

Acta Psychologica Tyrnaviensia
15–16

20. výročie
Katedry psychológie
na obnovenej
Trnavskej univerzite
(1992–2012)

TRNAVA 2012

Family in the context of prenatal psychology and education

DOROTA KORNAS – BIELA

Social Science Department · John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin · Poland

Abstract · The article deals with specific family issues from the perspective of prenatal psychology and education. The personalistic paradigm is highlighted according to which a prenatal child is declared as an active family member who communicates with its environment. The conception of a child also initiates a developmental situation for the parents as “being two in one body” initiates physiological, mental, social and spiritual changes. The child should be considered as a gift for the parents, but also the parents are a gift for the child. The specific prenatal child–parents union is the first experience of a community for the human being, which shapes one’s relation with oneself and others for the whole life to come.

Keywords · prenatal psychology, prenatal community, prenatal communication, dyad mother–prenatal child

Anybody who traces things from the beginning has the best view of them.
Aristotle

Human life before birth has been a mystery for centuries. Scientific knowledge was scarce, and the fetus was treated as a biological creature whose senses are inactive, who does not register stimuli, does not feel or react, does not have a consciousness, does not learn or remember. He or she was treated as *tabula rasa*, a blank board, and human psychic life was believed to begin only after birth. The traditional scientific approach to the relation between parents and their prenatal child presents the child as a fetus that is mainly a passive recipient of its mother’s vital biological resources (Chamberlain, 1992).

The scientific vision of the prenatal development and the mutual relations between the mother and the prenatal child was, however, different from the vision of the parents themselves. By intuition, mothers often felt that the child is an active member of their emotional life, and that it feels and reacts to whatever happens around the mother, is able to feel her mood, and

experiences various emotions. The belief that the child is influenced by the parents' emotions, especially the mother's, through inter-neuro-hormonal and inter-bio-chemical transmission, has a tradition that is centuries old. In the European culture it was Aristotle who stated that the child receives the mother's feelings like a plant receives vital substances from the soil. In China and India, more than a thousand years ago, prenatal clinics were founded where mothers were taught how to make contact with their prenatal child. Talmud mentions the unborn child's consciousness. Similarly, the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt 1, 39–46), in the scene of the meeting of the two mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, makes it clear that they are aware not only that they are pregnant, but also that they carry children in their wombs. We can see their warm attitude towards their children: their bonds, attuned to reading the child's emotions, a belief in the possibility of a quick communication of the mother's emotions to her child, the child's participation in them and adequate reactions to them (the mother's joy provokes the child's joy). Similarly, Leonardo da Vinci expressed his belief that the mother's desires have an impact on the child, and her fear or psychical pain are much more destructive for the child than for its mother, as the child might even lose its life because of them.

In primitive cultures and in many societies there have existed various complex systems of beliefs and customs, orders and bans concerning the thoughts, images, pictures, behaviours, and objects that prenatal parents should avoid in order to prevent problems with pregnancy and birth. Moreover, the list also included thoughts and behaviours of the parents so that they might support the child's successful development and safe delivery (Kornas-Biela, 1995a).

I Prenatal community

Contemporary prenatal psychology and pedagogy recognizes the prenatal and perinatal period of life as the first ecological situation in which the human being is functioning and his or her health is programmed (Barker, 1998; Nathanielsz, 1999; Kornas-Biela, 2004, 2009; Pluess, Belsky, 2011). The prenatal child is recognized as a member of the family and an active member of the extended family and community. Between the parents and their child in the womb exists a reciprocal relationship at the physiological (hormonal), psychological and spiritual level. The mother's womb is its first life environment, both social and educational, and the first home (oikos) (Kornas-Biela, 2000). It performs the function of a family "nest", a place of "hatching" a new

member of the family. The prenatal period of development takes place in an environment that is not just a set of two people, but a community of a very specific character: both persons are strongly dependent upon each other. The success of the pregnancy from the mother's point of view depends on the child's health. On the other hand, also the life and health of the child depend on the mother's life and health, her lifestyle and behaviour. During pregnancy, both persons are not for themselves, but for the other person. The social character of the prenatal life is possible thanks to the stable and very tight relationship between the mother and her child, and thanks to the relationship between the mother and other members of the society. From a Christian perspective, the coexistence of the triad of the mother, father and the prenatal child may also be seen as reflecting the communion of the Holy Trinity (Kornas-Biela, 2012).

Both partners of the prenatal situation are equal in their personal dignity, but different as far as other qualities are concerned. The prenatal child cannot be treated as "material for processing" that is only an object of usage by the adult. It is mainly adults who bring up the child, however, in this situation also the adults are being brought up.

