

COMMENTARY

MOTHERS, DIALOGUES, AND SUPPORT

Commentary on Garvey & Fogel and on Duarte & Gonçalves

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Although the lives of mothers and children have shifted dramatically from those of our foraging ancestors, it is worthwhile to reconsider the parenting practices that emerged with social mammals some 30 million years ago (Konner, 2010). These mostly match up with the common practices for infants and young children recorded among foraging hunter-gatherers who live in small, cohesive communities representing the lifestyle of over 90% of human genus history. Ancestral childrearing practices include extensive, on-demand breastfeeding, constant touch, responsiveness to needs of the child, natural childbirth, and multiple adult caregivers (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). When any of these are missing, child outcomes may be negatively affected (Narvaez & Gleason, in press; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, in press).

The characteristic of multiple caregivers may be the most fundamental component because it supports the mother in carrying out all the rest

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of the practices. But maternal support is sorely lacking for many mothers today and makes motherhood more conflicted than ever, as noted by the transcripts of Duarte and Gonçalves (2012). The concept or ideal of One Mother burdens the mother in that she must be her own community of support through the different dialogic positions meant to be held by alloparents. The rich dialogicality provided in the evolutionary context of ancestral parenting is lost in the modern One Mother ideal. Mothers are forced to take on the dialogue within themselves, and it is likely that very few do this smoothly or coherently. This is too much for one person to carry. Many voices are never expressed or expressible in the modern context.

Another characteristic of our ancestral environments bears on this discussion. Although parenting is intense and apparently pleasurable in our ancestral social contexts, adults and older children have other needs that seem well met in the ‘companionship culture’ of foraging bands (Ingold, 1999). Not only do they deeply enjoy one another (Everett, 2009) they express the self through extensive joint creativity in dance, song, play and teasing. Through these activities, the self is unified with the environment (nature and the social group) in a holistic sense of togetherness.

The Western world is becoming more aware of how deeply *social* humans are, so much so that human mental health breaks down with isolation (Cacioppo, 2008). Motherhood may be an especially socially-needy time in which the mother needs just as much support as the child from a community. The social dialogues that occur in supportive communities provide the framing for motherhood. The mother’s community explicates motherhood and frames the notions of motherhood that become internalized by the mother. Turnbull (1983) gives us a glimpse into the experience of pregnancy among the Mbuti, the small-band foragers he studied:

Again it is an individual matter, but the most common ways in which [the woman] recognizes her pregnancy include adornment of the body with leaves and flowers...It is clearly a form of consecration, as it is when in the last few months she takes to going off on her own, to her favorite spot in the forest, and singing to the child in her womb. This lullaby has certain distinctive features. It is the only traditional form of song that can be sung as a solo... It is composed by the mother for that particular child within her womb. It is sung for no others, it is sung by no other....In a similar way she talks to the child, telling him of the forest world into which he will soon emerge, ...describing the place where the child will be born, the other children he will meet and play with, grow up with... the mother...is reinforcing *her* own concept of the world, and is readying *herself* for the creative act about to unfold, giving *herself* confidence that the forest will be as good and as kind to her child as it has been to her; providing food, shelter, clothing, warmth—and affection. (pp. 168–169)

What a different environment from the modern mother's! However, one can see that the mother, like mothers of today, prepares herself for the grand event through dialogue with the child, both nonverbally and with words. With few distractions, she can put her soul into the preparation. In such a context, accompanied by natural childbirth and the 'mothering' hormones that accompany it (e.g., oxytocin, prolactin), a mother can develop a deep unity with her child.

Our modern Western mothers face a different milieu. As Duarte and Gonçalves (2012) point out, mothers today are often conflicted from the beginning and even during and after parturition. Unlike in the foraging context where everyone was together most of the time, modern life is compartmentalized into home and work, trapping mothers in the demands of multiple conflicting roles in separated contexts. The separation into distinct and conflicting contexts echoes the aforementioned loss of the rich dialogicality of ancestral communities, where a polyphony of voices builds up an integrated, multi-positional parenting context. In contrast, separated contexts lead to isolated voices and entail an overload of integrative work on voices and positions for the mother-to-be.

However, in both social environments we can see that the mother dialogues with the self in self-preparation, in self-adjustment and self-reassurance. Duarte and Gonçalves (2012) show how dialogues with others allow the mother to receive extensive verbal support from self and others as she goes through the process of reconciling multiple self concepts with cultural concepts of womanhood and the demands of her life. We can see the evolution of the mother's feeling and worldview as she forms a committed relationship with the baby after birth, widening her "I."

Verbal support is not enough for the mother and child to flourish however. As humans have practiced for countless generations, multiple alloparents are needed to care for both the mother and the child. "Cooperative breeding" (Hrdy, 2009) allows the mother to share labor, and to adopt multiple mother positions within a community of support. She is never alone. In fact, mother-child pairs cannot flourish by themselves. Isolating mother and child from the rest of society is detrimental for the mental health of both. Expecting mothers (even with fathers) to carry the burden of childrearing was unimaginable until recently, when modern culture made it "normal." Mothers should not feel like they have to raise their children on their own.

