

The paradigm of unity in prenatal education and pedagogy

ABSTRACT

The traditional approach to the relation between parents and their prenatal child presents the child as a fetus, a mainly passive recipient of the mother's vital biological resources. Contemporary prenatal psychology and pedagogy recognizes this relationship in a quite different perspective: the prenatal child is a member of the family and may be seen as an active member of the wider family as a community, extended to grandparents and other relatives. Between parents and their child in the womb exists a reciprocal relationship at a physiological (hormonal), psychological and spiritual level. The prenatal child communicates with the parents in different ways and reacts to their stimulation (acoustic, tactile, loco-motoric, chemo-receptive, thermo-receptive, and emotional). This dialogue of the parents and their prenatal child enriches each member of the family community. In this sense, the prenatal child is a gift and a challenge for the parents to develop their personality, social competences and spiritual life. The reflections presented in this paper fit the conception of the paradigm of unity applied into the area of prenatal education and prenatal pedagogy as a new pedagogical subdiscipline.

The concept of *paradigm* in the philosophy of science was introduced by T. Kuhn (1962). In his understanding, *paradigm* means a mental breakthrough in the way of ujmowaniu/describing/approaching the subject of study, and/or in

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the research methods used, but above all in the theoretical and systemic vision of reality, which is the basis for formulating research questions and hypotheses, operationalising the research procedure, analyzing the obtained research results and a theoretical interpretation of these results. To Kuhn, a paradigm may be understood in such way only in the natural sciences, when new visions of the studied natural reality appear. This is accompanied by a mental change in the cognitive schema itself of understanding reality not only for the creator of this vision, but also in its/his/her broader scientific environment. Kuhn considered the most eminent example of such appearing paradigm in the history of science to be the Copernican revolution, thanks to which the view on the world of nature surrounding the human being has completely changed and there was a mental breakthrough in the 15th and 16th century not only in the area of science, but also in the worldview of people of those times, for whom the world has become more open and broad. Kuhn, however, did not consider a paradigm to be a methodological concept in the humanities or social sciences. He was of the opinion that they must first mature more and make their methodological status more precise if one wishes to talk about a paradigm in these sciences.

A scientific event that gave an occasion to reflect on the possibility of introducing the concept of paradigm into social sciences was the occasion of granting the title of doctor *honoris causa* in the field of social sciences by the Catholic University of Lublin to Chiara Lubich. The Focolare movement, also called The Movement of Unity, founded and led by her, introduced, a new approach to the area of human relations at every level (interpersonal, family, local society, economic relations, intra- and inter-denominational dialogue). The arguments for granting the title included the fact that the practical activity of Ch. Lubich in various areas of social integration may be described as a Copernican revolution in the cultural-religious relations, and even in social-economical ones, according to the new paradigm, understood practically, which may be called a *paradigm of unity*. It was stressed that these activities may play a serious/significant inspiring role in the methodological reflections on the *paradigm of unity* in the social sciences (Biela, 1996). Such reflections were actually brought up first generally in the social sciences (Biela, 2006), and then within the methodology of psychology (Biela, 2009) and education (Kozubek, 2009). At present, one may consider introducing this paradigm into prenatal education and pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: *prenatal education and pedagogy, paradigm of unity, child, family*

PARADIGM OF UNITY IN PRENATAL EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY

In the context of general methodological discussions, I would like to propose a /reflection on the methodological aspects of introducing the *paradigm of unity* to prenatal education and pedagogy as a new sub-discipline of education and pedagogy (Kornas-Biela, 2009). Accepting the paradigm of unity in this field (in Kuhn's understanding of paradigm in science) gives a basis for a systemic approach to its object of study, human procreation and the earliest period of human life. In this context, three questions appear: 1/. What would the paradigm of unity mean in prenatal education and pedagogy? 2/. What scope and what areas would this paradigm concern in prenatal education and pedagogy? 3/. What methodological benefits would it bring to accept the paradigm of unity in prenatal pedagogy? Other considerations concern an attempt to present possible contexts that arise in response to the above questions.

Unity itself is an ambiguous and polysemic concept. The study of unity is called henology. A major Polish dictionary (Słownik Języka Polskiego) defines *jedność* [unity] as 'a commonness of the essence, basis or the rule of something, uniformity in variety, cohesion, indivisibility, inseparability, consistency, no contradiction, unison, acting in accord, coexistence, agreement, harmony [own transl.] (1978, p. 837). In classical philosophy there is a rule that unity is supreme over multiplicity, as no multiplicity is able to exist without a unity that is its basis.

