

Being a Son – Becoming a Father: A Mourning Process

Madeleine Sednaoui-Mirza and Irène Krymko-Bleton

Université du Québec, Montréal, Canada

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Abstract: Becoming a father starts before the birth of a child. It is a process that involves giving up being a son (Legendre 1985, 1989). This intergenerational switch is attempted through the reenactment of early oedipal relationship with significant others. Deutscher (1981) describes the task of fatherhood during pregnancy as the man's attunement and alliance to the woman bearing his child, an alliance based upon a certain degree of maturity and empathy whose origins are related to maternal as well as paternal identifications. Herzog (1982) in his study on fatherhood, has observed that male children who have been deprived of their fathers develop a "father's hunger" which in adulthood affects their availability to attune to their female companion and to participate intrapsychically and interpersonally in the progression towards parenthood.

An exploratory study (Sednaoui-Mirza, Bleton and Lortie 1991) with men whose female companion have a high risk pregnancy for idiopathic reasons has revealed a common theme: during their early childhood, the families of these men have experienced severe losses (divorce, separation, deaths) that have led at times to the "dead mother syndrome" (Green 1986) described as the sudden psychic unavailability of the mother towards her child. During adulthood these men's wish to conceive a child is avoided or mainly triggered by unresolved oedipal rivalry. These findings are illustrated by 4 different examples of psychic configuration or ways of dealing with these early issues reenacted during their companion's pregnancy.

Contrary to Herzog's conclusions, the outcome of this study stresses the importance of both parents for the process of mourning that will enable a man to give up being a son and prepare him to become a father.

Zusammenfassung: *Sohn sein – Vater werden: Ein Trauerprozeß.* Vaterschaft vor der Geburt eines Kindes ist ein Prozeß, bei dem es um die Aufgabe der Sohnesrolle geht (Legendre 1985, 1989). Diese Rollenveränderung geht mit Wiederholungen von frühen ödipalen Beziehungsmustern einher. Deutscher (1981) beschreibt die Übernahme der Vaterrolle während der Schwangerschaft als einen Prozeß der Abstimmung und Verbundenheit mit der Frau, die mit seinem Kind schwanger ist. Dies setzt eine gewisse Reife und Einfühlungsfähigkeit voraus, deren Wurzeln in Identifizierungen mit der Mutter und mit dem Vater liegen. Herzog (1982) hat in seiner Untersuchung der Vaterschaft beobachtet, daß männliche Kinder, die ihren Vater früh verloren haben, einen „Vaterhunger“ ent-

Correspondence to: Madeleine Sednaoui-Mirza and Irène Krymko-Bleton, Dept. of Psychology, P.O. Box 8888, Centre Ville, Montréal, H3C-3P8, P.Q. Canada

wickeln, der ihre Fähigkeit als Erwachsene zur Abstimmung mit ihrer Frau und zur Übernahme verantwortlicher Elternschaft beeinträchtigt.

Eine explorative Untersuchung (Sednaoui-Mirza, Bleton u. Lortie 1991) bei Männern, deren Frauen ohne körperliche Ursache eine Risikoschwangerschaft entwickelten, ein gemeinsames Problem hatten: während ihrer frühen Kindheit erlitten die Familien dieser Männer schwere Verluste (Scheidung, Trennung, Tod), die zu dem „Syndrom der toten Mutter“ (Green 1986) führten, das als eine plötzliche psychische Unerreichbarkeit der Mutter für ihr Kind beschrieben wird. Als Erwachsene vermeiden diese Männer eine Vaterschaft oder sind dabei durch ungelöste ödipale Rivalität bestimmt. Diese Ergebnisse werden mit vier unterschiedlichen klinischen Beispielen illustriert, die die verschiedenen Muster des Erlebens und Verhaltens bei dieser Problematik während der Schwangerschaft der Frau beschreiben.

Im Gegensatz zu der Schlußfolgerung von Herzog zeigt das Ergebnis dieser Studie die Bedeutung beider Eltern für den Trauerprozeß, der dem Mann ermöglicht, die Sohnesrolle aufzugeben und sich auf die Vaterschaft vorzubereiten.

Introduction

In this paper, a reflection on the mourning process, and its relation with fatherhood as a developmental stage will be presented. This reflection is based on case studies done in the context of an exploratory research on fatherhood, during high risk pregnancy for idiopathic reasons.

