

The Impact of Prenatal Psychology on Society and Culture

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Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: As a result of the research conducted by prenatal psychology into psychological and emotional experiences before and during birth, a whole new dimension has been added to our life-history. We are now able to recognise that human cultural artefacts and activities have to some extent always expressed prenatal and perinatal feelings and by doing so have familiarised us with an alien world by allowing us to "rediscover" the microcosm of our prenatal life in the macrocosm of the world. This is illustrated using several examples, such as the mythical ideas about kings (prenatal feeling of power), the holy trees (placenta) and the holy chambers (uterine space), among others. INTRODUCTION The 19th century, as Ellen Key's famous book put it, was "the century of the child" (1902). People became aware of the needs of infants and small children in a new, more thoughtful and reflective way. At the same time, psychoanalysis and the other psychotherapies discovered the infant and small child in all of us. It became clear that the conditions and relationships we experience during the first few years of life have a decisive impact on how we see ourselves and our relationships. Literature, art and films investigated this new way of looking at ourselves and our relationships (Janus 1997). Life-histories and romantic relationships became less a question of integrating oneself into a predefined religious or social order and focused more on self-awareness, finding out who we really are, and individuation and self-realisation in our relationship with the opposite sex and with society. Childlike spontaneity was retained in the way we lived and no longer had to be one-sidedly sacrificed for the sake of obligations and buried under the hardships of life. This new model of life was the basis of the modern liberal democracies that spread throughout the world during the course of the 20th century. The old hierarchical and totalitarian systems were overcome in the western world in the course of a remarkable and difficult process and were replaced by liberal democracies. This prominent history conceals a history of the 20th century that has received little attention, namely, how the development of the unborn child was discovered. Egg and sperm became clearly visible under the microscope for the first time, and people gradually became aware of the various stages of prenatal development. The psychological and emotional development that begins before birth also gradually became accessible. The initial topic was a recognition of the particular drama of human birth and the realisation not only that all of us experience our own birth at an affective level, but also that our prenatal experiences continue to exist within us as a kind of backdrop to later life. These experiences determine the basic outline of the way we experience life, the way we feel about ourselves and our relationship with the world. All these issues have increasingly been studied and developed in the field of prenatal psychology during recent years. In this context, the Association for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health (APPPAH) and the International Society for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine (ISPPM) have been important forums for discussion and reflection of the scientific and practical content and consequences of these new insights. It has become clear in the course of this discussion that prenatal psychology is more than just another aspect of developmental psychology. Instead, it is the discovery of a new dimension of human life-histories that was hitherto concealed behind the biological "naturalness" of pregnancy and birth. It became clear that prenatal psychology has the importance of a new paradigm and has fundamentally changed and extended the way in which we see ourselves. It has also become obvious that prenatal psychology is not a specialised area of an individual discipline, whether it be developmental psychology or developmental medicine, but that it relates to all human sciences and therefore has very different dimensions, which have developed over the years in the debates that have taken place at the conferences held by our two associations. Right from the beginning it was