Perhaps this is linked to what I see missing in the scripts that Duarte and Gonçalves (2012) present—the deep sense of *pleasure* that many women report having as mothers (a fulfilment unmatched by anything else). Are women finding less pleasure in mothering these days, or is this an unusual group, or did Duarte and Gonçalves not emphasize this aspect?

Although emotions are simmering in the various positions of the "I" in Duarte and Gonçalves' (2012) work, Garvey and Fogel (2012) face emo-

tion head on. Using Wallon's theory, they emphasize the role of emotion in human experience, the glue that connects one person to another. They point out how "self development is a dynamic and continuous process of emotional co-being both in linguistic and kinesthetic dialogues" (2012, p. 9 in MS). Indeed, this is lifelong occurrence, as humans require regular 'limbic resonance' with others for wellbeing (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 1999).

Mothers today may be raised to be physiologically distinct from mothers in our ancestral contexts. Ancestral parenting practices mentioned previously build a brain that is fully prepared for deep sociality, garnering great pleasure from social relationships. In contrast, when a child is raised with greater isolation from others as in modern Western childrearing (e.g., not physically in contact with others throughout the first years of life, not breastfed for years), the brain is not wired up as well for social relationships and must learn to find pleasure in ways outside of deep social relationships. Mothers with this type of early life history may find it more difficult to attain the deep pleasure in being a mother and may be especially deflated by modern childbirth practices that greatly interfere with mother and child wellbeing and bonding, practices that are commonplace in the USA (e.g., drugging the mother, mother-child separation after birth, feeding newborns something other than breastmilk; see Trevathan, 2010).

Garvey and Fogel's (2012) ideas fit very well with triune ethics theory (Narvaez, 2008), a neurobiological model of moral functioning that emphasizes emotion also, and how emotion systems are 'tuned up' by caregivers in the first months and years of life in ways that matter for social and moral functioning later. As Garvey and Fogel point out, the day-to-day experiences with caregivers in early life sets up self-in-situation patterns that follow the individual through life. Each person develops their own preverbal neurobiological narrative of the social and moral life (Narvaez, 2011) that is only reshaped with considerable effort later. Triune ethics theory corroborates Garvey and Fogel's theoretical assumptions in the domain of morality and proposes three ethical mindsets: Safety, Engagement, and Imagination. The closed mode of functioning is about self-protection and manifests itself in a Safety ethic. The systems for survival are built in and available at birth. A human baby is born 9 months early in comparison to other animals (due to head size), with only 25% of the brain developed. For optimal development, the child requires "extero-gestation," a 9-month experience of an external womb. If the child is allowed to become too distressed for too long at critical moments of development, the child can develop a self-protective brain that has a low threshold for stress reactivity. The primitive parts of the brain ("reptilian"; MacLean, 1990) will dominate the rest of the brain when a threat is perceived. A stress-reactive brain is more likely to perceive threat as a matter of course and habitually respond with a Safety ethic, deterring sociality.

The open, relationally-attuned mode of functioning mentioned by Garvey and Fogel (2012) requires, for optimal functioning, the type of ancestral parenting described earlier. In this way the mammalian emotion systems are properly “wired” and integrated for social relationships (Schoore, 1994). In terms of moral functioning, this seems to be the dominant mode of functioning in ancestral environments, what I call an Engagement ethic, involving relational attunement with others. In this mindset, the individual is able to respond with compassion to others, losing the self in collaboration and cooperation. Without ancestral parenting, relational attunement is more difficult or impossible, pushing the individual towards a more autistic (relationally impaired) mode of functioning and habitual use of a Safety ethic.

The third mindset, the Imagination ethic, emerges from the neocortex and prefrontal cortex, the more recently evolved parts of the human brain, which allow for abstraction from the present. These areas also require ancestral parenting for optimal development or else the Safety ethic can use reasoning for self-protective ends (vicious imagination) or be completely detached from emotion. Ideally, the individual integrates emotional attunement with abstraction capabilities for a communal imagination, allowing for solving complex societal problems. In any case, it is the initial nonverbal and verbal dialogue with mother, perhaps starting in the womb, that facilitates these different moral mindsets.

The woman embedded in a community of caring support is most able to provide the type of parenting that best matches the evolved practices that facilitate optimal social and moral functioning. A woman with secure attachment to her parents or caregivers will provide a similar, “attachment-parenting” to her children (Steele, in press). In other words, the capacities of the mother are promoted by her own history of developmental support and relational attunement with her caregivers. A mutual-responsive-orientation (Kochanska, 2002) provides the milieu for the development of a socially-capacious individual who is able to dialogue with others. No matter their background, however, for mothers to maintain an Engagement Ethic with their children, they need a community of support that includes alloparents. As our ancestors realized, raising children is a communal task.

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Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 1999

Schore, 1994

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