In the prenatal relationship between the mother and her child both participants of the interaction concentrate on the experience of this phenomenon of meeting and their selfless "being together". Because of these specific conditions, parents have a different attitude towards their prenatal child in comparison to their attitude after it is born and the sense of educational necessity appears. Then, the system changes and parents dominate, look down upon the child, and the child is recognised as an object of upbringing who must obey the parents' requirements and orders.

According to the personalistic paradigm, we should concentrate on the child and its family that was called into existence at conception, and not on the pregnancy itself ("pregnancy" as such does not need parents). The child, since the moment of conception, becomes an element of the family system, in a relation with each member of the family. The family creates an irreplaceable structure of relationships that are necessary for the child's proper development. The parents do not treat themselves as parents of a future child or as "parents waiting for a child", since the child already exists. At conception, the child has changed the husband-wife subsystem and enriched it, thanks to the new relationships with its siblings, grandparents and other relatives. Not only the whole system influences each member of the family, but also each family member influences the system, and the number of relationships, which become emotionally marked, is increasing. The system of mutual relations

where the whole family takes part is a relational and dynamic reality. The role and significance of the mutual support among the parents and other members of the family is especially stressed (Kornas–Biela, 1992, 1995b).

2 Prenatal communication

To develop, each child from its conception needs to be in a relationship with other people and to have its emotional and social needs recognised and satisfied. As a social being, already in its prenatal period of life the child communicates with its environment, takes part in contacts initiated by adults and actively constructs social situations (Chamberlain, 1992; Schindler, 1998; Kornas–Biela, 1995a, 2002).

Throughout pregnancy and childbirth both the mother and the child actively participate in a continuous, creative dialogue (occurring at the mental, emotional, biochemical and hormonal level) not only with each other, but also with the mother's psycho-social environment (especially the father, but also other significant persons). The tight connection between the mother and the child is psycho-somatic and psycho-spiritual in its character – a unique and inimitable relationship. For prenatal dialogue to exist, the following conditions need to be met: the reality of the child's existence must be recognized during the pregnancy, the human being must be personalized before birth, the prenatal child must be affirmed as a person to be brought up and susceptible to the communication, one should identify oneself as a parent, take responsibility for the process, and find forms of communication with the child.

Nowadays, the development of medical technology (e.g. ultrasonography) allows to documenting more and more clearly the fact that a child developing in a mother's womb receives signals from the physical and personal environment (through the placenta and the abdominal skin), reacts to them and has specific feelings. The prenatal child communicates with parents in different ways and reacts to their stimulation (acoustic, tactual, loco-motoric, chemo-receptive, thermo-receptive and emotional – Kornas–Biela, 2002, 2004, 2011).

Prenatal communication is a type of interpersonal communication, a loving interaction and a mutual exchange that takes place in different ways. It may have the following forms: bodily contact (of the child's body with the mother's body that surrounds and "wraps" it), physical contact through abdominal skin, the mother's movements, the mother's metabolism that reflects her mental state and mood, sounds, including intra-linguistic features of the language spoken around the child (e.g. its emotional component). There are

various complex ways of maintaining contact with the child that have existed between the child and the mother with relatives throughout different epochs and cultures.

Parents are able to accompany the child in its prenatal development in different ways, for example they may think positively about the child, imagine him or her, visualise the child and the expected future situations (e.g. birth, breastfeeding, bathing, playing); they may also talk with the child (aloud or silently in one's mind), write a diary of the pregnancy time and a diary of the child's development, tell stories, read poems, write fairy tales or letters to the child, listen to music, sing songs, play an instrument, rock (e.g. to the rhythm of music or singing), dance (calm, rhythmic movements) Other forms of contact include tactile ones, such as stroking, massaging, knocking, brushing, tapping, cuddling, caressing, playing with the child, concentrating on the signals sent by the child. A popular form of contact is to observe the child's movements and answer them, and various forms of artistic activities for the child: poems, music, pictures, sculpture, preparing clothes or toys for the child, and involve it in all areas of life (Kornas-Biela, 2009, p.256, 389–390).

Each mother and each father finds their own, unique ways of communication with their child. The frequency, the kind and content of the different forms of contact of the family members with the prenatal child gives colour to their feelings and forms the mutual relationships in the family. On the other hand, the child perceives the feelings of the people around him or her – obviously, especially the mother's emotional state influences the child's mood and behaviour. These feelings are a kind of “developmental food”, giving the sense of security, love and care. These forms of contact provide the nutritional environment for the child's development, lessen the consequences of negative factors, and form the basis for the development of a healthy personality. In this context, the prenatal period of development may be called a period of a “school of love” (Kornas-Biela, 2003).