clear that prenatal psychology is not only concerned with enhancing the experiences of individuals in terms of their life-history, but also that social and cultural life are greatly affected by this for the very reason that we have all had this experience. This topic was already addressed in Otto Rank's basic book on prenatal psychology *Das Trauma der Geburt* (The Trauma of Birth) in 1924. Two thirds of the book deal with the social and cultural significance of the projective processing of prenatal and perinatal experience. Michael Irving (1989) has devoted particular attention to this subject and investigated the processing of prenatal and perinatal experience in human myths. Nevertheless, in practice, the focus has mainly been on consolidating and securing the individual importance of prenatal and perinatal experience and linking this knowledge with the scientific areas of developmental biology and medicine. However, the social dimension of prenatal psychology has repeatedly been addressed; one example is the psychohistorical dimension of prenatal psychology, presented at an APPPAH Congress by Lloyd deMause (1996), *Restaging Fetal Trauma in War and Social Violence*. After the successes of the APPPAH conferences held in recent years on the practical and scientific dimension of prenatal psychology, I would like to take this opportunity to address the cultural dimension of prenatal psychology again. Both poles of prenatal psychology, the individual and the cultural, need to interact, because we are also essentially talking about a new way of relating to pregnancy and birth and hence changing the way we see ourselves and the basic values of our society. This is the only way that prevention can develop at the level of society, the necessity of which we are aware of from difficult experiences of ourselves and of our patients. I would like to present some examples to highlight the impact of prenatal psychology on society and culture.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS This presentation is based on the idea that the key element of the human condition is that we understand our surroundings in two ways: first in the context of our instinctive needs and second in the context of our prenatal experience. We search for the microcosm of our prenatal sphere of life in the macrocosm of the postnatal sphere. Referring back to our prenatal experience is our way of familiarising ourselves with an alien world and surroundings. We try to find the prenatal home we have lost in the postnatal world so that we can come to feel at home in this world through our prenatal emotions. All human cultures are held together by projections and re-enactments of prenatal emotions and needs. All tribes and all villages gather around a central holy space, the centre of which can be a holy tree, a holy grove, a holy spring etc. The presence of our origins and the sanctification of the present by our origins and the world becoming whole again are conjured up in magical rituals and celebrations (Janus 1991). And that is not all: In endless endeavours and in a collective spirit, humans use the means at hand to recreate part of the hidden original world in their real world. This has allowed humans as a species to modify unsuitable surroundings and create an appropriate environment for life. While the primates related to us remained in the biological, sub-tropical world that suited them, our ancestors were able to settle in other climatic zones too, because they were able to adapt biologically and climatically unsuitable surroundings to satisfy their basic needs. This process of adapting the world into a world fit for human life was the achievement of the Stone Age tribal cultures, which enabled human settlements even in surroundings hostile to life such as the Arctic. In this sense, the evolution of the brain as the species developed into human beings appears to be fundamentally determined by the fact that human existence is essentially rooted in a situation in which prenatal and postnatal worlds constantly have to be balanced and creatively linked anew in a highly artificial manner. For *Homo sapiens*, a tree was not just a tree; it could also appear as a placenta-like object that promises to be a steady source of food, protection and safety. Making the tree into a place to live by building a tree hut would be an example of this creative concretisation of a prenatal need in the postnatal world. Even more complex is the cultivation of fruit trees from their wild forms in order to meet all our nutritional needs in the external world fulfilling to some extent the role of the placenta. The central idea is thus that prenatal experience is not something that has limited significance in connection with positive early or traumatic experiences, but that it is a constituent part of how humans sees themselves and realise their potential in a particular society and culture. I would like to present a few examples to illustrate this.

THE EMBRYONIC POWER OF KINGS Early psychoanalysts recognised the roots of feelings of power in prenatal

feelings of power and strength. Good nutrition and protection were able to give the prenatal child a feeling of omnipotence, as Ferenczi (1913) described. Freud (1914) termed this original feeling of power and self-worth primary narcissism. In the same way, prenatal deprivation can convey a feeling of helplessness and worthlessness, which Adler (1907) described as the inferiority complex. It appears that the social structure of tribal cultures was essentially based on the biological needs of a horde of primates. Due to particular skills, one member of the group becomes the leader or chief, and social life essentially follows the pattern of hordes of primates. The invention of farming in the Neolithic Revolution created a new situation. The tribes were in a position to produce hitherto unprecedented surpluses, which dramatically increased the power of the head of the pack and recreated the quality of prenatal power and worth. The stage of development from chiefs to kings seems to be historically tangible in special festivals in the Neolithic period celebrating this abundance, as described by the ethnologist Harris (1974). This new agricultural abundance was used in extravagant celebrations to increase the power of the leader. In my view, the magical and numinous qualities that surround the chiefs and later kings thus celebrated directly reflect prenatal trance-like feelings of power and strength. The king's power is rooted in this sense in the trance-like re-enactment of positive prenatal feelings that the members of the group are allowed to share by honoring their king. Kings are presented by society as fetal beings in this world, carried like children in the uterus; they sit on a throne like the child in its mother's womb, and they are given wondrous clothing. Like the child in its shell before birth, they shine and glow, reflecting the pleasant skin sensation before birth (Dowling 1990). They are kept warm and fed like the child before birth, and they feel the ring of the crown around their head like the child before birth feels its mother's pelvic ring etc. Their "holy" presence allows a healing reassociation with positive prenatal feelings. There is a large body of literature on the healing power of medieval kings and emperors (Bloch 1998). The prenatal dimension is also directly present in the medieval theory of the king's two bodies (Kontorowicz, 1957): The king has a human body and at the same time an eternal and immortal body, from which his actual power emanates. I see this as a fetal body. This level of eternity and immortality gives the earthly power the enduring justification and strength it needs to hold large social groups together in their communal fetal trance. The purpose of social rites and works of art is fundamentally a visualisation of this deep prenatal dimension of human strength, whereby individuals are enabled to relate to their prenatal strength and to draw on this to develop a scope of action and an ego-strength that other primates cannot achieve. Thus the way kings are presented not only realizes a new dimension of large social groups, but also a new dimension of individual ego-strength, which still draws from the collective re-enactment of the fetal feeling of power and strength in the king. Identification with this projection gives individuals a new feeling of strength and self-worth and an ability to act. The "invention" of kings was thus accompanied by the "invention" or "creation" of a new dimension of ego-strength and ability to act. Over the centuries, practicing and assimilating this ego-strength led to such a degree of individual self-confidence and security that, since the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence, we believe that we can dispense with kings as support and we can be the king or queen of our own lives.

