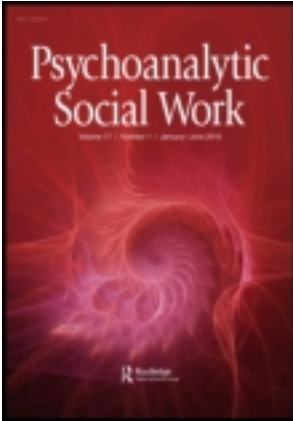


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Psychoanalytic Social Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wpsw20>

### The Changing Role of Fatherhood: The Father as a Provider of Selfobject Functions

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Available online: 07 Oct 2011

To cite this article: Gary L. Dick (2011): The Changing Role of Fatherhood: The Father as a Provider of Selfobject Functions, *Psychoanalytic Social Work*, 18:2, 107-125

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228878.2011.611786>

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## **The Changing Role of Fatherhood: The Father as a Provider of Selfobject Functions**

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*Fatherhood is evolving. The way that men carry out their paternal role is reflective of the historical time era in which they live, social and cultural forces, both the mother and the father's expectations for fathering behaviors, as well as the father's own innate capabilities, wishes, and desires. Fatherhood is also greatly influenced by men's relationships with their own fathers, the quality of that relationship, and the extent to which the father was emotionally available. The ever-changing role of fathers has been a challenge for the psychoanalytic literature. There is no comprehensive theoretical body of knowledge about fatherhood that takes into account the changing nature of fathering, especially considering men's desires to be emotionally responsive and nurturing parents. This article examines the changing role of the father and suggests a model of paternal involvement that expands the nurturing and available father role to include the father as a selfobject. It discusses the importance of understanding men's relationships with their fathers, a central dynamic in shaping fathers' involvement with their children. The residual impact of paternal deprivation is explored, followed by two clinical vignettes that symbolize the search for missing selfobject functions. This article concludes by outlining clinical implications and questions to pose to assess the selfobject relationship with one's father.*

**KEYWORDS** *fatherhood, changing role of fathers, selfobject theory, mirroring, twinship*

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of men as fathers continues to evolve and change over time. Fathering has been viewed as socially constructed, distinctive to a historical era, and culturally unique. Fathering behaviors are continually redefined and negotiated as men balance the external demands of work with their internal constructs of how they want to be as fathers (Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009). As the cultural definition of manhood and fatherhood shifts over time, so has the construct of masculinity and how men embrace the role of fatherhood (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). The role of men in families is being deconstructed and a new male identity is emerging that has redefined the role men play in their families (Day & Lamb, 2004). Given that the determinants of fathering behaviors are culturally influenced and socially constructed, and that they change over time, it is important to recognize the way a man enacts the role of fatherhood is greatly influenced by a multitude of factors, many of which derive from his internal motivations and lived experiences. Fathering also alters in complexity throughout life as both the father and his child continually negotiate external influences and demands with internal needs, drives, and conflicts. Understanding the complexities of men's relationships with their own fathers has been the missing link in understanding how men construct their fathering role. How one was fathered influences how one fathers. The central focus of this article is to discuss the importance of expanding the role of father beyond an idealizing selfobject to being a provider of mirroring and twinship selfobject functions.

## SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

Fatherhood has been described as in a state of crisis and as a work in progress (Miller, 2010). The central polarity of the fatherhood crisis is the emotionally unavailable father and the growing number of children who grow up fatherless; contrasted by those fathers who are totally immersed in fathering and who embrace the role of being an emotionally responsive, nurturing father. This significant shift in the perception of the role of fathers is creating a new father identity, one that is often quite different from one's own father and grandfather. A new father role identity has emerged; one where the father is more emotionally available to his children, more nurturing, more affectionate, and less distant. Most new fathers truly want to be involved in their children's lives (Wall & Arnold, 2007). In a study of young African-American fathers, a central theme that emerged was an idealized father who is a provider, nurturer, and someone who is there for his children (Paschal, Lewis-Moss, & Hsiao, 2011). There has been an emerging de-traditionalization of fatherhood, one in which the perception has expanded from an exclusive view of the father as the distant protector and breadwinner

to the nurturing, actively involved father who is more emotional and intuitive (Minsky, 2000). What has been missing in this transformation of fatherhood is a theoretical framework that supports the important role of father as an emotionally responsive parent. The author proposes a model of fatherhood that suggests the father as a source of selfobject functions; one in which the father provides necessary and important psychological sustenance that serves to solidify the child's sense of self and self-esteem. This perspective requires a shift in the psychoanalytic view of the father as a strong, distant, and powerful symbol to viewing the father as an empathetic, emotionally available self-soothing selfobject who attempts to understand the inner life of his child.

