relationship with the father must be distinguished from the symbolic representation of him. (Establishment of the mental representation of the relationship between the images of the mother and the father would constitute a still more elaborate step, which might well turn out to provide the formal element of the oedipus complex.)

During the practicing subphase, some mothers occasionally recognized the toddlers' playful hammering or building as delayed imitation of the specific activities of the father. More often however, it was the mother who was the source of such "imitation without mental content" (*Mahler, 1963, p. 311*), especially in terms of her feeding and care-taking functions. Toward the end of this subphase, dolls were used progressively (more so by girls), and the play acquired a definite make-believe quality.

We saw that, a few weeks after the rapprochement crisis, the toddlers began to evoke the father in their play when they felt disappointed by the mothers. In the picture books, stories about daddy now came to be preferred; the boys-this time more than the girls-began to play at "shaving," "fireman," etc. For most of the toddlers, the toy telephone represented the rescuing "daddy line." (Throughout the third year, "calling daddy" remained a favorite group play.) During the latter half [|246|](#) of the second year, spontaneous father play became more frequent in all subjects.

We might speculate on the adaptive and defensive roles of this emerging fantasy identification with the uncontaminated parent, following the crisis of rapprochement.

In Mark's case, the rapprochement subphase began with a dramatic regression after 17 ½ months, during which he was ambivalently (and therefore, almost completely) focused on his mother. From 19 to 21 months, the father appeared progressively in his play associations. After 21 months, he would wear a fireman's hat, a gift from his father. His mother now reported his first "dreams": in his sleep, he cried "my hat," and, at another time, "Nellie, don't do that," Nellie was the mother's first name, and only the father was likely to use it. Here, identification with the more powerful father may have served as a way of escaping from the fantasized omnipotence of the mother. At that time, Mark began to affirm his own will, either opposing or endorsing another (typically maternal) will. He was now able either to give or to take; he could say "yes" as well as "no."

Conclusions

Because of the exploratory nature of this research and the complexity of the topic, the following conclusions should be understood as being tentative. The subphases of the separation-individuation process described by *Mahler* (1965, 1966a; Mahler and *La Perriere*, 1965) were clearly observable in all children, and are taken for granted here as a general framework.

1. The specific relationship with the father (e.g., the smiling response) begins in the symbiotic phase, somewhat later than it does with the mother and siblings. When the father is reasonably familiar to the infant, the latter shows no stranger anxiety toward him.

2. During the differentiation subphase, attachment to the father increases progressively; but the most conspicuous "turning toward the father" occurs at the beginning of the practicing subphase, when he becomes the "other," the "different" parent. He is a new, more interesting object for the child in the practicing subphase, whereas the mother is by now taken for granted as a "home base," for periodic refueling. The father comes to stand for distant, "nonmother" space – for the elated exploration of reality. A special quality of exuberance is linked with him. [\[247\]](#)

3. Father – and siblings – are only the first landmarks in the expanding practicing space: "out there," the male adult seems to represent the most different, the most fascinating group of objects. At first, stranger reactions to men are distinct, and often more violent than they are to women. This derives from the sequence and modes in which the specificity of father and mother have been established: the "stranger" is either too unlike or too similar to the parent(s). With the passing of the stranger conflict, a clear preference for men often emerges patterned on the relationship with the father.

4. Girls tend to attach themselves to the father earlier than boys and, conversely, to be more wary of strange men, more discriminating with regard to unfamiliar persons in general. Boys approach male adults earlier and in a more exploratory way. This is associated with their greater interest in distant space and in inanimate objects. Girls have been observed to be amazingly "feminine" and flirtatious as early as at the beginning of the second year, seeking passive physical affection with father substitutes. (One might speculate about the symbiotic roots of the world of the father, and of the animate world in

general for the girls, while in boys the dichotomy between the symbiotic and the nonmaternal world would be more clear-cut.)

5. Toward the end of the practicing subphase, toddlers may try to obtain the attention of more than one adult, or to play one against the other. Rivalry may represent a necessary developmental step at the end of the practicing subphase (perhaps combining the structure of both stranger- and separation anxiety, and thus replacing them as principal sources of distress). Envy and aggression, however, are directed more typically toward peers than toward adults. The father is not consistently experienced as a rival for mother's loving attention; rather he remains an "uncontaminated" parental love object, while the relationship with the mother tends to become fraught with ambivalence during the rapprochement crisis. The role of the father as a rival may be foreshadowed more clearly and consistently in first-born boys, or in different cultural settings; in such cases, it may even bear some traits of the later oedipal conflict.

6. The symbolic representation of the father must be distinguished from the actual relationship with him. The rapprochement crisis is at first centered solely on the representation of the self and the mother. A few weeks later, the father begins to appear in the fantasy world of the [\[248\]](#) toddler as the other, more powerful parent. This father image may be necessary for the satisfactory resolution of the ambivalent rapprochement position. The simultaneous representation of the three images of the self and both parents would constitute an even more elaborate step – perhaps representing the formal element of the oedipus complex. Thus, the development of these nuclear images after the rapprochement subphase would seem to recapitulate the earlier history of the actual specific relationships – in a distilled and schematized form. In cognitive development, Piaget (1947) has called this recapitulation a "vertical lag".