WHAT DOES THE PARADIGM OF UNITY MEAN IN PRENATAL EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY?

A paradigm as a methodological concept in prenatal education and pedagogy means an approach in the theory, research and application that is aimed to integrate the theoretical terms and

the methodology of prenatal research and of studying human procreation. This approach attempts to stimulate the most optimal development of the prenatal child in its habitat – the environment in the womb – and to shape positive procreation experiences of parents, taking into account the specifically community character of the womb environment, the continuous interpersonal communication between the mother and the child on many levels, their dialogue of life/ that is possible only thanks to unity in its various aspects.

The perspective preferred by the paradigm of unity would thus have a lot in common with the propositions by one of the theoretical trends in contemporary psychology, called positive psychology (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This approach to studying the prenatal period of human life would focus not only on preventing any disturbances in the prenatal development, relations between the child and its relatives, and on their experiences related to procreation, but also on optimising the child's integral development, prenatal bonding and a developmental character of events related to procreation, an optimistic vision of what happens from the conception to the parents' first contacts with the child after birth – concerning both the life of the conceived person, as well as its mother and those in the nearest environment.

What is, then, the basis of the paradigm of unity in prenatal education and pedagogy? What is meant here is a teleological unity, that is, a unity resulting from the same goal, which is providing the most advantageous prenatal development, finalised with a birth of a healthy child, and supporting the parents so that their procreation experiences would contribute to their personal development – considering that the specific situation of the prenatal child requires a unity of them both (or even broader, all three of them).

Hence, the paradigm of unity in prenatal education and pedagogy suggests focusing on a positive goal in the theoretical studies, research methodology, as well as in practically supporting

the immediate and more distant family in which the conceived child is living, and also the broader social environment (health and social assistance institutions, the legal environment that regulates the care over the mother and the prenatal child, the local environment, non-government organizations that support the family in the period of pregnancy, giving birth and postpartum). The positive goal – of supporting the proper development of the prenatal child, delivery, the health condition of the mother, and the positive experiences of all persons who are involved in the procreation process – is seen from a systemic point of view and considers various factors and conditions whose integration is crucial for successful prenatal – and hence, postnatal – development and human procreation as such.

THE AREAS CONCERNED BY THE PARADIGM OF UNITY IN PRENATAL EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY

As for the scope of concern referring to the paradigm of unity in prenatal education and pedagogy, first it is necessary to identify various types of unity which may (and should) be considered here. The possible types of unity include the following ones:

- **Substantial unity, expressed in:**

the unity of human development from conception at a physical-psychic-social-spiritual level.

The above dimensions of human development are up-to-date at every stage of life, as the physical is always related to the psychic, social and spiritual. In this context, it is important that the studies on the prenatal development integrate the psycho-physical, social and spiritual dimensions. They should also be considered when referring to the child before birth, as well as in

a comprehensive approach to human procreation. This approach includes the fact that the somatic, psychic, social and spiritual ones are always strictly connected with each other and that successful and satisfying procreation depends on every one of these dimensions and on their mutual connections.

unity of the process of development and education already before birth

This unity is expressed in the impact of the factors that are always of a developmental-educational nature, i.e. whatever serves the development of the child's body, also serves shaping the proper attitudes for its education, and whatever serves the child's education as a person, also serves his or her proper biological development. At the level of prenatal development – and never again – this connection of the developmental and educational factors is especially close. Already at this stage, this relation is of a person-creating character for every member of the *prenatal personal relation*, and being in a community is of an educational nature (see Kornas-Biela, 2006).

unity of the pre-, perinatal and postnatal development

This unity, understood as a continuity and connection between the life before and after birth, has been confirmed by several studies that point to the prenatal conditioning of the quality of human functioning after birth. This concerns not only distortions in development, congenital diseases, brain defects or physical defects that have appeared before birth, but also the prenatal origin of one's features of personality, disturbed functioning of the nervous system, such as lateralisation, learning disorders, personality disorders, behavioral disorders, social contacts, social and sexual pathologies, neuroses and mental diseases.