Research supports that father involvement has a profound impact on children. The benefits of father involvement go far beyond the traditional protector, disciplinarian, and good provider roles (Lamb, 1996; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008; Jackson, Choi, & Franke, 2009). Children who experience the physical or psychological absence of the father can suffer from paternal deprivation, a psychological reaction to loss of the father resulting in *father hunger*: a longing to be admired by a wise, compassionate, nurturing and caring father (Herzog, 2001). This sense of loss can extend into adulthood, creating an inner sense of loss and emptiness and conflict in interpersonal relationships. It is what Osherson (1986) refers to as the "wounded father within," a pervasive sense of inner emptiness for those whose fathers were physically or psychologically absent. Father loss in early childhood can leave men feeling half alive, with fears of abandonment and engulfment. When children do not know their father, they create an intrapsychic father, an idealized image of the father they need (Jones, 2007).

Central to understanding the complexities of men's lives and how they enact the father role is an examination of the external forces shaping fatherhood, as well as the couples' expectations, and the internal expectations of how men want to be as fathers. Constructing a father identity is influenced by a multitude of dynamics. LaRossa (1988) described this conflict as the gap between what fathers actually do, the conduct of fatherhood, versus the culture of fatherhood, what is expected of them. The shifting dynamics within the culture of how men should be as fathers and the conduct of fatherhood—that is, how men actually carry out their paternal role—is often a source of internal psychological tension. Father identity and the thoughts men have about themselves as fathers influence fathering behaviors. In their research on mothers' and fathers' expectations of father involvement, it was found that both parents' expectations are substantial predictors of instrumental involvement, and that fathers' expectations were stronger in predicting their affective involvement (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005). While the culture provides an ideology for how men should be as fathers, and the couples' personal expectations influence fathers' behaviors with their children, another dynamic force that often goes unrecognized is that of men's

relationships with their own fathers. For some adult men, the psychological exploration of one's relationship with one's father opens a deep wound; and yet as painful as this may be, men can benefit from coming to terms with their ambivalent feelings surrounding their fathers (Osherson, 1986). The physical or psychological presence or absence of the father is a central dynamic in understanding how men construct their father role. As men explore their subjective inner experience of their relationships with their fathers, a stronger sense of self can emerge as they come to understand what they got from their fathers and what they didn't get, but felt they needed (Osherson, 1986). This internal exploration of men's relationships with their own fathers serves to integrate the social and cultural forces that form the idealized image of fatherhood with men's own internal subjective relationship with their fathers.

### PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS OF FATHERHOOD

Psychoanalytic concepts have contributed to the idea that fathers are important to the psychological inner world of children, but much of the psychoanalytic thinking has focused on the father's role in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and rarely as a source of selfobject functions that serve to provide necessary psychological functions for a strong and solid sense of self. In Freud's conceptualization of the father's role in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the role of the father was to serve as a patriarchal representation of the culture whose primary task was to disrupt the child from the blissful union with the mother (Freeman, 2008). As the young boy denounces his intense merged state of being with the mother out of fear of the father, he begins to idealize the father and turns to the world of reality. For Freud, the identification with the father was easier for boys than girls, who have less to gain from the father than boys (Minsky, 2000). The symbolic father according to Freud breaks up the bliss with the mother and helps the child make the transition from a state of merged oneness with the mother into a triangle that includes the father, thus making the child an outsider, who eventually comes to accept that he can never possess the mother. The identification with the father ushers in the laws and the constraints of the culture, and allows the child to grow up. Freud saw the father as representing the reality principle; his presence instilling cultural inhibitions. The child learns to tolerate frustration, to cope more creatively, and give up the omnipotent incestuous fantasies, and most importantly not to murder those who get in the way of one's desires (Minsky, 2000). This orthodox psychoanalytic view of fathers marginalized them from the emotional fabric of family life and ignored their potential to serve important psychological and emotional functions in the development of a self-structure for their children.

Psychoanalytic thinking has traditionally portrayed the father as a patriarchal distant symbolic figure that is at the periphery of family life. This view of the powerful distant father has excluded fathers from the intimacy of family life, as if the patriarchal father has been exiled from meeting any of the emotional needs of the children (Freeman, 2008). If the father is emotionally available to help the child resolve the Oedipus complex, then his emotional presence allows the child to separate from the mother without much loss and anger (Minsky, 2000). The view within psychoanalytic thinking is that the distant father serves an important role in psychosexual development by disrupting the incestuous attachment with the mother. From a self psychological perspective, the distant and emotionally remote father would not be present to provide necessary types of experiences, such as warmth, empathy, and emotionality that would, in turn, support the child being in a selfobject relationship with the father.

### THE FATHER AS SELFOBJECT

In addition to the symbolic father creating a triangle in the mother-child union and introducing the child to the reality of the culture, the father can also be present for the emergence and maintenance of the child's sense of self. The selfobject experience is not an interpersonal relationship, but an intrapersonal one, where the selfobject is experienced subjectively and is necessary for the development and maintenance of the self's structure. Not only is it important that the father is the idealized father, but he needs to serve twinship and mirroring selfobject needs.