Parents may offer their prenatal child, and themselves, time spent together, moments of relaxation, intimacy, contemplation, and a communion of thoughts and feelings. The time spent together with the child shapes the emotional bond with the child. After birth, the child is welcomed as somebody well-known, as a member of the family, with whom a lot of time has been spent together, and who has been looked forward to and missed for a long time. To achieve this, parents should approach the child's development holistically as a person, and may include religious upbringing, which is the personal basis that enables the child to create a relationship with God. The specific “place” of opening to the transcendental reality is prenatal communication,

through prayer, meditation, blessing the child, adoration, contemplation, sacraments, pilgrimages, etc. For Christians, it is possible when parents are treating the child with a consciousness that it is a human being who is meant to live forever, as an inhabitant of heaven, heir of the Eternal Kingdom, and an everlasting gift of the Son for His Father (Kornas–Biela, 2009, p. 372–393).

3 The child and its parents as a mutual gift

A significant approach to prenatal upbringing of the child is treating it in the category of a gift. Each child is a gift for its parents, and thanks to their relation of love they only provided a possibility for the life to be created. From the religious perspective, thanks to God's participation in the physical act of conception, a new human being is created as God's creature and image that acquires similarity to God himself. It is not the power of the parents that decides about the creation and dignity of the human being, as a physical, mental and spiritual wholeness; and God knows the human being before the mother is able to recognise the child's existence: "before I created you in your mother's womb, I had known you, before your birth, I had sacrificed you" (Jr 1, 5). From the Christian view, it is God who creates each human being separately as His image. Existing beyond the category of time, God carries each conceived child in His heart, in order to give it as a gift for its parents – the only gift that is a person – and this unique personal gift from the Person Himself is given to the child's parents, siblings, grandparents and relatives. In this perspective, it is the most precious gift for infertile couples to accept an adopted child from God, given indirectly by its biological parents.

Seeing a child as a blessing implies gratefulness to the giver for the exceptional gift. It also implies respecting the dignity of the gift – the person – which means respecting this person's rights, creating the opportunities for developing this person's potentialities and for realizing the person's vocation. It may require heroic dedication in the process of bringing up the child. Receiving a gift from God, a gift that is a person, is a great commitment for the parents not to waste the divine gift, and parents are given responsible educational tasks. The child is a sign of God's trust to the openness of the parents' hearts. The conception of a child is a signal that God himself entrusted the parents with His greatest treasure, and He trusts they will be able to help the child by their care and upbringing to shape itself into the image of God's splendid work. The parents should make sure to take care to prepare their hearts for the acceptance of each child, as it should be wrapped from the very first moments of its existence by an atmosphere of acceptance, safety and unconditional love.

It is not always the case that parents are oriented towards conceiving a child. Sometimes the child appears without being planned earlier, which may be not an easy situation. However, treating the child as God's gift and a reflection of His presence in their life may help them to accept the fact of the conception of their child and interpret it that God himself visited their house and is making a place for the child "not knowing, they entertained the angels" (Heb 13, 2). When it happens that the child has not been planned, or it is ill or handicapped, the gift is difficult to accept. Although it is helpful to remember that the Giver himself helps to interpret the gift as a sign of love, time and effort are necessary to read this gift and understand the meaning of it, to grow to love it and to experience how much this child has brings into family life, e.g. how he or she helps it to become more mature, better, and to see how many gifts the parents receive along with the child.

It is also important to realize the fact that not only the child is a gift for the parents, but also the parents are a gift for the child. They represent God and by their attitude towards the child and by the attitude towards each other, and for the child are an image of God. For the prenatal child the mother is its "whole world", so for the parents the prenatal child and the time of pregnancy are a unique experience: contact with the child it is not only an educational situation for the child, but also for the child's loved ones.

4 Pregnancy and prenatal life as a period of development

Pregnancy, as a state of "being two in one body", is being now treated not only as a time of physiological but also mental, social and spiritual change (Kornas-Biela, 2009) The conception of a child is a so-called significant life event that initiates a process of reorganising the parent's personality, the systems of "I" and "we", in order to create a new identity and to give meaning to this unprecedented experience. They also have to give their own personal meaning to their parenthood (what does it mean for them to be a mother or a father?). They face a necessity to verify their identity and to create a new one, enriched by the new experiences, feelings and expectations (Kornas-Biela, 2002; Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2006). It has to be integrated with the concepts of *who I was*, *who I am* and *who I want to be in the future* (the past, the present and the future self). These and similar questions inspire a reflection on the sense of one's life, to take new attitude towards oneself and others in the following dimensions: dominance, trust, acceptance, openness, autonomy, and co-operation. This exceptional situation of the prenatal relationship of *I - you* secures the experience of

wholeness, fulfilment and anchorage. Such perspective supports the attitude of “to be” rather than “to have”.