Losses and Mourning in Normal Development

Losses are inherent in the developmental process. Pine (1989) in his study on the place of the object loss in normal development, states, that while these losses differ from traumatic events as well as other losses such as death, divorce, etc. their grieving, and resolution prepare the human being to face losses.

Normal object loss is a fundamental moment in the structuring of the human psyche, as a new relation to reality is introduced. It involves the symbolic and real separation of the mother through birth, weaning, as well as the renunciation of the incestuous wishes towards the parents and the resolution of the oedipus complex. It is in the developmental stage of adolescence that the parents of the childhood will no longer hold the primary libidinal place in the life of the offspring . . . This work of “detachment” notes Pine, is called a mourning process, indicating the emotional pain of that work, in allowing new ties to be made. The nature of the mourning will be related to the role of the object at the time of the loss.

The structural and historical aspects of the oedipus complex, are fundamental because they define the subject, within the context of human, sexual and intergenerational differentiation. With the assistance of a relatively successfully resolved oedipus complex, the child learns, not only to compromise and subordinate to realistic requirement of his culture, but also to face and accept separations and losses.

In his study, Pine examines parenthood and parents relationship with their children, but he does not explore the losses involved of the parent to be in relation to his own parents.

The Mourning Process and Fatherhood as a Developmental Stage

In this section selected definitions relating fatherhood to the mourning process are presented, they will be followed by case studies that enabled us to explore the evolution of the mourning process inherent to that developmental stage, and connect it to unexpected losses that occurred during childhood.

Fatherhood – an Intergenerational Process

Fatherhood is a developmental stage, a social and an intergenerational process that has been studied by Legendre 1985. Exploring the interaction of the law and the family systems in the light of psychoanalytic concepts, he defines fatherhood, as a passage, a “Symbolic permutation” involving three generations: a son becoming a father must symbolically take his father’s place: he has to be able to renounce his role as incestuous son and become a father toward his own child.

The difficulty arises from the fact that in the unconscious it does not always happen this way. A father might reenact his own conflicts with the significant ones in his surrounding, in particular his child, and behave towards him such a way that he becomes symbolically his parent.

Fatherhood and Couple Dynamic: The Paternal Alliance

Deutsher (1981) has explored fatherhood in relation to couple dynamics during pregnancy. He describes the “alliance-to-pregnancy or paternal-alliance” as the capacity of the father-to-be to attune to and ally with the pregnancy of his companion. It is related to maternal and paternal identifications and resolution of the Oedipal complex.

Father’s Hunger

Elements affecting the attunement of “the father to be” during pregnancy have been explored by Herzog (1982) in a unique longitudinal study on fatherhood involving premature birth. In his results Herzog focused on the concept of the “father’s hunger”, a father’s deprivation during childhood which becomes an important element that can affect the alliance-to-pregnancy of the father-to-be. However, Herzog does not mention the other parent, i.e. the mother and her influence on the development of the child who later will become a father.

Fatherhood During High Risk Pregnancy for Idiopathic Reasons.

A Research Study

The present exploratory study of men whose companion had a high risk pregnancy, due to idiopathic causes, was based on a review of literature Sednaoui-Mirza, Bleton and Lortie (1991) which emphasized the importance of the attitude of the father-to-be toward his pregnant companion. According to Ferreira, intrapsychic as well as interpersonal issues can have an abortogenic effect on pregnancy.

Our study revealed a common thread: These father-to-be had been subjected to severe traumatic losses, specifically separations through divorce and deaths in their own families of origin.

We will be presenting four cases studies: it consist in the complex analysis¹ of the life stories told to us by four of the ten men met in the course of our research. Hypotheses about their wish to conceive a child, are based on four different psychic configurations, or ways of dealing with their early Oedipal issues. These were reenacted during their companion's pregnancies.

Case 1: A Child of Divorce

Present Situation

The first man who will be called fictitiously Louis, is living with Lucienne, his companion, who was hospitalised for premature contractions at 32 weeks of gestation, and who delivered an infant who required to remain in an incubator for at least a month.