Kohut's (1977) theory of the self provided an understanding of the inner psychological world of the individual. This inner world of feelings, thoughts, fantasies, and wishes is observed within ourselves through the process of introspection, and in others through empathy. Vicarious introspection is the human capacity for empathy, and allows for a father to deeply understand the inner world of his child. Self psychology provides an explanation of how fathers and mothers can shape and influence the child's self-esteem and identity by providing empathic responses. I propose that the quality of the father-child relationship is an inevitable part of the development of a psychological self-structure, despite the fact that it continues to be ignored in most of the literature on fatherhood. For children to grow into healthy adults, they need certain empathic responses from parents. A father who is empathic is more likely to understand the inner emotional life of his child. In contrast, fathers who primarily fulfill their role through intellect, problem solving, and teaching may help the child understand the world around him, but without empathy, can offer little in the way of helping the child understand himself.

This emotional knowing and empathic understanding of the child's inner life not only serves as a promoter of positive self-esteem, but places the

father as the person the child seeks out for comfort, nurturing, and reassurance. In a study of adult men's self-esteem and relationships with their own fathers, men with high self-esteem had significantly different types of relationships with their fathers than men who had lower self-esteem (Dick & Bronson, 2005). The men with high self-esteem reported their fathers as highly involved with them and emotionally available. They viewed their fathers as more accessible and more nurturing than the group of men with low self-esteem. They perceived their fathers as more loving, understanding, encouraging, comforting, and affectionate. The men with high self-esteem reported that their fathers were more likely to praise them, talk to them about their problems, tell them that they loved them and make them feel special, more so than the men with low self-esteem (Dick & Bronson, 2005).

Empathy is central to self psychology and these empathic responses promote the processes whereby the child utilizes the father to serve needed selfobject functions. Selfobjects are mental representations that are necessary for self-esteem. The formulation of the self is dependent upon the caretakers in the child's environment being able continually to provide certain psychological responses that support the child's emerging sense of self. These selfobject functions are (1) mirroring, (2) idealizing, and (3) twinship. *Mirroring* is the need of the child to feel admired, recognized, affirmed, accepted, and appreciated by a loving, emotionally responsive parent. *Idealizing* is the psychological need to be part of, or linked to, an admired and respected other, such as the father (Bacal, 1992). *Twinship* is a basic psychological merger experience where the child desires likeness with a stable, wise, and calm idealized other. For example, watching a child push a toy lawnmower while walking behind his father while he is cutting the grass is a behavioral manifestation of *idealizing* and *twinship*. According to Kohut, the quest for self-esteem becomes central to personality development.

Identity theory and self psychology suggest that adult men's relationships with their fathers will have a significant impact on their relations with others, including with their own children. If certain aspects of the father-son relationship are associated with higher self-esteem, then it is important to identify those factors and work to increase those paternal behaviors in future generations. This shift in conceptualizing the father beyond an idealized selfobject to a provider of mirroring and twinship functions is more in line with contemporary identity schemas of fathers, and more aligned with what research indicates as contributing to higher self-esteem.

## PATERNAL DEPRIVATION

Paternal deprivation results from the real or perceived loss of the father. It is the lack of a psychological experience of a meaningful father relationship. The father may remain in the home with the child and be physically present,

but not provide selfobject functions. The father is experienced by the child as emotionally unavailable, as detached, aloof, distant, and disengaged. In some situations the child has minimal contact with the father, or may have never known his father. This is contrasted with the father who is physically available and provides many fathering behaviors that support the child's development, such as being a good provider, showing interest in the child's schoolwork, being a disciplinarian, and being involved in activities with the child, though nevertheless being incapable of an emotional connection. Instead, these fathers interact with their children in an intellectual and cognitive way. The children of such fathers remain emotionally unknown to them. Paternal deprivation is an internal subjective experience of the relationship with the father. Regardless of whether the father was unknown, dead, living in the home, or abandoned the child, the one dynamic that crosses all forms of father loss is that the father is unavailable as a selfobject and therefore fails to contribute psychic energy toward the psychological self-structure of the child.

Paternal deprivation can be derived from the father physically abandoning his children following a divorce, incarceration, or by death. The central characteristic of physical abandonment is that he is both physically and emotionally inaccessible. It is especially painful for the child when the father chooses to disengage. In these cases it is important to understand the quality of the father-child relationship up to the time of abandonment, and the circumstances leading up to his physical disappearance. The father as a potential attachment figure to offer security in times of danger, fear, and loss is now nonexistent, and he is unavailable to contribute to the formation and maintenance of a cohesive sense of self. The father as a source of admiration, twinship, and idealizing has been lost to circumstances beyond the child's control. When a father abandons his child, the vitalizing and soothing experiences that once could have emulated from him leave the child vulnerable in times of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. The need to merge with a wise, strong, and calm selfobject leaves the child searching for empathic responses to thwart off any threats of disintegration in order to restore self-cohesion. The course of this trajectory is a central issue in therapy with men who experience paternal deprivation.

