Conflict development in infancy

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ABSTRACT

Research on infant development and mother–infant interaction is dominated by an implicit ideal of synchrony, harmony and shared feelings, while conflict, opposition and disagreement are mostly regarded as an issue for clinical psychology. Conflicts can, however, be seen as an important moment of transition in a mother–child relationship.

This study examines the development of conflicts between mothers and infants. Weekly questionnaires from seventeen mothers of firstborn infants have been collected from the infants' first to the sixty-fifth week of age. Analyses of responses to questions related to the infant's "difficultness" and the mother's feelings of impatience or irritation towards her infant are reported here. Three different sources of maternal irritation have been found: infants' demands for attention such as infant crying, fretting or clinging; infants' sleeping problems; and infants' protests or disobedience. The mothers' expressions of irritation change along with the age of the infant, reflecting the growing demands she makes on her infant. Open conflicts and clashes appear around one year of age, indicating a general crisis, as described by Vygotsky, among others. Such crises can be related to major developmental change.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary developmental theory infants are considered active and social from birth on. Some now seminal studies have demonstrated that when interacting with their mother, infants can imitate and can take the initiative in making contact. They offer a small but genuine contribution to mother–infant communication, mainly regarded as preverbal dialog based on shared emotions (e.g., Trevarthen, 1993; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). The maintenance of the dialog nevertheless mainly depends on the mothers' interpretation and fulfillment of the infants' behavior through phasing, timing and confirmation by mirroring (e.g., Stern, 2002; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001; Tronick, Als, & Adamson, 1979; Urwin, 1984).

However, infant upbringing, education and development also consist of less amiable moments. Infants may wake up in the night, refuse to eat and cry stridently. Although frequent occurrences in everyday family life, events like these have not been given much attention by developmental psychology research (Shantz & Hartup, 1992; Valsiner & Cairns, 1992), which can appear biased by an idealization of childhood and by a narrow focus on communication and language acquisition (Bradley, 1989; Burman, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Urwin, 1984).

The general claims of interpersonal harmony conceal an implicit norm of how parent–child relations should take place (Bradley, 1989; Burman, 2008). Especially when dealing with the mother–infant relationship, studies have explicitly prescribed sensitivity and synchronization (Biringen, Emde, & Pipps-Siegel, 1997; Burman, 2008).

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1.1. Vygotsky's theory of conflicts and transitions

The age periods of childhood are, according to Vygotsky (1998), defined by relatively stable periods of growth and learning, divided from each other by crises. Each crisis, in turn, is a developmental turning point, during which the imbalance or tension between the old and the new emerging skills necessitates a reorganization of the child's psychic structure. The developmental dynamics is furthermore determined by the social situation of development which Vygotsky understood as the relationships a child creates with his or her social environment. The crisis results in the development of new relations between the child and his or her world of people and things. In the relatively stable period following a crisis, the social situation of development is characterized by growth and learning resulting in a "neoformation." Neoformations characterize the reorganized psychic structure of the child. As a consequence, the relations between the child and social reality change. The former situation of development disintegrates and a new situation unfolds as an initial point for the subsequent age. The reconstruction of the social situation of development makes up the content of the critical ages (Vygotsky, 1998, pp197–199).

Infancy is consequently a period distinguished from both the neonatal period and childhood by crises. In the first month of life the crisis appears as a transition from a sheltered intrauterine life into a life as a physically separated individual reaching a steady bodily state at the end of the neonatal period. Longer periods of alertness and attention and a preference for social relations mark the beginning of infancy. The infant is still totally dependent on adults to satisfy all his or her needs, and the social situation of development is initially an almost merged existence with primary carers out of which the infant's development towards independence takes place. In the first phase of infancy, the infant's affective life is thus described by Vygotsky as confined to sleeping, feeding and crying, and the infant is characterized by a kind of receptive form of interest in the outside world, an interest marked by passivity, reactivity, and the dominance of negative emotions (e.g., crying and dissatisfaction when an adult leaves). In the second phase, the infant shows an interest in his or her environment, actively seeking contact with adults. According to Vygotsky, the contradiction between the necessity for infants to communicate their wishes to the adult and their lack of speech is the driving force behind their further psychic development, although the development of affect and will and the ability to walk are important achievements too. When the infant is around one year of age the tension caused by the pressure of the new prospects and a longing for the vanishing prior conditions result in a crisis. During this crisis, not only protests, resistance, and confrontation, but also dominance and subordination, despotism and compliance can appear as a result of the development of affect and will, and of difficulty in making oneself understood. Inadequate knowledge of the rapid changes that occur during the transitions as well as inappropriate child rearing may result in difficult behaviors in the infant. Vygotsky maintained that pedagogy adapted to these critical ages is undeveloped both in practical and theoretical respects, indicating his view that these difficult behaviors can be managed and conflicts reduced with improved understandings.

1.2. Urwin's psychoanalytic oriented approach to conflicts in infancy

The development of conflicts was much later described and discussed by Urwin (1984). According to her, a series of shifts in the mother–infant relationship can be observed around six months of age. Infants begin to exploit the signaling properties of crying as a call for attention and they use actions to signal the responses they require from the mother (see also Rogoff, Mistry, Radziszewska, & Germond, 1992; Mosier & Rogoff, 1994), indicating a voluntary control of actions. A growing interchangeability in interaction also appears in the shape of increasing mutual imitation. To begin with, mothers adjust to the infant's current level of development, but when the infant is around nine months of age they counter the increase in the infants' initiating behaviors and active control of the interaction by raising their demands. Mothers might thus insist that the infant wait, introduce conflict by breaking regularity, wait for a correct response and then point out what the infant is supposed to do. Moreover, improved infant mobility necessitates social sanctions and prohibitions that might create conflicts. A tension in the power balance between mother and infant as well as indications of infant intra-psychic conflict emerge around the end of the first year. On the one hand, the infant shows omnipotence and autonomy; on the other, he or she demonstrates stranger and separation anxiety, revealing fragility and vulnerability. Temper tantrums are especially frequent during this period. However, the infant may not only show anger, scream, reject and bite the mother, but also want to please her (Urwin, 1984).

Urwin assumed Lacan's notion of a 'mirror stage', in which Lacan introduces the 'mirror experience' to account for the transition from narcissism into object love and the first differentiation between self and other. She elaborated this notion to include then recent research on mother–infant interaction, and presented a theory of how the mother's completion and mirroring of the infant's actions create an illusive sense of wholeness and control, and how power of assertion subsequently forms a strong motive in the infant. The mother, however, also goes against the infant's expectations now and then, which results in moments of awareness of dependency and vulnerability. As an important aspect of the theory, the mother's mirroring is incorporated in the infant's experience of him or herself as whole and in control of the situation. This experience is thus based on an illusion and has the mother's responses as a constitutive part. In the crisis around one year of age the infant discovers his or her real dependence on the mother and the illusion of perfect control changes into its counterpart, the illusion of total subjugation, and although separation means independence it can also be experienced as annihilating, according to Urwin (p. 301). The struggle to cope with this fundamental split is a strong motivational force in the infant's development towards autonomy and power. The deep socio-emotional significance of the inter- and intra-personal conflicts is a salient feature in her theory.