Procreation is understood as a dimension of human life that gives a chance to develop an attitude of openness, revising past opinions, changing habits and accepting new events. It is this kind of attitude that enables one to be open to the future and supports creativity, trust and acceptance of the fact that not everything may be predicted – one is not able to predict the course of events and the consequences of the situation which one is invited into by procreation. The conception of a child puts the parent in a new perspective of development, acquiring new skills and abilities.

The conception of a child initiates a developmental situation for the parents. Solving the problems that occur in the time of pregnancy, childbirth and education of the child lead to functioning at a higher level of mental and emotional maturity. Conscious and active participation in the development of a new human being and securing for the child an emotionally nutritional environment already in the prenatal and perinatal period of life is a specific “school of love” for the parents and is an exceptional chance for their psychosexual and psychosocial development. The conception of a child creates numerous occasions for them to practise and master new skills and features (e.g. emotional sensitivity, empathy, patience, tenderness, affection), acquire new parental competencies, shape new valuable attitudes (e.g. heroism, devotion) and take up new positive activities. The conceived child brings new content and new experiences into the parents’ world and takes the parents out of their world. This situation also initiates new forms of internal activities (e.g. mental and emotional) and external ones (e.g. various ways of perceiving and experiencing reality, working out new ways of dealing with difficulties). Prenatal communication means meeting the child, but it also creates a unique occasion to meet oneself, as everybody was once a small child. For the parent it creates an opportunity to confront the present with the personal past, and give significance to one’s childhood and one’s period of life that has passed. Thanks to that, the time of pregnancy and childbirth may be a time of intensive personal growth.

Parents may also take advantage of all forms of prenatal communication and use them as occasions for the couple to be together. The child is then seen as cement that deepens their love, not as a rival who invaded their life and is now conquering one of them. From the Christian perspective, it is marriage that is a sacrament, not parenthood, and the child has been entrusted to them only for a certain time. Hence, they should take care of their mutual relationship, and the child will benefit from it, because the deeper their love and

mutual exchange, the better they are prepared to receive the gift of the child and multiply the fruit of this gift.

Concentrating on the specific prenatal experiences that occur in the context of the “double life” creates a special bond with the child. It is easier to wrap the child in love if it is not treated as a burden, a weight, a dispensation of Providence, but as somebody thanks to whom I may experience a blessed state. The child is then treated as a source of joy, personal growth of the parents, transgression, enriching oneself by the person of the child, deepening the vision of oneself and the sense of one’s life. From such perspective, the prenatal period may be treated as a time of incomparable parental experience that, despite the difficulties and worries, is seen as a source of positive feelings, strong and diverse emotions, deep satisfaction and affection. Accompanying the child since the moment of its conception is a developing experience for everybody and brings joy because of the fact of development itself, not only about the new mental and social experiences, but also in terms of the metaphysical or spiritual experiences. The opportunity to participate in the process of creation of a new human being enriches the inner world of the parent. The dialogue with the prenatal child mutually enriches each member of the family community. In this sense, the prenatal child is a gift for parents to develop their personality, social competences, and spiritual life (Kornas-Biela, 2009).

5 The unity of the *dyad mother–prenatal child* as a model of interpersonal relations

The human being is relational in nature and needs contact with others – if not physical, then at least mental. The human social nature is inherently directed towards entering various types of relations and communicating with others and painfully experiences any forced deprivation of contact with others, and when the human being is deprived of the right to enter relations with others, it is perceived as punishment. Many commonly known studies – e.g. on the consequences of emotional rejection of a child in the prenatal period of life, social reactions of children despite their severe brain damage, effects of kangaroo care of premature infants, or conditions of the orphan syndrome – indicate that the need of contact with others is crucial for biological survival, as well as for the physical and mental development.

A deeper reflection on the *personal prenatal union* between the mother and the prenatal child allows to indicate its certain features that might become a model for any interpersonal relations, as the human being is constantly in

various relations of dependence with others: as a dependent one, one on whom the other party depends or one whose relations are or a partner type, but every participant of the relation gives something and takes – offers and is granted/bestowed. The characteristic features of the *prenatal unity of the two* that might become a model for interpersonal relations include selflessness, directness, closeness, brotherhood, security, accessibility, openness, offering oneself as a gift, entrusting oneself, cooperation, mutuality/reciprocity, and communion. The first environment of human life in the womb is also an educational environment and may be treated as a pattern for any human community. Such community allows the human being to develop the most valuable and most human qualities.