Paternal deprivation also originates from emotional abuse by the father. When a child is shamed and humiliated by the father, there is an emotional cutoff and the father is avoided as a source of self-esteem. When the father emotionally maltreats a child, the tendency is for the child to protect himself or herself by buffering and distancing from the relationship. The prolonged separation from the father in this situation tends to be the choice of the child. Pervasive empathic failures coupled with emotional abuse create a syndrome that includes struggles maintaining self-esteem, and hypersensitivity to criticisms and disappointments. Paternal deprivation is the residual consequence of child abuse and neglect. There are two dimensions of emotional abuse:

on one pole is overt abuse and neglect; it is fundamentally intentional. The intent is to inflict harm, to hurt, and to cut off all and any attempts to comfort, soothe, and protect the child physically or psychologically. On the other end of the pole is covert emotional abuse, where the abuse is denied, minimized, or guised in a way that the harm inflicted upon the child is portrayed as something good for them. It may be rationalized as a form of teaching where the parent tells the child they were forced to do it in order to keep them in line. The child may be told that it is for his or her own good. What is so costly emotionally in this kind of paternal deprivation is that the child, even long into adulthood, may keep returning to the “dry well” in hopes of having emotional needs met, by attempting to engage the father emotionally.

Another form of paternal deprivation emerges out of the father’s psychological distance or his emotional unavailability. The father’s own narcissistic injury, his depression, addictions, or distraction with his own inner life leaves him emotionally unknown and unavailable to his children and them to him. In a longitudinal study of 235 fathers, researchers found that the father’s drinking and his depression had a negative impact on children’s adjustment leading to externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Furthermore, in examining the father within the context of the family, the father’s depression and drinking were associated with marital conflict, which then was related to a decrease in positive paternal parenting (Schacht, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). Children’s externalizing and internalizing symptoms were related to emotional insecurity, which is indicative of a diminished degree of emotional availability from the father, and possibly also from the mother as a result of the marital conflict. When the father is emotionally unavailable, needs for mirroring, idealizing, and twinship create a state of paternal deprivation characterized by a longing for the admired, beloved, and longed-for idealized father.

The situation is quite different when the child does not know his father. In the above types of paternal deprivation it is assumed that the child has had some meaningful physical and psychological contact with the lost father. In many situations where the child does not know the father, he only hears about him through the stories of other adults. On the other hand, if either the father fails to acknowledge paternity, or the mother fails to establish paternity, the child has no actual memory of the father. In both situations, the child is left to conceive an image and relationship with the father through fantasy.

The effects of being paternally abandoned can last far into adulthood and leave the individual longing for an admired, loving, wise, calm, and understanding father figure. Herzog (2009) points out that the self develops as another self-seeking structure and in an interactive relationship with the mother, an interactive relationship with the father, and an interactive relationship with both the mother and the father.

## CASE EXAMPLES

## Frank

Frank grew up with an abusive father in a chaotic home with his mother and 10 siblings. When Frank was age seven, his father was convicted of child abuse and served time in prison. He reported memories of beatings by his father, where his father would break up the babies' beds and use the spindles to beat him and his siblings. Frank recalled that one particular time when his father was beating him, "I looked into his eyes and he looked as if he wanted to kill me. I thought he was going to kill me." Frank stated that the "beating didn't stop until the spindle broke." At the age of 10, shortly after Frank's father was released from prison, the beatings began again. Child welfare investigated the case and once again substantiated child abuse. A few weeks later Frank's father hung himself in the basement while all the children were home. He recalled looking out of his bedroom window and watching his father go out of the home on a gurney with a sheet over his body.

As Frank became more aggressive, he was placed in residential treatment. As he recalled the "horrible aggressive behaviors" he exhibited while in placement, he seemed bewildered, wondering why he was not terminated from placement and sent to jail. When Frank was a freshman in high school he was constantly sent to the principal's office due to fighting with other boys. For Frank, this began what was to become a long history of sexual abuse. He shared that the principal would have him stay after school, where he would talk to him about his behavior. It was in these disciplinary meetings that Frank was sexually abused. He knew the sexual abuse was wrong, but he felt guilty because he kept going back. He recalled that when he was with the principal in his office alone, that it felt "calm," that he "gave me attention" and that "he was kind to me and really cared for me."

During his teen years, Frank began to abuse drugs and alcohol. His mother was unable to manage his behavior and began to distance herself from him. Frank found a family in the gang of boys he hung out with in his community. Frank revealed that his aggression began to escalate. He got into dealing drugs and reported that during one particular drug deal gone wrong, the person purchasing the drugs refused to pay. Frank and his friends went to the school and found the boy in a crowd of students on the playground. Frank's friend pulled out a shotgun and aimed it at the crowd. Frank took the shotgun from his friend and fired into the crowd. He fired high and no one was hurt, but, as he said, "Nonetheless, someone could have been killed." Frank was sent to prison. When I asked him if he had wanted to kill someone, he responded, "I don't know. I didn't hate anyone in particular. I just hated everybody."

