Making sense of parenthood

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# On ambivalence and resourcefulness

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# 1. Introduction & background of this Lectorate

*It takes a village to raise a child (African saying)*
*It takes parents to raise a village (Baartman, 2010b)*

This Lectorate was born out of an unusual and inspired cross-fertilization of two visions. The one, of a foundation whose philanthropic mission to reduce child abuse was uniquely sage enough to realize that parents must be better understood before children can be helped. The other, the mission of a Dutch social worker whose keen eye and 30 years of practice led her to overturn a large stone called 'childrearing' and discover 'parenthood' lying flattened and forgotten underneath (van der Pas, 1988). With her inspiration, a professional journal, and a body of work by practitioners, parenthood has begun to receive the attention it needs, in the Netherlands. With the support of the Augeo Foundation and Leiden University of Applied Sciences, this Lectorate was created and housed in an academic context.
In this talk, I will focus on the nature of being a parent, and what it does with a person to become a parent and live the experience of parenthood. In particular, I will focus on ambivalence, an under-studied yet central feature of parental experience. In the heat of the moment, every parent experiences the conflicting pull of love and hate; the desire to hold tight or to push away; adoration that can give way to fury in the space of a second. We know how easily parents can be knocked over by their own passions while trying to manage those of their children. And yet we have difficulty considering the parent

as a subject – not just a childrearer, but a whole person. We have trouble viewing the messy inside of the matter. As a result, we – neighbors, friends, public, politics – get increasingly frustrated by the chaos, which we try to clean up with ever more protocols, programs, and televised interventions. Moreover, in our frustration with the failures, we forget to wonder about the successes. It is precisely by understanding how parents survive parenthood in spite of all the difficulties that besiege them that we can come to a deeper understanding of what it is to be a parent. Here, we can wonder, how do professionals of all sorts contribute – or impede – parents' survival? What role do experts have in the village it takes? I start by elucidating the 'neglect' of parenthood in academic and professional theory and research, and briefly consider the ways in which parents are 'under fire' to perform better as childrearers. Yet, as I illustrate, people do not parent free of circumstances or societal attitudes. In chapter 2, I elucidate the 'essence' of what it is to become a parent, followed by an exploration of the psychology of parenthood, and of the ambivalence that riddles any parenthood with conflicts, often a source of shame. I consider resourcefulness in chapter 3, both personal and social. I explore the role and impact of experts in the 'village' parents need to help them raise a child. I conclude by discussing plans for the Lectorate in Parenthood and Professional Work with Parents.

### 1.1. A neglected area of study

There is a broad lack of information and perspective about parenthood as an experience in its own right Almost all thinking about parents and parenting, whether in the domain of science, policy, or popular pedagogy, focuses on the effects of parenting on children, rather than on the nature of parenthood or parental experience. In the Netherlands, despite 20 years of development, the practice of parent guidance is still marginal in education and clinic alike, and financing for professionals who work with parents is threatened (Van Tilburg, 2009). The case for this Lectorate – for investigating and un-

derstanding parenthood from the perspective of parents – has recently been made in an essay by Baartman (2010a), who traced the lack of information and perspectives about parenthood from private to public sphere, and from clinic to academy. Invariably, child development is prioritized and positioned in such a way as to negate, ignore, or conflict with the interests of parents – a false and yet easily bought argument.

### 1.2 Parents under fire

In social and political discourse, parents are under fire. No one is more attuned to this than parents themselves. While concepts of infancy and the associated expectations of parents have shifted with almost every decade, the most recent expectation is 'child centered' (Parker,1995), an observation shared by Hoek (2008) in her analysis of Dutch policy. In a study by J/M – a parenting magazine in the Netherlands – middle class parents expressed enormous fears of failure, along with a myriad of worries about their children, and an underlying assumption that they as parents have a huge influence on almost every area of their child's life and happiness. There is an epidemic of parents feeling guilty (Schaubroeck, 2010). Popular books describe the manic heights to which expectations of parents have risen, and enjoin parents to calm down. Often it is not clear where the anxiety comes from, or who needs to calm down about what. J/M exclaims 'Parents! There is no 'perfect child!' as if the source of anxiety were parental perfectionism. Parents are under fire, even from well meaning sources of advice.