Being in such *communion* with another person which is characteristic for the prenatal union between a mother and a child, and living „for” the other person, means not only providing physical existence and securing this relation from various forms of violence, but also creating conditions for full personal development of each member of the relation. The quality of experiencing the *prenatal child–parents union* is the first experience of a community for the human being, which shapes (although does not determine) one’s relation with oneself, as well as social relations with others for the whole life to come. In the further course of life the human being expects and attempts to copy these qualities of the prenatal life environment that were for him or her the first *lesson of love* (Kornas–Biela, 2003, 2009).

Social life has its roots in the *unity of the two: mother – prenatal child*. This unity is for both of them a lesson of life with the other, a lesson of living for the other, and “living the other”. It teaches to be close, but in an intimacy that does not threaten any of the persons, but develops and heals – a closeness that is a biopsychic need and a source of development. It also teaches to be without fear when in a relation of dependence on another person, entrusting oneself to the other person, and an openness not only to his or her needs, but also to the creative aspects that this other person may contribute. This closeness teaches selfless accessibility for the other person – one that does not limit, but creates a bond that enriches both participants of the relation. It is also a lesson of not existing next to each other, but striving towards a unity with him or her, creating a community with others, as opposed to only participating in a group, and shaping the ability to build a relations of *us*, where there is a deep unity among the participants (one that is characteristic for the type of their bond), without losing the individuality of each person. Such relation makes the predisposition of the heart for mutual love come true – this relation means giving and taking, and what is given, comes back. In the

environment of the womb the *golden rule* of the greatest religions in the world is fulfilled “do to others as you wish they did to you”.

R E F E R E N C E S

- Barker, D.J.P (1998) *Babies Health in Later Life*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingston.
- Bielawska–Batorowicz, E. (2006) *Psychologiczne aspekty prokreacji*. Katowice: „Śląsk” Sp. z o.o. Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Chamberlain, D.B. (1992) Babies are not what we thought: call for a new paradigm. *International Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Studies*, 4, 1–17.
- Dobrzańska, A., Gruszfeld, D., Czech–Kowalska, J. (2004) Prenatalne uwarunkowania schorzeń wieku dorosłego. *Standardy Medyczne*, 1.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (1992) Obraz siebie i poczucie wsparcia społecznego u kobiet oczekujących urodzenia dziecka. In: E. Bielawska–Batorowicz, D. Kornas–Biela (Eds.) *Z zagadnień psychologii prokreacyjnej* (pp. 91–98). Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (1995a) Kontakt rodziców z dzieckiem przed urodzeniem. In: *Najlepszy start dla twojego dziecka* (pp. 53– 60). Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz naturalnego Rodzenia i Karmienia.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (1995b) Z zagadnień psychologii rodziny w okresie ciąży. In: B. Chazan (Ed.) *Rodzina i prokreacja* (pp. 37–52). Warszawa: Instytut Matki i Dziecka.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2000) Ekologia łąna ekologią świata: o nowy paradygmat w ekologii. In: J. M. Dołęga, J. W. Czartoszewski (Eds.) *Ekologia rodziny ludzkiej* (pp. 99–116). Olecko: Wydawnictwo Wszechnicy Mazurskiej.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2002) *Wokół początku życia ludzkiego*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2003) Psychodynamiczny nurt w psychologii prenatalnej: wybrane problemy z obszaru prokreacji. *Przegląd Psychologiczny*, 46, 2, 179–196.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2004) Okres prenatalny. In: B. Harwas–Napierała, J. Trempała (Eds.), *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka 2* (pp. 15–46). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2009) *Pedagogika prenatalna. Nowy obszar nauk o wychowaniu*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2011) Okres prenatalny. In: J. Trempała (Ed.). *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka. Podręcznik akademicki* (pp. 147–171). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Kornas–Biela, D. (2012) *Reciprocity and the gift of self between parents and their prenatal child*. Paper, 3 rd International Congress Psicologia e Comunione “Prospects for research and treatment in psychology: identity, reciprocity and gift of self”. Castel Gandolfo, Centro Mariapoli Internazionale, 4–6.05.2012.
- Nathanielsz P.W. (1999) *Life in the Womb: The Origin of Health and Disease*. Ithaca, NY: Promethean Press.
- Pluess M., Belsky J. (2011) Prenatal programming of postnatal plasticity. *Development and Psychopathology*, 23, 29–38.
- Schindler S. (1998) Towards a scientific approach to prenatal psychology. From twilight to dialogue. *The International Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine*, 10 4, 415–428.