In the prenatal period of life the programming of the further development takes place. Since the 1980s, medicine, psychobiology and prenatal psychology have been using the term *prenatal*

programming or *fetal programming* to refer to the long-term, lifelong role of all pre- and perinatal developmental factors. The view of prenatal programming of physical and mental health, intelligence and behavioral tendencies is accepted in medicine and neuropsychology. It expresses the conviction that the prenatal environment, individually for each child in the womb (Kornas-Biela, 2010a), has an impact on shaping the anatomic and functional features of the specific organs, including the brain, and these features not only influence one's functioning in the further life as an adult and even an elderly person, but are also transmitted to the next generations (extragenetic intergenerational transmission of features, see e.g. Agin, 2009).

- **Interpersonal unity, expressed in:**

unity, coexistence and mutual dependency of persons who simultaneously remain separate and distinct (unity despite their ontic and functional separateness).

Speaking of a unity between persons who are in prenatal relations, I mean unity in diversity, as every person here is separate, and the developmental conditions and factors, although are the same, do not affect them in the same way (e.g. a cigarette smoked is the same factor, but affects the mother and the child in a different way; moreover, if there are more children in the womb, it affects each one of them differently).

The unity of two separate persons, the mother and her prenatal child, is especially taken into account in the medicine of the mother-and-child, where two patients are always taken into account: the mother and the yet unborn child. Every procedure that concerns the mother also affects the child, and the child may only be affected through the body of the mother. Learning about this untouchable unity of the *mother-prenatal child dyad* created new challenges for medicine in terms of the ethical commitments

related to the rights and a simultaneous protection of the personal well-being of each person within this dyad (Mattingly, 1996), perceiving the prenatal child as a patient (Syweński et al., 2008; The Fetus as a Patient Society), the necessity of a simultaneous consideration of the presence of two healthcare clients (Littleton, Engebretson, 2005, p. 87-89).

unity of the persons involved in procreation and the prenatal child

This type of unity has its unique expression, not present ever and elsewhere outside this dual set, in the unity of the *mother-prenatal child dyad*. This unity turns out to be not only a condition for the physical existence of one of the elements of this relation, the yet unborn child, and the condition of the woman's physical state, the pregnancy, but also through the quality of this unity it is a condition of their physical health and psychic and personal development. The prenatal *mother-child union* is of a person-creating significance; only through this *communion* do we become persons. One of the dimensions of unity is the bond between the child with the nearest persons, between these persons with the child, and them with each other. The conception of a child caused a formal and content change of the social relations in both families of the child's origin and in their relations with the environment.

The insufficiency of considering the mother-child dyad itself is visible in the problems related to various distortions in the prenatal development caused by unfavourable attitudes of persons in the mother's immediate or more distant environment towards her or the conceived child, especially in the case of persons who are significant for her. Prenatal development demands taking into consideration the unity of the mother-father-their prenatal child *triad* as a model of social communication. It is thus important to specify the factors that beneficially affect the development of unity in this social triad, as opposed to those that are distractors of proper relations among the triad members. In families with

more children or in multi-generational families, the unity of the triad should be extended so that the educational activities also include other family members.

UNITY OF THE *MOTHER-PRENATAL CHILD DYAD* AS A MODEL
OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

The human being is by nature relational, needs others and cannot do without contact with others (at least mental contact). As naturally social, the human being is attuned to entering relations of various types and communicating with others, and the experience of (not voluntarily) being without the possibility of contacting others is experienced as painful (as punishment, being deprived of the right to contact). The fact that a unity with another human being is an essential need for biological survival, as well as for physical and mental development, has been confirmed by commonly known studies, for example those on the consequences of emotional rejection of the child during its prenatal period of development, on the social reactions of children despite their very severe brain damage, on effects of kangaroo care for premature infants, and on the conditions of the orphan syndrome.

If we consider the *personal prenatal union* between the mother and the child more closely, we may discover its certain features that might become the model of any human relations. The human being is always in relation with others as the one who is dependent on them, as well as the one whom others are dependent on, and also as one whose relations are of a partner-type – but in each case every participant of the relation gives or takes something, giving and becomes gifted.

In this context, we may ask which features that are characteristic for the *prenatal unity of the two*, might also become a general model for interpersonal relations. These features may include the following ones:

- selflessness;
- directness;
- closeness;
- brotherhood;
- availability;
- openness;
- reciprocity;
- giving oneself as a gift;
- entrusting oneself, trust;
- empathy;
- cooperation;
- helping each other;
- mutuality, communion;
- well wishing the others.