Family Background

Being the messenger. Louis is 23 years old. He is the older of two siblings. Since early childhood, he witnessed his parents quarrels and their divorce when Louis turned 7. Both Louis and his sister became their parent's messengers. Both mother and father expressed their anger through their children. This situation left Louis hating his father and feeling ambivalent toward his mother. Each parent began a new family soon after the divorce. Louis reported the part-time presence of cherished grand-parents, in particular his maternal grand-mother, during the summer vacation.

Couple Formation and fatherhood for Louis

He chose him. Louis described himself as a passive man. This passivity according to him, is his way of dealing with his life, since in the past, whenever he expressed a wish, it was "never" realized. He is often forced to chose what other people have to offer. For instance, he claims that his companion Lucienne, chose him and when they decided to live together, it is because their common roommate moved to another dwelling.

"Life has chosen me". When Lucienne stopped taking contraceptives, the couple agreed to be careful and the conception of a child appeared "unexpected" to Louis. Conflicts within the couple started then. They were linked to Louis's lack of understanding of Lucienne's need to be reassured and to have a stronger commitments from Louis, in the form of a marriage. Lucienne delivered a son in relatively good health, after 8 months of pregnancy. Although Louis claims he is a happy father, he insists saying: "life that has chosen me". As far as he is concerned, he never wanted to be a father.

Describing the new born as the "saviour" of the couple, Louis has not yet decided whether he will give him his family name. In not doing so, Louis demon-

¹ We are not presenting the methodology as it is not the purpose of this paper.

strates his ambivalence to recognize the baby's existence. BEBE is the universal non identifiable name given to the infant for the present time.

Discussion

The struggle at letting go. For Legendre (1985) becoming a father is a process by which a man gives up his place as a child and as a son. The task requires that the father gives the child the place that he is entitled to. For Louis, we witness a struggle at letting go of his place as a son. Giving the baby the mission of a "saviour", he unloads on the child a task that can hardly be assumed even by adults. We note, that Louis is also using his son to confirm his manhood, competing with his own father, who remarried and has presently a 1 year old son! (sic).

Divorce, trauma and developmental loss. According to Lohr and Chetluk (1989) the loss of parents in cases of divorce, is viewed as a traumatic event in the lives of both children and adults. The child has to grieve over the acute sense of loss experienced at the time of divorce, and also over the way in which the parents have altered their availability, in assisting the child to meet and resolve subsequent developmental tasks. They conclude, that during the Oedipal phase and latency period, boys are likely to experience guilt over Oedipal victory.

Evoking the work of Bowlby and Parker (1960) and Anthony (1974) Lohr and Chetluk concluded that in order to mourn their loss, children need the help of a trusted person to deal with painful affect. Although Louis has mentioned to us the intermittent presence of his grand mother, he is still longing for love and protection and is unable to assume responsibilities.

The passivity and helplessness of Louis, could be related to an inability to deal with the loss of the parental couple, at the time of his parent's divorce. It may also be viewed, as an experience of betrayal from his parents from whom he expected care and protection.

In Louis's case, his inability to mourn loss is experienced as a failure to be in control, an inhibition of personal desire and a fear of rejection. Safety is ensured by waiting for external situations to coincide with the wishes, hence his passivity.

Louis's ambivalent feelings toward the newcomer, the child, and his wish to resume his exclusive relationship with Lucienne are symbolically expressed through his satisfaction at returning home, and his relief that the infant is kept at the hospital in an incubator.

Case 2: The Secret Wish

Present Situation

The second story is about the life of a man whom we will call Jean. Married for 12 years. Jeanine, his first child, was born prematurely. His wife, Jacqueline, is presently hospitalized for a second pregnancy with premature contractions at 32 weeks.

Family background

Grief in the family of origin. Jean is 33 years old man, he is the second born of 4 male siblings. The first born died a few days after delivery. Jean's mother, an active woman who had several miscarriages, became involved with her work, letting several nannies take care of her sons. His father, a rigid man with authoritarian and traditional values, symbolically "died" and "buried himself" with his deceased first born. Until now, he considers manhood, as the raising of sons who will honour and transmit the family name.

During his childhood and adolescence, successfully competing with his younger brothers, Jean tried to be the perfect child while his two brothers were noticed more for their bad behaviour. Nevertheless, he experienced a rejecting mother as well as an absent father.

Couple Formation and Fatherhood for Jean

The secret abortion. When Jean was 19, he fell in love with Jacqueline. He had difficulties convincing her family that he was the quiet, honourable man she needed. Keeping secret the abortion of his first unborn child with Jacqueline, Jean finally succeeded and married her.