Early in therapy he reported that he went "looping"; that is, he cruised the parks looking for men to have sex with. Frank had criteria about the

men he would pick up. First, they had to be between the ages of 45 and 55. If they were not within that age range, "they don't even count." As Frank recalled his looping, he reported that the men had to want him, they had to pursue him. Then he paused and, reflecting, observed, "They have to make me *feel wanted*." Frank was asked to recall a time when an experience with a man was more meaningful. Without any sense of hesitancy, Frank recalled, "He was older, of course, and he kept calling me his boy. He told me what to do, he kept telling me what to do. He took control. He was in charge. He kept calling me his boy."

This case exemplifies the importance of assessing the psychological impact of paternal deprivation. Frank was narcissistically impaired and presented with a fragmented self that was in need of mirroring in order to shore up a fragile sense of self and low self-esteem. His need for admiration from older men reflected his attempt to feel admired, worthy, and calm. Frank also sought out merger needs. When he recalled the story of the older man telling him what to do and taking charge, it presents a clear picture of his deep need for merger. When he was told, "You're my boy," Frank experienced an internal belonging, that subjective sense of being connected to someone more powerful and strong. The fact that he saw the man as "in control" helps us understand on a deeper experience the self-fragmentation Frank experienced. Frank's father failed to provide the calmness that Frank needed, and was unavailable to soothe Frank, possibly because he never experienced this with his own father. Frank's need for mirroring, twinship, and idealizing selfobject functions was most illuminated when he described what I provided for him that was helpful. "It is not so much what you say, but no matter what I am talking about, you always look at me as if you are trying to understand me." Once when I was leaving for an extended vacation, Frank commented, "I feel like we have been on this calm island together as a swirling sea rages around us. Why do you have to jump off the rock?"

When a father is unable to provide empathic responses, and mirror back to the child his sense of greatness, and when he fails to serve as a self-soothing object that can contain the child's anxieties and fears, we often see aggression. We see this in the case of Frank, who was unable to contain his aggressive impulses. When the emotionally absent father fails to provide the necessary self-soothing functions, and resorts to abusing his child, the child is at risk for internalizing and merging into the father's anger and aggression. In Frank's case, his sense of paternal deprivation was pervasive. His father physically abandoned Frank and his siblings via his suicide. He abused all of the children and was psychologically and emotionally unavailable as a selfobject. Frank behaviorally sought out what he needed emotionally. He liked the "calmness" of the principal's office; he had a deep need for mirroring, and the men had to "make him feel wanted."

## Josh

Josh grew up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood and was the only child of a successful businessman and his wife. Josh's mother and father had worked together since their early twenties, building their business. I first began to see Josh when he was 9 and continued to see him in therapy until after he graduated from college at the age of 24. Josh's father and mother provided an enriched environment for Josh. The family structure was consistent, stable, and predictable.

Josh was initially seen as oppositional defiant, depressed, and unable to control angry outbursts. His outbursts created problems at school, on the playground, and on his sports teams. Josh would argue with the teachers as if he were always trying to get them to see his point of view. It felt as if Josh was always trying to be heard, to be understood, or to have someone see his side of the story. Josh would become easily frustrated over not being understood or not heard, at which times he was unable to internally calm himself. He would often say he felt like he was going to explode. Despite his anger, depression, and argumentative interpersonal style, Josh excelled in school and was athletic, playing on several sports teams during middle and high school. He was outgoing and social, but internally, Josh was in anguish. He lived with an inner feeling of deadness, and felt as if his parents did not believe in him and did not appreciate him as their only son.

Both of Josh's parents were overtly critical of him. They tended to get in power struggles around daily chores he was required to do, and lost sight of the importance of remaining emotionally comforting to Josh. Josh's father was a likeable man. He loved his son and spent time with him fishing, taking him to sports events, and exposing him to an array of cultural and social experiences. He would do anything for his son. They traveled the world and Josh spent time after college backpacking through Europe. Yet, Josh felt as if his father and his mother did not accept him. He felt that their criticism of him was unwarranted, and that they failed to see any good in him. The parents would worry about Josh's homework, his lateness to class, his chores, how clean his room was, and a host of other things. Josh felt as if he could not do anything right. In one particular session when he was 16, Josh finally broke down and cried. He looked up and said, "I wish my father would see the good in me."

Josh had ambivalent feelings toward his father. His father meant well, and with his success in business he was able to supply Josh with all the things any young man would want. He was afforded a good education and the trips with his father provided him time to bond and enjoy time with him. However, it was the criticism that contributed to Josh's depression, his feelings of inadequacy, and a sense of inner deadness. During one therapy session when he was about 11 years old, Josh was building an aqueduct with wooden toys. I quietly watched as he built this elaborate labyrinth stretching

from the couch to the floor. It was a perfectly designed aqueduct, and as Josh rolled the marble down the aqueduct, I noticed he accidentally, ever so slightly, moved a piece of the aqueduct, which did not allow the marble to go the entire length of this maze. I quietly commented to Josh that he accidentally bumped a piece of the maze with his knee. At that moment, Josh was furious at me for insulting him and telling him what to do. At that moment, I realized I had done to Josh what his father had been doing and became aware that even in my calm attempt to help him find success, Josh experienced my comment internally as critical and judgmental.