The order in which the above features appear does not indicate their ranking in importance. Undoubtedly however, an attempt to specify at least selected ones makes us realize that the mother's womb, which is the very first environment of human existence, and at the same time of education, may also be a model relation of any human community. Such community lets the human being, be human and fulfill what is most precious for being human. The *unity of the mother-prenatal child dyad* is firstly a model for shaping the *unity of the mother-father-prenatal child triad*. The relation of the community of the three may also be a useful model for the unity of any human community. Evidently, the concrete content and form of realizing the above features of the prenatal relation will differ in the case of other relations, depending on the various social relations and circumstances one happens to be in (e.g. student-student/student-teacher, employee-employer, neighbors, travel companions), but the features of mutual prenatal relations remain up-to-date, despite the being adjusted to the specific manifestations of the given situation.

Being in a communion with another human being in a way that is characteristic for the prenatal mother-child union and living

„for” the other means not only providing physical existence and securing the contact from any forms of violence, but also creating conditions for a full personal development of every member of this relation. An attempt to make these qualities of the prenatal dyad, valid also in the relations between other people and the prenatal child, is one of the goals which challenges of prenatal education and pedagogy. The experience of the *prenatal mother-child union* and the *prenatal mother-father-child union* is the first human experience of a community, and it shapes (although not in a deterministic way) one’s relations to oneself and the social relations for one’s whole life. In the further course of life, the human being expects and strives to actualize these features of the prenatal life environment that once were for individual the first “lesson of love” (Kornas-Biela, 2003).

Social life has its roots in the unity of the two: mother-prenatal child. This unity is for them both a lesson of living with the other, living for the other, and living the other. It teaches to live in closeness and intimacy that does not threaten the very self of every one of these persons, but on the contrary, helps to develop and heal. It is an intimacy/closeness that is a biopsychic human need and a source of growth. It also teaches to live without fear when in the position of being dependent on others and entrusting oneself to them, and to be open not only to the needs of the others, but also to what they can contribute into one’s life. Another ability one learns in this relation is a selfless availability for the other – an availability that does not addict, but creates bonds, does not humiliate, but enriches. It is also a lesson of not merely existing next to others, but attempting to a unity with them, of creating a community, and not merely co-participating in a group, of shaping the ability to build a *we-relation* of a deep union without losing the individuality of each person (characteristic for the given type of relation between them), of fulfilling the predisposition of the heart for mutual love that gives and takes, and that, once given, returns. In the womb environment the golden rule of most world

religions is fulfilled in a special way: "do to others as you would like them to do to you".

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *PARADIGM OF UNITY* FOR PRENATAL EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY

The basic advantage of applying the paradigm of unity in prenatal education and pedagogy is the possibility of a more precise systemic perspective approach to the development processes and educational activities through integrating them towards a positive developmental-educational goal. Setting a goal for education and pedagogy, as a descriptive-normative discipline, is a very basic task, especially when striving for an advancement in the methodological approach called humanistic-personalistic within the area of prenatal education and pedagogy. This approach, in line with the position of John Paul II on human ecology found in his *Centesimus annus*, is appearing reflections and studies on human ecology, the ecology of procreation and the ecology of the womb (see e.g. Kornas-Biela, 2000, Fijałkowski, 2001) and concrete activities in this field (such as birth classes, promoting natural birth, breastfeeding) whose aim is the well-being of the person in the prenatal stage (and then the newborn) and his or her nearest ones – which may not be an easy task if the well-being of one of these persons seems to stand in opposition to the well-being of another one (e.g. a suggestion to reduce the embryos, to make a selective abortion of the child affected from the innate disease – Kornas-Biela, 2010b). Prenatal pedagogy considers the paradigm of unity and the demands from ecology of procreation, is taking into account both the multiplicity, diversity and differentiation of the functions of the persons engaged in procreation at the earliest phase of their personal growth, and at the same time their mutual self-dependance, coexistence, being for and the specific unity.

In sum, *the paradigm of unity* is not limited to utilitarian pragmatism, but has deeper roots in the axiological basis and points to the essence of unity (unity despite separateness/individuality and despite ontic and functional dissimilarity), its dynamics, creative force, and its key significance in theoretical studies, research and applicative referring to prenatal development, to the relation between the parents and the prenatal child, as well as to issues concerning procreation. The specific prenatal relation between the mother and the child, and also between the child and its parents, may be a beneficial general model of interpersonal communication and a model of mutual love that should be present in any interpersonal contacts within what is referred to as the *culture of giving*.

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