

# Mother-Child Separateness and Connectedness from Fertilization to the Creation of an Intermediate Space

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**Abstract:** This article assumes that from the moment of fertilization the relationship between the mother and the emerging fetus is not one of merger, but rather a continuous movement between the two of connectedness and separateness that exists throughout life. In order to examine the idea that the relationship is not one of merger, the article presents three stages of the child's development in the preverbal stage. The three stages of development are the beginning of pregnancy (placenta), the birth (caesura), and the building of the potential space (third area).

**Keywords:** merger, preverbal phase, placenta, caesura, third area

*\*The author acknowledges that while this article's scope of language is narrowed to the terms of "woman," "mother," and "motherhood," a gestational parent may identify in many different ways and use various terms to describe themselves.*

Motherhood is a mental organization that includes biological, sociological, and emotional elements that come into being in the mother's psyche at conception, during pregnancy, at birth, and throughout life. The woman becoming a mother and the relationship between her and her children are both a personal and a universal experience (Perroni, 2009). This article assumes that from the moment of fertilization, the relationship between the

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### **The Placenta**

The placenta is a feto-maternal organ that enables the fetus to obtain a sufficient supply of oxygen and nutrition, as well as regulating the fetus's body temperature and removing waste. The placenta begins to develop upon implantation of the blastocyst into the maternal endometrium, grows alongside the fetus during pregnancy, and is expelled along with the baby at birth. The placenta is an organ that is formed from the tissue of two genetically distinct organisms: Part of the placenta develops from the tissue of the mother's uterine wall and part from the fetus's own tissue. After the blastocyst—which will develop into the fetus—makes contact with the uterine wall, the blastocyst and the maternal tissue grow together to form a single cooperating organ.

The fetal umbilical cord contains two umbilical arteries: one belonging to the fetus and the other belonging to the mother. The two are close, but no intermingling occurs between them. This process can be summarized by quoting Aharoni (2012):

The placenta is an organ that gives life, is anchored in inter-uterine life that connects the baby and the mother, but also separates them. The placenta mediates inter-uterine life. It is tissue that is created from the body of the fetus and develops within, and by means of the mother's body. It also carries the father's genetic code and has its own independent existence; it is separate from the mucosa (mucous membrane) of the uterus, but is deeply integrated with it. Even though anatomically the fetus is the source of the placenta, during pregnancy it also functions as an organ of the mother, takes the place of the ovary, and even changes the mother's metabolism...The placenta constitutes an 'intermediate space' between the mother and the fetus, which creates the 'third' presence that is responsible for the connection between the mother and the fetus, but also separates and divides them, so that there is never any merger between the mother's tissues and those of the fetus. (p. 131—132)

In short, there is at no point any real merger between fetus and mother. The placenta forms a separate "intermediate space," allowing the inter-uterine life between the two human entities, mother and child.

### The Dramatic Caesura of Birth

Birth itself is a powerful process of movement of both strong life-and-death forces and of creation. There is no clear answer as to what initiates birth, but it would seem that a dramatic process takes place in which the fetus's inner life force and the force emanating from the mother's body come together to produce the caesura of birth. On the one hand, the birth finally unravels the immediate physical connection between mother and baby, but on the other, it leads to a new kind of connectedness that involves separation, continuity of being, and preservation of the intrauterine impressions. According to Winnicott (1949), there is at birth not only the active action of the surroundings on the fetus, but also an autonomous internal movement of the fetus itself towards life.

The caesura model emphasizes the twin elements of cutting off and continuity that occur simultaneously in the birth process. Bion (1977) extended the meaning of caesura from intrauterine life experiences to all of life and emphasized its importance for building personality (Aharoni & Bergstein, 2012; Bergstein, 2013). Bion (1977) entreated: "investigate the caesura, not the analyst, not the analysand, not the unconscious, not the conscious, not the sanity nor insanity but the caesura, the link, the synapse..." (p. 56). Freud's argument on community echoes the theoretical basis of Bion's caesura model. Freud (1926) states: "There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life prior to birth and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe" (p. 109).

Bergstein (2012) continues: "The source of the word "caesura" used by Freud is the Latin *caedere*, meaning *to cut*, which carries the meaning of interrupting continuity by an abrupt cut, followed by continuation. Freud developed the idea of a connection between postnatal thought and emotional life, and prenatal experience" (p. 71). According to Bion (1977), "Events which are in the womb of time eventually show themselves in the conscious life of the person concerned who then has to act in the situation which has now become actual" (p. 49). For Bion, traces of prenatal life in postnatal life seemed quite normal.