While these lines of speculation about the rapprochement subphase and its resolution warrant a more detailed discussion, some general remarks can be made here on the possible significance of our observations for an understanding of the separation-individuation process. To begin with, from the fact that the vital task of a child at that time is to achieve individuation through a process of intrapsychic separation from the symbiotic mother, 'it does not necessarily follow that this is an affair between just mother and child. Quite to the contrary, the task might be *impossible for either of them to master without their having the father to turn to.*

In the infant, this can be observed during the differentiation subphase, if not earlier. The mother acquires her specificity, on the one hand, through the "content" of the simultaneous experiences she conveys; this (the libidinal?) aspect of object cathexis is epitomized in the *separation reaction*. On the other hand, she also becomes specific through comparison with the features of the "other"; *stranger conflict* dramatizes this more formal, or perceptual-cognitive aspect of object cathexis. In the wake of the stranger conflict, the "different" one is likely to turn out to be the more fascinating of the two.

The fact is that there is a host of more or less "different" others, apparently cast there by the whims of fate. Yet the infant may have an *inner readiness to respond* to certain

primordial differences – men as against women, adults as against children. Further, the qualitative character of this readiness may be different in girls and in boys. Is there an early "priming" toward the oedipal choice, at a time when the ego and id are hardly differentiated? Is castration *the last of a series of cues* for sexual discrimination, the *ultimate hurdle* in body representation? Wide areas of relevant research are suggested by observations such as these. [|249|](#)

To be sure, the "other" is not only and not always the father. The child's earliest "social space" may differ greatly from one culture to another. Yet, it may not be an accident that the "average expectable" nuclear family in the more developed societies does familiarize the infant with the primordial differences, and at the same time offers him the opportunity to generalize them to ever less familiar people. The father becomes the first and most familiar of the "different" adults – the first step into the world of novelty, of external reality. As such, he comes to reflect the exuberant qualities of the practicing subphase, in which the push toward active exploration and autonomous functioning is dissociated in time and space from the "refueling," the periodic returning to the familiar and comforting mother. While this very source of comfort, if exclusive, threatens the infant's need for initiative, attachment to the father is apt to bind the new, wild, centrifugal forces. The father responds exquisitely to the "need to function" of the child's newly maturing gross motor apparatuses. Indeed, during this transitional period, mother and father could also be viewed in terms of the maturation of psychophysiologic systems: on the one side, the mutual tuning of *proximal modes*, rooted in the rhythmic interreactions of the prenatal phase (*Mahler, 1960*); on the other, the active, adaptive turning outward into *visual motor space*.

There is implicit opposition between the centrifugal forces involved in practicing and the underlying need for the mother. Increasingly, as this need is brought to light and the two poles confront each other, the centripetal forces of rapprochement threaten to submerge the newly conquered reality in the whirlpool of the primary undifferentiated stage. But when this reality is genuinely anchored in a wide range of nonmaternal objects, when the father is firmly established as the "other," the "different" parent, then we need not be too concerned about the further development of the toddler toward final individuation and intrapsychic separation.

Having thus abstracted some major lines of force from our observations, we can readily see that these lines converge in large measure with the psychoanalytic observations and reconstructions of *Loewald*, *Greenacre*, and *Mahler*. During the course of the separation-individuation process, the father becomes aligned with reality, not yet as a source of constraint and frustration, but rather as a buttress for playful and adaptive mastery. This early identification with the positive father figure [|250|](#) precedes and prepares the way for the oedipus complex (*Loewald, 1951, p. 15*). Indeed, rivalry presupposes an empathic identification with the wishes of the "other one" (i.e., the rival). It is only when the relationship between the "one" and the "other one" has been sufficiently apprehended, that this "other one" can become "the one who wants the same one I want."

Index of the Mentioned Authors

Abelin, E.L.	4	Kleeman, J.A.	5
Ames, L.B.	5, 7	Klein, M.	3
Barclay, A.G.	4	La Perriere, K.	7, 12, 14
Bender, L.	4	Lacan, J.	3
Benjamin, J.D.	5	Lang, J.-K.	3
Brunswick, M.	2	Lebovici, S.	2
Cusumano, D.R.	4	Leclaire, S.	4
Diatkine, R.	2	Lewin, B.D.	2
Emerson, P.E.	5	Loewald, H.W.	3, 16
Freud, S.	2	Isaacs, S.	3
Furer, M.	5	Mahler, M.S.	2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16
Glazer, N.	4	Mohaczy, I.	5
Gosliner, B.J.	2, 3, 12	Moynihan, D.P.	4
Greenacre, P.	2, 3, 16	Neubauer, P.B.	4
Hartmann, H.	6	Piaget, J.	4, 13, 15
Hetherington, E.M.	5	Pine, F.	5
Ilg, F.L.	5, 7	Sachs, L.J.	5
Jacobson, E.	4	Schaffer, H.R.	5
Jones, E.	3	Siegman, A.W.	5
		Spitz, R.A.	2, 4
		Spock, B.	3
		Yarrow, L.J.	4

Subject Index

attachment to the father	5, 7, 14, 16	rapprochement subphase	12, 14
cathexis	15	rapprochement subphase proper	12
contamination	3	representation	4, 11, 13, 15, 16
delayed imitation	13	research on separation-individuation	5
early triangulation	4	rivalry	5, 12, 13, 15, 17
father image	3, 4, 12, 15	self image	4
father relationship	2, 4, 10	separation anxiety	15
mother image	2, 3, 12	separation from the father	5
object constancy	6	stranger anxiety	4, 5, 9, 14
oedipus complex	13, 15, 17	stranger conflict	11
organizers	4	stranger reaction	5, 7, 9, 14
peers	11	symbiotic mother	9, 15
practicing subphase	9, 12, 13, 14, 15	symbiotic phase	7, 14
rapprochement	11, 13	symbolization	13
rapprochement crisis	12, 13, 15	triangulation	3, 4

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New layout and text processing by Detlef Staude 2015.

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