Many of the accounts linked to this so-called 'hyper parenting' phenomenon, are limited to western middle class families, suggesting a class-based normativity in childrearing. Studies of poor and working class parents indicate that their priorities are different, though no less committed (Vanhee et al, 2001; Van der Zwaard, 1999). Furthermore, the last 40 years have seen a rising expectation that parents should control their children. In the Netherlands, Baartman (2010b), critiques government policy which has moved from the notion

of helping children by helping parents (family preservation) to a more punitive position in which fear of child protection mistakes dominate. This creates an atmosphere of mistrust, illustrated by policy documents that appear 'more like fighting with parents than fighting child abuse' – indeed, Baartman worries, this 'mix of fear and fixation on safety...creates the risk that we will do the opposite of what parents need, i.e. support, respect and understanding' (p.130).

### 1.3 Nobody parents in a bubble

The assertion that 'nobody parents in a bubble' is threefold. First, despite political discourse that assigns all liability for children to parents, parenthood is by no means the only influence on children. In a televised interview, de Winter (2007) claimed that research could show that only 12% of the problems of youth are actually caused by their parenting. Parenting accounts for less than 7% of children's depression or anxiety (Mcleod et al 2007). In a study of high risk children, Werner (1996) found that parental competence was a much less important variable in children's long term adaptation compared with their own competencies and temperaments. In spite of these claims, there remains a monolithic and widely shared sense that parenting causes children to act or to turn out the way they do.
Secondly, there is no parenthood in a 'bubble', free of the intrusive circumstances that appear uninvited, unwelcome, and unfairly, at most families' doorstep. In a review of studies about the daily practice of parenting small children, van der Pas (2007) notes that noise and frequent conflict are the norm rather than the exception. That life with children is not smooth sailing, will come as no surprise, and yet, the statistics are startling: for example, up to 15 conflicts per hour, or that children of all ages listen to their parents less than half the time. Furthermore, van der Pas (2005) notes the high statistical chances of parents or children being confronted with physical or emotional problems, sleep disorders, not to mention divorce! We must assume that most family lives have complications.

The third meaning of 'bubble', is that parents always parent with an audience in mind, looking in from outside. In an essay on the 'theatre' of the 'good parent' (2007), Van der Pas explores the phenomenon of parenting as an activity with a constant audience of fans and critics, real or imagined. This audience consists both of the internal representations of figures past and present, and actual partners, grandparents, neighbors, etc. Audiences may variously be experienced as supportive and helpful, or critical and shaming. Thinking of the intellectual tradition of the Belgian Interactie-Academie (Mattheeuws, 1983), one may extend this cast of characters to include the much broader range of social representations connecting the personal and local to larger culturally and temporally mediated societal mores concerning child rearing and how one is expected to perform as a parent. These too may be experienced as anywhere from reassuring to persecutory.

# 2. Being a parent

*'The baby lies at home like some unintelligible goddess, luminous, pulsing, strange, an icon of lofty requirement. As her disciple I cannot but appear to have undergone some mystic conversion which distances me from those I love' (Cusk, 2001:93)*

## 2.1 What is a parent?

Most definitions of parents, parenthood, or parenting, describe the matter in descriptive realist terms, literally, as having and rearing children (Bornstein, 2002). Biologically determinist variants focus on the bearing of babies and a host of associated 'natural' instincts. Socially mediated variants focus on power relations or responsibilities inherent to the child being smaller and less powerful and the adult being larger and more grown up. Generally, the activities of childrearing are in the foreground, with parental experience in the background. An exception is Van der Pas (2003) who distinguishes between 'parents' ('ouders' in Dutch), child rearing by parents ('grootbrengen') and child rearing by others ('opvoeders'). There is an array of child-carers and educators involved in any child's upbringing, and these too are 'childrearers'. For them, the label ends when the child leaves school or they go home from work at the end of the day; or when the child turns 21. For the parent, the label remains forever. Once a parent, always a parent, even if you don't set eyes on your child his whole life, as in adoption.
Following on from the distinction between child-rearer and parent, Van der Pas (2003) distinguishes between the terms 'parent' and 'parenthood', and defines 'parent' as 'a person