THE PRENATAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN SPACE The human experience of space at the beginning of life is that of the uterine space. It is the experience of a living and breathing space that gives the child food and protection before birth. In a very elementary way, the uterine space is there for the child in order to give it room to grow and develop. It is a space for living and experiencing. My hypothesis here, too, is that at an affective level we never lose our memory of this primal space, but that in our personal relationships and our relationship with the world we are continually seeking a replacement for this primal space or creatively form a replacement. In fact, it appears to me to be a basic human trait to search for or create living spaces such as these in the outside world. In my view, it is therefore not merely by chance that Stone Age caves play a particular role in the history of mankind. They allow a trance-like visualisation of the prenatal space and thus enable us to achieve a degree of distance and independence from the space dictated to us as primates by our instinctive needs. A primate simply lives in the biological space that suits it. Outside this space it necessarily dies. In contrast, we humans can liberate

ourselves from the biological space by referring back to the prenatal space. This visualisation of the prenatal sense of space no doubt occurred at the beginning of life in the natural space of a cave or the cave-like feeling of a forest. Caves and forests act as a trigger for prenatal feelings. The particular nature of prenatal feelings appears to be that of something sacred to be revered. Newborn children can retain something of the feeling of sacredness and reverence in their relationship with their parents and the world. All cultures have their holy spaces in which and through which they maintain contact with their prenatal origins. From time immemorial, holy spaces used for ritualistic re-enactments of our origins have always had uterine shapes, for example the ritual rooms at Catal Hujuk in Turkey. In this context, the holy space is merely the expression and symbolisation of the particular relationship that humans have to space, determined by the dual reference to the biological living space and the prenatal experience of space. As humans in the world, we are constantly living both in the real world and in an emotional connection with the prenatal sphere, which makes the real world appear to us to be a living and breathing home. Thus the holy tree or Tree of Life often played a central role in ancient cultures as a centre of their energy. It symbolised the presence of the prenatal experience of the placenta. Eliade writes of "... a tree or a central pillar that supports the world, a tree of life or of wonders that makes those that eat its fruit immortal because the tree embodies absolute reality, the source of life and of sacredness, and it is found in the middle of the world" (Eliade, 1986, p. 437). Death in a culture or a mythical world is often symbolised by this tree dying or being cut down. The main aim of political conquests in ancient Greece was to fell the holy tree of the city under attack, and one of the elements of the conquest by Cortez of the Indian tribal territories consisted in the holy indigenous tree being cut down and replaced by a cross. This clearly shows the extent to which these correlations are present and have an impact on experience and, at the same time, how much they are part of the unconscious. It is not only the ritual holy spaces that have this symbolic significance of uterine protection, but also the town walls, which also have a crucial emotional importance and create a living space in a magical way. This magical and emotional aspect becomes clear when we consider that town walls in ancient Sumer could be as much as 27 metres thick; this had no military significance, it was an expression of the emotional protective magic. The urban community is held together by the magic of a uterine space. Here, not only symbols of space play a role, but also the common language, which individuals hear as their mother tongue before birth and which is thus familiar in a primal way. In Europe, from the Middle Ages up until the Modern Age, people devoted great attention to the creation of holy spaces. A huge number of churches filled the towns. The presence of early experience could be intensively experienced within these churches. I presume that our rooms of emotional innerness and our experience of relational spaces are to some extent psychohistorical descendants or offsprings of this development of ritual innerness within churches. The presence of early experience is no longer explored solely in ritual group experiences, but also in individuals' own meditative study of themselves and in encounters in their relationships.