The secret wish. Five years later, a little girl was born to the unavowed disappointment of Jean. He secretly wished a son. Nevertheless, Jean needs to describe himself as a good father, different from his own parents. But he also tells us that he and his spouse are working professional, and that most of the time, Jeanine who is now 7 years old, is in fact, cared by her maternal grand-parents. Jean insists that when he is on vacation, he entertains his daughter himself. Showing his need to prove that he is present to his daughter.

Feeling not good enough. Jean feels his family name will not be transmitted since he has girls. This is likely to affect his manhood although he denies it, insisting that this transmission is important only to his father and his in laws . . . Jean explains that both pregnancies, Jeanine, and the present one, were planned. But the couple had to wait many years, in order to ensure enough living space for the family to expand.

Jean has fears at each of his wife's pregnancies: for example, having to do emergency delivery himself, having a handicapped child. Our experience shows us that these fears, could be linked to the fears that each of his parents carried within themselves following the numerous miscarriages and death of their own firstborn.

We also can link Jean's fears to his experience of failure at being the perfect son. He had to endure in silence an abortion of his own first born, without the consoling rituals that help a mourner keep a feeling of belonging.

Discussion

The meaning that could be given to abortion. In a study of abortion, Colin (1988) suggests that conceiving a child is at times unconsciously used as a goal to confirm man's virility. Abortion, on the other hand, is undertaken to insure the man's place as the first loved one in the couple. In Jean's case we could hypothesise that it is a

remnant of early unresolved oedipal issues transferred in his relation with Jacqueline. It seems that as a child, Jean, had to prove himself in a family where both his parents were overwhelmed with mixed feelings toward the surviving children.

On being a replacement child. In her study of parental grief over the death of a child, Schutzenberger (1993) noted that the child who is born after the loss of a previous child, will have great difficulty taking his own place in the family. There is the risk that his parents will use him to replace the lost child.

We can assume that the desire to be the “perfect child” for Jean, is an attempt to compete and fill the void experienced by his parents mourning their first child, to defend against a feeling of being a “not good enough” son.

This feeling seems to be translated in Jean’s continuous wish to prove his manhood. This attempt having failed twice, Jean expresses his anger and disappointment by deciding not to have any other children.

Case 3: I Am a Father-Hen

Present Situation

The third case is about Pierre, a married man, father of a ten-year-old son, whose wife is hospitalized for premature contractions at 34 weeks gestation

Family Background

A wish that came true. Pierre 33, is the second child in a family of 6 siblings. He is close to his mother, who, similar to himself, is private, while his father, an outgoing man, likes to drink. Pierre’s conflictual relationship with his older brother is coloured by jealousy and rivalry.

He confides briefly, and with hesitation that when he was 18 months old, his little brother Christian, only a few months old at the time, swallowed a safety pin. He died on his way to the hospital. Pierre remains silent over his other childhood experiences.

Couple Formation and Fatherhood for Pierre

At 15 Pierre met Genevieve. Three years later, deciding to share their lives, they settled in an apartment in the same building as his mother-in-law. After several unsuccessful attempts at having a child, they moved to Montreal.

“I am a father-hen”. Genevieve, unexpectedly, became pregnant and gave birth to a boy, Mathias, whose delicate health necessitated several hospitalisations and care.

Pierre describes himself as a Father-Hen. Having a night job, he stays at home during the day while his wife works. Living with a constant fear that something terrible might separate him from his son. Pierre seemed drowned by his own needs to protect his son Mathias. His life consists of work, sleeping and taking care of a sick child.

The unwanted child. Pierre admits having gone through a hard time, and after the birth of Mathias, the couple decided not to have more children. With the present pregnancy, the couple was in shock. Because of his moral values, Pierre decided they would keep the baby, but following his wife's suggestion he plans to have a vasectomy. Being the decisions maker Genevieve is an active woman who hardly gives herself time to rest. Pierre perceives her as the wise woman he loves and wants to keep.

Discussion

Death of a child in the family: an intergenerational trauma. In her review of literature on trauma, Brette (1988) concludes that every separation brings back mourning issues as well as past trauma which are reworked in the present. The nature of the mourning will be related to the role of the object at the time of the loss.