Josh's father was a problem solver for his son. He was always encouraging him to have a plan, to set goals, and to achieve at some task. In doing so, Josh always felt as if he was not good enough and, no matter what he achieved, he felt internally inadequate. Josh's father gave to Josh what had been given to him—unrelenting criticism. Josh's father grew up with a critical and emotionally unavailable father, which to some extent was a driving dynamic force in Josh's father's pursuit of success. His own sense of paternal deprivation took on a trajectory of achievement, success, and wealth. As Josh got older he became more insightful of his family dynamics and commented in therapy how hard he observed his father trying to impress his paternal grandfather when the latter came to their home for holiday celebrations. He also was cognizant that no matter how hard his father attempted to win his own father's approval, it never seemed to work. Josh was angry because his father was doing to him what his grandfather did to his father.

The empathic failures and the lack of understanding from Josh's father—and in this case his mother—contributed to a deep sense of narcissistic injury for Josh. The father's inability to calm Josh and his rage over his defiance only further contributed to Josh's fragile sense of self. Josh was in need of a selfobject relationship where his idealized needs for merger could be met in a calm and soothing manner. Following college all of Josh's friends moved away and he lost several selfobject relationships. Josh moved back home and took his first job. Unfortunately, Josh's first supervisor was critical, demanding, and judgmental, and fired Josh. Once again, Josh did not develop a selfobject relationship due to the lack of mirroring that supported his potential, talents, and ambitions. The criticism and rejection that was mirrored back to Josh left him resisting most of his father's attempts to engage him. Josh protected himself by putting distance in the relationship. Following the loss of his job, it was very hard for Josh to set realistic goals. He seemed to be adrift, searching for something more than a job. Josh was searching for an empathetic selfobject relationship that could shore up and sustain his fragile self-structure.

I worked with the parents throughout my therapy with Josh, interspersed with individual parental sessions, couples sessions, and family therapy. I attempted to provide them with acceptance, understanding, and compassion, while calmly sharing with them what I believed Josh needed emotionally

from them. It was a challenge to repeatedly hear all of their criticisms of Josh. Following the aqueduct session, I met with Josh's father to help him understand Josh's internal reaction to some of the comments that were meant to be helpful, but were experienced by Josh as criticism. The parents struggled with parental self-esteem. Their negative views of Josh and their criticism reflected to Josh an internal self state of "you are not good enough, no matter how hard you try." In return, it was hard for Josh to be empathic and loving toward his parents and, as he grew older, his hurt and anger signaled to Josh's father his own failures as a parent. As a family system, quests for mirroring selfobject needs were repeatedly thwarted by anger, criticism, and emotional abuse. The father and mother viewed the therapist as their partner in helping raise Josh. Josh's father would often relate to me what he thought the next goal was for Josh to work on and what tasks needed to be accomplished in order to meet the next achievement. I always listened warmly and empathized with his concerns, and would then wonder together with him what Josh needed emotionally before he could achieve "these most important tasks to be successful." As Josh's father felt more supported and understood by the therapist, he began to acknowledge Josh's depression and low self-esteem. As he did so, his wishes for his son began to include "to be happy and content, and to *know* he is a good person."

As Josh grew older and shared deeper levels of father rejection, I would empathize with his feelings, and then empathize how difficult it must be for his father to "not be able to get it right." As the father transference developed I was cognizant that I was providing the psychological sustenance of mirroring and twinship. As I did so, Josh became calmer and also more depressed. As his guard came down, he allowed himself to go deeper into more depleted inner states and the sense of loss he experienced in his relationship with his father, and more recently the loss of a girlfriend, and a circle of friends following graduation from college. As his real self emerged, in all of its depleted emptiness, so did his potential and all of his ambitions. As he became more accepting and compassionate toward himself, he also became more accepting and compassionate toward his father.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE

Using a self psychological framework within psychotherapy, the therapist needs to be extremely accepting and to avoid as much as humanly possible any and all judgments, condemnation, confrontation, and criticism. Acceptance is conveyed by using both empathy and interpretation. For self psychologists understanding includes not only our intellectual understanding of the individuals' internal world through interpretation, but also emotional attunement driven by empathy, based on emotional knowing. Interpretation verbally conveys to the patient the therapists' understanding of their

internal world. Interpretation includes all the intentional activities, including both verbal and nonverbal, that are performed by the therapist to restore self-cohesion (Chernus, 1994). Men who enter therapy with issues related to their distant and emotionally unavailable fathers can benefit from the therapist's use of empathy as an affective response, and as a prolonged process of understanding the individuals' internal subjective experience (Chernus, 1994). Both interpretation and empathy serve to provide a self-object relationship, one which responds to naturally emerging mirroring, idealizing, and twinship needs. This kind of empathic attunement allows the father to be known emotionally and for him to become conscious of what was missing and needed psychologically as he was growing up. In using the empathic mode there is always some selfobject need being met (Chernus, 2000).