THE PRENATAL DIMENSION OF CRAFT AND TECHNOLOGY

In the ancient cultures, it was always said that craftsmen's skills and methods stemmed from another world and had been brought to humans by divine heroes. If heaven is a primary image of the heavenly prenatal experience of being safe, protected and warm, then the discovery of fire, for instance, creates something of this heavenly warmth on earth. The heat given off by the fire recalls uterine sensations of warmth. By controlling the fire and using it to warm myself, I can to some extent create heaven on earth. Since my primal vitality is rooted in the embryonic and foetal period, the creative visualisation of prenatal qualities in the real world is to some extent my own confirmation and assurance of an inner link with my primal vitality. This fits in with the fact that many inventions initially appear to be emotionally justified and are only later used for worldly purposes. People began by building temples and holy spaces and only then huts and houses; they first created votive vessels and only then containers for storing things. Stone Age vessels reveal their prenatal roots in snake-like lines symbolising the umbilical cord and the rhythmical points symbolising the mother's heartbeat. Individual inventions, such as houses, clothes, water pipes etc. recreate particular qualities of the prenatal situation in the real world and hence make us independent of our biological and climatic living space. As the

behavioral scientist Desmond Morris (1994) put it: We are the only species that builds its own zoo. I would like to add that the model for this zoo is the uterine space. The primal emotional link appears to me to be particularly clear in the human dream of flying. People have always dreamt of flying, not because this was an economic necessity, but because flying recreates something of the prenatal sensation of floating in the real world. The tenaciousness and courage required for technical inventions stem from the deep-rooted longing to discover elements of the lost prenatal world in this world. IN CONCLUSION The psychological and emotional life of the unborn child was essentially discovered by and through people who did not feel at ease in their cultural surroundings and who suffered from neurotic and psychosomatic symptoms. Experiences of suffering as infants and small children proved to be significant. Experiences of suffering during the prenatal and perinatal period of life were even more significant. However, what initially appeared to be the specific problem of certain people who had had a difficult childhood and start in life turned out to be a new paradigm for the way in which humans see themselves and a new way of looking at culture. The distress caused by our own suffering and experience of failure engendered the courage to investigate our own life-history as far back as the preverbal and prenatal period. In earlier times, human distress and suffering used to be seen as an expression of the original sinfulness and badness of human beings. They could only be healed in the hereafter. Exploring and overcoming early suffering before we leave this life leads to a new cultural identity. It is a continuation of the psychohistorical development from the attainment of external political liberation in the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence to the achievement and enhancement of inner freedom by actively experiencing one's roots and life history right from the beginning. One stage in this development was the discovery of the significance of our own feelings as children and infants-something which the psychoanalysis and psychotherapies of the last century made accessible. Here, too, the extent to which cultural institutions are based on the feelings we have as children towards our parents had already become clear. Our childlike loyalty towards, and dependence on, our parents is transferred to social and governmental institutions and allows them to function in society. At this level, too, social life is always about continually finding a balance between the adult and childlike plane. The findings of prenatal psychology go much further in the inner integration of the preverbal and prenatal space. From this point of view, we are able to recognise that the basic desires of the fetus and its relationship with the world live on within us as adults in the way we feel about ourselves and our surroundings. This continuing effect of the prenatal period in the way we experience ourselves and life actually appears to be something particularly human and something that distinguishes us from the other primates and is a key factor on which human societies are based and that allows them to function. My aim has been to illustrate this using the examples of the embryonic roots of kings, holy spaces and technological utopias. Holy spaces and the social demonstration of the power of kings, just like the realisation of technological inventions, are the psychohistorical correlation of our modern ego-strength and ability to act. Thus it would be reasonable to presume that the remarkable cerebral growth over the course of human history was not only connected with the requirements of manual skills, but even more so with the necessity typical of humans to repeatedly find a balance between prenatal fetal, postnatal childlike and adult feelings as part of our makeup as primates. In my view, modern art has played a major role in paving the way for the visualisation and inner realization of these links with our original experiences. From the point of view of prenatal psychology it is wrong to refer to modern art as abstract or surreal; it would be more correct to call it specific and realistic in the way it makes the preverbal and prenatal roots of our experience accessible (Evertz & Janus, 2002). In my opinion the pictures by Kandinsky, Dali and Miró, for example, show that art makes the early preverbal roots of our experience at the beginning of life accessible for society, thus extending our awareness and increasing our scope for action (Janus 1993). References REFERENCES Adler, A. (1907/1965) Studie über die Minderwertigkeit von Organen (Study of organ inferiority). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. Bloch, M. (1998) Die wundertätigen Könige (The healing power of the kings). Munich: Beck. DeMause, L. (1996). Restaging fetal traumas in war and social violence. *Int. J. of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine*, 8(2), 171-212. Dowling, T.

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