who has an awareness of being responsible for a child' (p. 40). She hyphenates 'being-responsible' to emphasize its 'being' or existential quality and to distinguish it from being responsible, say, this evening. This kind of '*being*-responsible' lends the definition its 'all-or-nothing-quality', its 'unconditionality' and its being 'without a limit in time'. Beyond this universal essence, the definition does not stipulate what kind of parent one is, or how one parents, responsibly or irresponsibly, competently or incompetently, which Van der Pas views as elements of one's parent*hood*, or parent*ing*. It also does not comment on the variations in individual experiences of parenting, but rather indicates that this awareness of being responsible forms the ethical core of the experience of being a parent, with profound emotional implications: Because it is not humanly possible to protect one's children to the extent that one's awareness of 'being-responsible' would imply (Van der Pas, 2007), a chasm opens up between a parent's sense of how s/he ought to be, and the reality of how things *are*. This disjuncture generates tension, and the sense of failure, shame or guilt that characterize, to one extent or another, any parenthood.

Here, other perspectives on parenthood come to mind. Due to the ethical component in Van der Pas' definition, I will draw first from moral philosophy, followed by an anthropological perspective, and in the second part of the chapter, a number of theories on parenthood. The concept of ambivalence as the core of parental subjectivity is dealt with in the third section.

**Moral philosophy: The parent and the child 'Other'**

Burggraeve (2006) a Levinas scholar intrigued by Van der Pas' definition, addresses parenthood as an ethical relationship. First, Levinas on being a parent: 'Though the child exists as a result of a parental act of conception, there is a "radical non-mutuality" insofar as neither the child chose the parents nor did the parents choose *this* child' (Burggraeve, 2006:39). Levinas (1969) writes that 'parenthood is a relationship with a stranger who in his otherness is myself' (Burggraeve p. 41). Yet, the otherness of the child is 'not constituted as a compensation of my shortcoming, and even less as my mirror, alter-

ego or a recreation of myself' (p. 42). The child is a 'result' of his parents' desire and/or will, and yet he can never be traced back to their intention. Against this complex and ambivalent backdrop of being the same and yet not the same, the child is always 'face to face': always a subject and not an object. By bursting into the parents' sphere of illusions and assumptions, by breaking their sense of being in control, the child becomes a 'moral teacher' who confronts the parents with their own and his vulnerability, through his subjectivity. It is in this sense that it becomes an ethical teaching (Burggraeve 2006:45). The vulnerabilities of parent and child figure prominently, intertwined with the larger vulnerability inherent to all human subjectivity. This ethics has as its backdrop the potential for violence present in every parent. Violence, here, is not just something physical, but begins at the moment of not seeing or recognizing the subjectivity of the child. Burggraeve suggests parental awareness of being responsible is universal, essentially linked to the ethics of 'thou shalt not kill'.

The parent is thus defined as a subject, a person whose entire being and existence is penetrated by the vulnerability of the child, while at the same time being unable to control or grasp the child's mysterious subjectivity. The notion of the child as teacher suggests that a parent, in being so disrupted, may stand to learn or be transformed by opening up to this experience. Of course, this is no guarantee: Burggraeve notes – as does Van der Pas – that parents are well able to turn a deaf ear to the 'ethical imperative' emanating from the child, in spite of (their awareness of) its intrinsically irrefutable argument. Indeed, he emphasizes that ethics is about choice, without which it would cease to be ethics and turn into force or submission.

This brief view from moral philosophy suggests there is an ethical dimension to the existential condition of being a parent, with all of the vulnerabilities that this implies, though the ethical 'imperative' does not guarantee an ethical response. It simply constitutes the intersubjective foundation of being a parent out of which the vicissitudes of parenting and parenthood are further developed.

**The anthropological perspective: pragmatic ethics**

From the anthropological perspective, we learn that raising human babies is quite a job, and that a number of standard modern – particularly western – notions about what is normal for parents raising their babies, are fictions. Hrdy's (1999, 2009) uniquely gynocentric approach to the anthropological study of parenthood revealed several elements universal to human parenting. Central to these is the fact that human babies are so slow and costly to raise, our species has adapted by evolving into sophisticated cooperative breeders whose success is contingent upon sharing the extraordinarily complex and difficult tasks of raising a child from birth until its independence. Hrdy (1999) dispels two common myths: Firstly, that parents and babies always experience 'love at first sight' or that bonding is linked to biological parenthood. Rather, bonding requires time and proximity for its hormonal bases to develop, for men and women. For an adoptive parent, or father, lacking postnatal hormones, close contact with a baby enables bonding.