Men often come to therapy with issues related to the father; however, in adult men, the relationship with the father is hardly ever presented as the initial focus of psychotherapy. Presenting problems often center on depression, and/or are most likely described as an inner sense of deadness, or a sense of not feeling alive. Other presenting problems are more interpersonal in nature and tend to be associated with relationship tension, both at work and within an intimate relationship. Underlying the relationship tension are themes ranging from not feeling appreciated, feelings of being criticized, shamed, and/or not being noticed, all of which have created interpersonal conflict and internal tension. The father-child relationship is never exclusive, and the degree of narcissistic injury is also dependent upon the relationship with the mother and other important people in the child's life. A cohesive self-structure fails to develop when a father continually fails to provide empathic responses. The abusive father in the case of Frank, who eventually committed suicide, and Josh's father's relentless criticism of him provide examples of both overt and more subtle forms of empathic failures that lead to a fragmented self. Both fathers failed to provide the selfobject functions necessary for the development of the tripolar self.

Empathic failures are normal and unavoidable, yet when the father grossly fails to provide the necessary selfobject functions that the child needs, or overtly condemns, criticizes, or abuses and rejects, then an adequate self-structure will not develop. Despite a mother's empathic attunement, the father's unavailability as an emotionally responsive and understanding parent may override the mother's emotional responsiveness and leave the child with a vague sense of inner emptiness, a lack of purpose and direction, a lack of zest in life, a sense of futility, boredom, and/or a lack of energy and focus. Josh did not have the energy to complete a résumé, and could not decide on a direction to take in life despite the fact that he had graduated from college with a marketable degree. His depression was described as inner emptiness; he felt tired, lacked focus, and felt as if he were "not good enough."

"It is primarily the *impact* of the consistent communication of our understanding of the patient's experience that self psychologists see as

promoting internal change, because it fosters the development of selfobject transferences which become internalized in the form of new and/or modified psychic structures” (Chernus, 2000, p. 342). Josh’s frequent breaks from therapy, coupled by his return home to live with his parents, were barriers to consistent selfobject transference. Josh was unable to develop an adversarial relationship with his parents without the cost of emotional distance and criticism. As the ongoing parent/child problems repeatedly surfaced in therapy, it was a challenge for the therapist to stay in the empathic mode. The family dynamics were driven by the latest disappointment in Josh, coupled by the demands of the parents to “fix” Josh, or to “come up with a plan.” Yet, despite these challenges, as the therapist remained in the empathic mode, Josh went deeper into aspects of the self that were inhibiting him from reaching his dreams and desires.

Development begins with the nuclear self and expands into the tripolar self along three lines of early narcissism: grandiosity, idealization, and twinship. A positive mirroring experience provides the individual with a feeling of admiration and acceptance; whereas it is through the twinship experience that the father provides the child with an likeness and mutual admiration. When these selfobject needs are less than what is desired and needed, they inhibit an idealized selfobject relationship with the father (Pauchant & Colette, 2005). The child may buffer himself or herself from the cold, cruel, indifferent, and emotionally abusive father. From a self psychology perspective, we can understand the internal needs of the individual, and through acceptance, empathy, and interpretation position ourselves within the therapeutic relationship to be available as a selfobject.

### ASSESSING THE SELFOBJECT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER

Assessment of the selfobject relationship should begin by incorporating the domains outlined by Jones (2007). Specifically, it is important to determine the father’s ability to function as an important selfobject, the quality of the attachment to the father, and nature and quality of the paternal representation. There are two dimensions of exploring men’s relationships with their fathers. The first dimension is to determine how it impacts their sense of self, their male identity, their father role, and the degree to which paternal deprivation exists. The second dimension involves a more in-depth analysis by determining the quality of the relationship with the father and the way in which any aspects of paternal deprivation are manifested.

To bring the father issue to the forefront of psychotherapy the therapist should consider asking the following questions:

- “Can you tell me about your father?” This allows the individual to begin to think about his father and construct a story about how he sees him and how he wants him to be. The response may not be reflective of his

feelings regarding his father, but the story that is told begins a process in which the therapist may become empathically attuned to the client's internal experience.