We can hypothesize that the early trauma experienced by Pierre and his family, in his early childhood, were reawakened at the birth of his own child, Mathias. He had to be "the mother" of a sick child, preventing himself from sleeping during the day, at the same time as working at night to be the provider. Exploring Pierre's obsessively close relationship with his 10 year-old son, one wonders whether it is not in fact a repetitive traumatic relationship, a reparation, or perhaps a reaction formation: Going back into Pierre's own early childhood, one could consider the event reported to him, (that is the death of his brother), to be a kind of screen memory that condensed infantile experience and forgotten fantasy. In his story telling, Pierre tends to isolate himself emotionally from the painful representation of the loss of his brother. There seems to be confusion in time, the past and the present, revealing a state of distress, a regression. Although Pierre states that his hostility is directed to his older brother, one can hypothesize a latent hostility towards his four siblings whom are seemingly forgotten by him.

We can see in Pierre an ambivalence and an attempt at minimizing or denying the meaning of some events. The excessive protection is over a helpless suffering son.

The work of reparation. M. Klein (1982) has talked about a reparation mechanism where the subject tries to repair the effect of destructive fantasies either through manic or obsessive defense. These latter seem to correspond to Pierre's behaviour toward his son. Pierre is struggling between two contradictory affects: a deadly hostility, a desire for repair and annulation of a past situation. He is partially identified with a mother's role, while he remains a son. He is ready to stop procreating a third child, perhaps unconsciously remembering that in his family of origin the third child died by accident. In Pierre's case having gone through multiple traumas and losses, the process of mourning involved in fatherhood becomes a difficult one: Pierre was unsuccessful at having his mother to himself, he remains ambivalent and filled with guilt. Regressing to a level of a symbiotic relationship with his son is one way to overcome his anguish.

Case 4: My Fathers, Myself

Present Situation

The last case study is about a man, François, who has had three fathers in his life. Living with his companion for about a year, she is presently hospitalised with premature contractions at 31 weeks.

Family Background

Mourning two fathers. François is 20 years old. He was a battered child, mother was the abuser; he has never known his biological father. His mother had two companions, to whom he became very attached. The first companion, Bob, who was also the first father he ever knew, left home when François was 6 years old. François remained attached to him and his half brother. When François turned 13 years old, Bob committed suicide after his own son killed himself with a drug overdose. Although François had been adopted by Marc, the second companion of his mother, he reacted very strongly to the loss of both his half brother and his previous father. Violence was enacted between François and every one who came in his way. He himself was attacked by his mother, and ended up being placed in a correctional school. In a research done on child abuse, De Lauzier (1982) found that inappropriate anger and abusing behaviour of parents towards their children, is intricately related to their own attachment experience. We can assume that François's mother had been struggling with attachment issues, transferring them in her relationship with her son.

Couple Formation and Fatherhood for François

Two years later, François escaped from the correctional school and met an older woman, Julie, with whom he stayed a few months, until he was brought back to the school where he remained until he turned eighteen.

Through his mother, François met his present companion, Myriam who was two years older than him. They decided to live together very rapidly.

The unknown daughter. Six months of a satisfactory common living was followed by François joyous consent to have a child from Myriam. She became pregnant by him. His happiness was interrupted a month later when by chance he met his former girl friend Julie and a 4 year old girl who Julie claimed was his daughter.

The unknown father. Although he was wondering about the possibility of him having conceived a child with Julie, he was surprised, angry, reluctant to acknowledge or see her. François deciding to remain with Myriam, was bleeding inside, because like himself, his daughter will never know who her father was.

Myriam's child. François had wanted to have a child with Myriam. His first reaction when he learned of her pregnancy was to identify with that mother who (at times) cared for him when he was a child. Gradually, recalling the care and support of his adoptive father, he was able to face his future role as a father towards the coming child.

Discussion

Splitting the unbearable experience. In his article on the vicissitudes of psychic loss of a physically present parent, Peter Shabad (1989) concludes that the denied wish for a relationship with a lost parent may be reenacted in the form of imitating that parent's abandoning behaviour. In François's case we witness the reenactment of psychic as well as physical abandonment, and a partial identification between François and his biological father.