The caesura of birth constitutes a significant break sequence, on one hand sharply cutting off, while on the other, simultaneously creating an impressive continuity. The caesura model, in Bion's (1977) view, constitutes an opportunity to grasp the continuity and connection between separate emotional states in life that ostensibly cannot be bridged. What we encounter in life is influenced by events that come from prenatal levels of mind.

In Bion's (1977) view, the caesura between life before birth and life after birth seems to be the sharpest and most dramatic separation in a person's life, in conjunction with the simultaneous continuity of being. For Bion, the existence of the caesura constitutes a model for the possibility of

crossing and meeting the continuity and the connection between psychic situations and events that seem to be separate and impossible to bridge—despite having continuity (Bergstein, 2012).

Up until now in our discussion of the placenta and the caesura, we have seen that these are both contradictory and complementary experiences: One is a connection that has a partition, while the other is a barrier that has a connection. Both these experiences are necessary for the creation and maintenance of life, and are ingrained in the body/mind from the beginning onwards (Aharoni, 2012). According to Bion (1977), the intrauterine happenings continue to exist in us even after birth and throughout life. Thus he says, “Investigate the caesura” (p. 56).

### **Transitional Phenomena and Transitional Objects: The Third Intermediate Area of Experience**

Transitional phenomena are a hypothetical area that exist (or do not exist) between the baby and the object—the mother or part of the mother—during the recognition phase of the object as not-me. This not-me object can become an area of separation that the baby, child, adolescent, and adult may creatively fill with playing, which in time becomes enjoyment of the cultural heritage. Transitional phenomena are constituted in the first year of life when the baby endows certain ordinary objects with significant personal meaning. By latching onto this object, the baby gains a measure of independence from the mother, which enables them to create for themselves a sense of the mother’s presence and responsiveness during her absence (Winnicott, 1971). The transitional object (usually a soft object) is part of the external world that stands for the breast or the object of the relationship (mother). This is neither an internal nor an external object; rather, it is the baby’s first not-me possession. In healthy situations the level of interest in transitional objects gradually increases (Winnicott, 1971).

This third stage is necessary for the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world and for the child to discover their own personal existence, which together lead to building up what might be called a continuity of going-on-being (Winnicott, 1979). In this process, the child begins to perceive the environment in a way that develops their capacity to be alone, which is one of the most important signs of maturity (Winnicott, 1979). The creation of potential space—a third mental area between inner reality and outer reality—is an area of subjective experience from which the baby develops as a human being. This is an important turning point for the future creation of relationships with others, and the ability to experience one’s own aloneness, connection and separation, as opposed to that of merger throughout life. This important area deals with the basic question of the meaning of the value of life (Kulka, 1995).

Continual presence in the intermediate space facilitates ongoing movement between connectedness and separateness, between identity and differentiation, as well as maintaining an infinite number of intermediate hues (Aharoni, 2012). The transition from infancy to creating an intermediate space, to the ability to play and experience the cultural milieu, encapsulates the basic forms of the feeling of the “continuity of being” (Winnicott, 1979, p. 54).

### Discussion

This article presents three developmental crossroads from fertilization to the end of infancy, which provide evidence that from the start of life, a relationship of connectedness and separateness, as opposed to merger, exists between the child and the other (the mother). Already at the preliminary stage:

the placenta constitutes an ‘intermediate space’ between the mother and the fetus..., which creates a ‘third’ presence that is responsible for the connection between the mother and the fetus, but also separates and divides them, so that there is never any merger between the mother’s tissues and those of the fetus. (Aharoni, 2012, p. 132)

During birth a dramatic process takes place in which the fetus’s inner life force and the force emanating from the mother’s body come together to produce the caesura of birth. Around the end of the first year, prior to acquiring language, a third mental area is created, located between inner and outer reality. This is an area of subjective experience from which the baby develops as a human being in an ongoing movement between connectedness and separateness that exists in an infinite number of creative hues and includes the feeling of being.

In the same way that the newborn brings with them after birth two skills that they developed in the uterus, namely sleep-wake cycles and habituation (Lubetzky, 2016), so they continue the process of connecting and separating and not merging, which enables the newborn to build the feeling of subjectivity, to experience the aloneness of the self, and to sense the meaning of the value of life.

The environment must continue to protect everyone’s going-on-being. Anyone who provides a facilitating environment for another person, be it a baby, child, adolescent, adult, or elderly individual (Winnicott, 1971), should allow them to find and consolidate their healthy way of living, in order to enable them to be part of society, active and creative, and not lose the spontaneity and feeling of freedom that comes from within and that exists from the beginning before birth.

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