Secondly, the myth that mothers unconditionally commit to babies. Rather, mothers invariably make an initial, crucial decision about whether to invest in *this* baby. When they estimate the chances of either survival or a life without undue suffering to be too minimal, they may elect *not* to invest. The fact that bonding takes some days to fully engage, enables a weighed decision before attachment becomes too strong. Indeed, Hrdy notes that the vast majority of infant abandonments take place within 72 hours of birth. These hard choices may seem far from our way of life, and yet, they are not: A student of mine interviewed the mother of a multiply handicapped son. At his birth, he appeared so frail and deformed that she didn't want to look anymore. Everything in her screamed: this one will not survive, don't look, don't attach, don't invest. Parenthood – across time and place – is a project in survival and enormous bio-psycho-social investment.

Hrdy thus reveals and debunks the essentialist myth of a 'normal parent', replacing it with the more complex and less biologically determined parental subject. She too implies a profoundly ethical and existential foundation – the decision

to invest in new life – from which parent*hood* is built up in all its particularities. Hrdy positions 'ethic' in relation to 'survival chances', giving it a pragmatic twist. Equally, parental vulnerability hangs on these chances, as the potential pain of loss despite investment.
It seems, in conclusion, that, from whichever angle we approach it, *the impact of becoming a parent is radical, a phenomenology of massive impact and division of the self*. From a decision to sustain new life, to a confrontation with a 'radical other', becoming a parent means 'crossing the great divide' (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Harking back to Van der Pas' definition, this ethical, pragmatic and existential 'great divide' lays the ground for a split or incongruence in the parental subject, between an existential ideal and the reality on the ground. I take this up in the next section, where the parent in theories of parent*hood* is revealed as a very complex subject indeed.

### 2.2 Theories about parenting

I continue the discussion of what it is to be a parent from a number of psychological perspectives, beginning with the classic notion of parenthood as a new chance and of parents as having an implicit or explicit vision of parenthood, rooted in one's experience of being parented. This is followed by further review of theory about parenthood, starting with a broad scan of the field, and an explication of the few parent-centric models. I then briefly explore the theory on fatherhood, parenting in a couple, and complex parenthood, where the parental perspective, along with tolerance of diversity, proves equally lacking. Together, these explorations provide the context for a focused discussion of ambivalence, which, I will argue, forms a core element in parental subjectivity and sheds light on the difficulties of thinking about parents from a parental perspective.
Parenthood has been described by many as a kind of quintessential paradigm of New Opportunity (Rutter, 2006) for parent and baby alike. Whether the aim is to parent in opposition to one's experience of abuse, poverty, or repressive atti-

tudes – or as closely as possible to the positively experienced memories of one's childhood, parents invariably have hopeful plans. Marcelis argues that parents choose to procreate in the hope of better versions of themselves (1998:126). Cowan & Cowan write that, in addition to 'desire for an intimate and special relationship with their children', parents expect to experience 'changes in self [that] would develop them as adults' (2000:36). The connection of past to present is a central notion in psychodynamic theorizing about parenthood, and figures prominently in attachment theory. Fraiberg (1980) gave us the powerful metaphor of 'Ghosts in the nursery' for those aspects of the unconscious that impact parents, such as a long-forgotten experience of abandonment that makes a father unable to tolerate his infant's crying. Parenthood emerges here as a project in re-working the self.