- “Can you tell me about your relationship with your father?” This introduces an emotional component to the process of introspection. As one father told me, “There was none.”
- “Can you share with me a memorable experience that you had with your father?” This provides an opportunity for the subjective experience of the relationship to emerge within the therapy. One father responded with a story of going fishing with his father at age 10. He told a story of trying to throw the fishing line into the lake when it got stuck on a bush. His father's rage poured down upon him. As he began to tell the story, he began to cry, stating, “Now I know why I have always been so fearful of trying anything new in life.”
- “Did you feel that your father emotionally knew you?” This question opens the door for a deeper exploration of the father as a selfobject.
- “Did your father tell you that he loved you?” This provides a deep understanding into the emotional expressiveness of the father. It is important to understand the cultural and historical area in which the father grew up. It is also a question that leaves the man thinking about what that meant to have his father tell him he loved him or not. As one father told me, “He never said he loved me, but I knew it. It was just something I knew inside of me.”
- “What did it feel like being in your father's presence?” This is a powerful question that gives insight into the man's subjective internal experience of the relationship. Often this question evokes strong feelings both positively and negatively. Some men are immediately responsive and emphatically state in a clear and explicit manner what it felt like for them. Other men are less reflective and at times hesitant to think about the question because of the feelings that may emerge. One man remarked, “I felt like my father had disgust for me, so how did I feel in his presence? I felt like I was not the son my father wanted.”
- “Did you feel accepted by your father?” Regardless of how each man responds to the question, it is not just the therapist's intellectual understanding that is important to convey, but his/her ability to convey empathy that is significantly therapeutic. The therapist's understanding and acceptance of the client's feelings provides the important mirroring experience of being accepted unconditionally. As one father in therapy told me, “I get what you are saying to me intellectually, and I will respond to that, but what meant something to me emotionally was how you said it, and how you conveyed you understood. I feel emotionally known and cared about. That was something I did not get from my father. This bad boy felt loved and acceptance from you. Bad boys need to be loved too.”

- “Did he understand you?” This question evokes recollection and introspection. Often times the man will respond with a quick, yes or no. At that point ask the client to give an example of when they felt understood or not understood by their father. As the man is sharing his experience, the therapist must realize that the important therapeutic task is to convey back what is you understand and with empathy. You in essence provide the understanding they didn’t get, or you confirm their experience of being understood, of being known internally to their father. One father in a wheelchair responded, “When I was a child my father had no idea what it was like for me to be in a wheelchair, nor did he understand how I felt when I watched him play sports with my athletic younger brother”.
- “What did you need from him that you did not get?” This is a question that he may have never heard spoken, but something most men immediately can respond to. It is as if they have been waiting a long time for someone to ask them this question? Some responses have included: “time”, attention”, “to notice me”, “to believe in me”, to guide me”, “to talk to me”, “to show up”, to stay alive”, and teach me about how to do things”. This question will be one that will be re-worked throughout the process of therapy, and hopefully, the father understands what was not given to him, is something his own children need from him.

All of these questions allow for the therapist to assess the quality of the selfobject relationship, the level of attachment to the father, and how the father was internalized. This places the father issue at the forefront of psychotherapy, and opens the door for the therapist to position himself or herself in a selfobject relationship as a provider of those psychological needs that were missing.

## CONCLUSION

What has been missing in both the literature on fatherhood and in the psychoanalytic literature is the conceptualization of the father as a mirroring and twinship selfobject. It is now recognized that many new fathers want to be involved with their children in nurturing and emotional ways, and most do not want to embrace this role expansion while forsaking other more traditional fathering roles. Other fathers want to be emotionally available to their children because their fathers were not and they know what was missing in their own relationships with their fathers and want to provide that to their children.

Further exploration is needed to more fully understand why a more comprehensive theory of the nurturing father has not been developed, one that posits the father as a source of emotional sustenance and who is important in the psychological life of his children. It is quite possible that the

theoretical constraints and the implicit professional boundaries of each discipline that researches fatherhood are constrained by their own self-imposed limitations. Those scholars who examine fatherhood from a social-cultural perspective do so at the risk of minimizing the in-depth psychological perspective offered from psychoanalytic thinking and vice versa. In addition, the social construct of gender roles may in part prohibit scholars from examining the roles of mothers and fathers beyond strict lines of masculinity and femininity. Freeman (2003) eloquently argues that we are in a cultural crisis surrounding fatherhood and that any conceptualization of fatherhood that undermines the authority and patriarchy of the symbolic father ignores the cultural reality of paternal intimacy. If the culture fails to function as a selfobject and only supports fathers as protectors, disciplinarians, and breadwinners, and not as selfobjects, then it is likely that what comes naturally for some men (that is, their ability to love and nurture their children) ignores the realities of contemporary culture. As scholars we continue to ignore the complexities of fatherhood and negate men's abilities to nurture their children and their responsibility for partaking in the emotional development of their children.

Self psychology provides a theoretical framework to support the further enhancement of the nurturing father role and provides an in-depth understanding of what is needed for the development of a self-structure. The external world may experience less conflict if the internal worlds of more people were in less conflict, and if the psychological and emotional needs of individuals were better understood and attended to with deeper levels of empathy, coupled with interpretations that conveyed acceptance. Fatherhood is complex; it is both instrumental and expressive. Fatherhood is shaped by cultural expectations, by men's relationships with their own fathers, and the needs, wants, and desires that men have as fathers. Understanding the internal world of men and their relationships with their fathers can be the first step in the professional migration of psychoanalytic thinking toward the important role of fathers in the emotional lives of their children.

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