François has lived through numerous traumatic losses. Unable to mourn, he repeats the trauma, reliving it instead of remembering it. Splitting the unbearable experience of having to lose significant others, mother, fathers, children as well as repetition of traumatic events, are seen here as François's attempts at integrating his attachments and losses with his three fathers, and his mother. One can hypothesise that he experienced a preverbal trauma related to his mother's psychic unavailability. This made it difficult for François to retain the holding he needed to integrate the bad and good experiences.

Conclusion

Although we cannot generalise the findings we have presented and discussed, they can be found and understood in similar cases. In these cases of "fathers to be", an absent and or rejecting father has been noted, in agreement with Herzog. Unlike Herzog who limits himself to the father/son relationship, early-mother-son relationship has been examined.

We can hypothesize that these mothers were absent due to traumatic events (deaths, divorces in their lives leading to psychic unavailability or what Andre Green (1986) refers to as the "dead mother complex". In his article, Green describes the traumatic experience that the child undergoes, in having a mother who is psychically dead. The sudden change in the mother's attitude, is experienced by the child as a catastrophe, and the child cannot understand its meaning. This situation is followed by an unstable and premature triangulation, a precocious Oedipal complex: because the child, the mother and the unknown object of mother's bereavement are present.

In most cases, the father is psychically absent or indifferent. The child finds himself caught between a symbolically dead mother and an inaccessible father. Green concludes that the effects of the dead mother complex, depend on the timing in the child development and the severity of the traumatic experience.

Fatherhood and the Dead Mother Complex

In the context of the present research and based on the work of Benedek the following hypotheses have been presented: pregnancy is a stage of parenthood where both parents regress to an early stage of development. Naturally this regression will affect the couple dynamic as they will be more prone to transfer their unresolved issues in their relationship.

The life stories we have examined illustrate different aspects of Green's notion of the dead mother complex, and its effect during the developmental stage of

fatherhood, where the reenactment of the oedipus complex becomes an attempt to accomplish the mourning process required for its resolution.

For Louis, becoming a father, repeated a triangular situation, where he experienced severe loss from both parents. They were unavailable, due to their own personal issues and quarrels, which ended in a painful divorce. He defended himself through passivity, idealization, and denial of feelings of helplessness and rage.

He is unable to mourn the loss of an exclusive mother-son relationship and repeats it in his present relationship with his companion continuing to wish to remain a triumphant oedipus in a passive way.

Jean's life seems to be a series of personal intimate failures. Being a father becomes a challenge to prove his manhood. He secretly hides a narcissistic wound, which leaves him feeling damaged, unable to reanimate not only a dead mother but also a dead father, both parents being unable to mourn the death of his first born.

In Jean's case both parents long for that idealised son who died so soon. Filled with anger, the parent's care and attention for their living children, expresses a moral duty that left Jean with a sense of helplessness and rage as well as a feeling of incompleteness.

For Pierre, being a father repeated a triangular relationship where an extremely severe loss affected his family, but also where his anger and death wishes towards his little brother came true. Filled with guilt, he obsessively tries to repair the harm he might do to his son, repeating a symbiotic relationship where him and his child are unable to feel free and separate from each other without feeling damaged.

François's numerous psychic and real losses have left him with an archaic way of defending himself against unbearable pain: splitting his experiences into either good or bad ones. He often finds himself with a feeling of betrayal, as the good experiences become totally bad whenever he feels disappointed by something that does not correspond to his ideal. Betrayal, abandonment and attack from loved object who is suddenly transformed into a bad object leaves him with helplessness and rage. He attempts to master these feelings through repeating the traumatic experience. In becoming a father, François is reversing the roles; he is now the powerful one who can abandon and reject any other member of the triangulated relationship.

Implications

This exploration suggests that both parents are needed for the individual to be able to transmit psychic life from one generation to another.

It also emphasizes the influence of each generation on the other one.

If the father-to-be is unable to ally to his companion pregnancy, how will she adjust to her own developmental stage of parenthood?

In premature contraction for idiopathic reasons, the hypothesis was that these contractions were expressing a psychosomatic acting out linked to the couple dynamics, to a transfer reaction from the mother-to-be, in relation to her companion's attitude towards parenthood, pregnancy and childbirth.

Further research with couples is certainly required.

The aim of the present study is to focus on the importance of prenatal preparation, not only at the physical but also at the intrapsychic and interpersonal level for both the mothers and fathers-to-be, in order to provide the necessary holding to the expectant parents.

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