**An overview of perspectives**

Students of social work are generally taught about parents from two perspectives, one of them pedagogical – such as the dutch 'opvoedondersteuning' or childrearing support (Blokland, 2009) – the other contextual (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987) and other family systems approaches. However, parenthood is theorized from a wider range of perspectives from psychodynamic (Benedek, 1959) to notions about adult development (Erikson, 1963), ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) or Belsky's 'Determinants of Parenting' (1984). Van der Pas divides the field of investigations into parenting into four areas: (1) those that examine 'regressive' impacts of parenthood; (2) studies which portray parenthood as 'phased', often parallel to the child's development; (3) studies that map trait and context as 'supposed *determinants* of parental success', and (4) studies 'focusing on parents' general, often 'inherited', *notions regarding child development*' (2003:72). While the first two areas attempt to understand something of the parental experience, the last two domains are primarily concerned with measuring the impact of parent variables on child outcome. Additional perspectives introduce complexity into the linear assumptions about parenting as the decisive factor in the quality of childhood. 'Child effect' (Bell, 1968), the impact

of children on parents, makes parenting a complex systemic affair (Kuczinsky, 2003; de Mol & Buysse, 2008).
From the domain of psychoanalysis, Winnicott's thinking on motherhood is some of the most comprehensive and nuanced we have, *and* he was the first to grant a mother her subjectivity. Winnicott's famous 'good enough mother' acts as a 'holding' container for the baby (1965), and though immersed in 'primary maternal preoccupation' (1956), she need not be perfect. In fact she might even at times 'hate' her baby (1947). Winnicott's work has since been noted to, at times, unwittingly shut down the very subjectivity he intended to open up, and his 'good enough mother' has been criticized for coming 'narrowly close to embodying yet another model of maternal perfection' (Kraemer, 1996: 769). Winnicott's and other classic psychodynamic ideas about motherhood have also been much updated and revised through the work of infancy researchers and revolutions within psychoanalytic theory.

***Parenting from the parent's perspective***

Based on a critique of parenting theories for being primarily child-focused; of academic knowledge for its superficiality about everyday childrearing'; and the 'deceptive nature of the concept "risk factor" in the explanation of problems of parenting' (2003:250) Van der Pas developed a schematic conceptualization of parenthood (2003; 2005). In it, she attempted to understand what mediates between 'risk' – difficult circumstances that impact a family – and the daily practice of parenting – the 'parental work-floor'. The resulting scheme has three columns, with the 'work-floor' on one side, the 'circumstances' on the other, and mediating processes, or 'buffers', in the middle:

*Work-floor <- Buffer mechanisms -> Circumstances*

The 'work-floor' consists of: *(a)* the daily, ongoing process of timing and titration of 'the big five' of parental behaviors – ensuring safety and physical caretaking, setting expectations and limits, gauging the child, and *(b)* regulating emotions. In the right hand column are 'circumstances' ranging from

the temperament of the child and the parents to the material, mental and physical well being of parents and children. Van der Pas (2005) found that four *favorable* circumstances appeared to 'buffer' the negative effects of a host of other less favorable circumstances. They are *(a)* 'a supportive society', anything from parent-friendly policies to social representations about parenting; *(b)* a social network to help the work of parenting; *(c)* a 'meta-position' or ability to stand back and reflect; and *(d)* 'good parent´ experiences' to generate confidence and renew motivation.

This *functional* model allows for a wide variety of individual and contextual variation. It is also integrative: The 'work floor' engages pedagogy and developmental psychology. 'Circumstances' recognize the impact of context ranging from the physical environment or family systems to individual temperament and psychopathology. Finally, the four 'buffers' connect to notions varying from humans' evolutionary dependence on shared childrearing (Hrdy, 2009) to Benedek's (1959) psychoanalytic idea of 'competence' as the building block of parental growth. The 'metaposition' connects with the concept of 'mentalisation' (Fonagy et al 2002) and a growing body of work on parental reflective function (Siegel, 2002; Slade, 2006).

Stern's (1995) 'Motherhood constellation' has many parallels to Van der Pas' work, but with an explicitly intrapsychic focus and limited to motherhood. Like Van der Pas, and others (Benedek, 1959), Stern believes that motherhood brings about a fundamental reorganization of the psyche, leading to permanent intrapsychic change. The primary frame of reference for this process is the triad *mother-baby-mother's mother*, as mother re-evaluates herself in relation both to her baby and her own experiences of being mothered. This process involves four themes. The 'Life-growth' theme touches on mother's ability to keep the baby alive, and the fear and fantasy this generates in the first, fragile phase of the baby's life. The 'primary relatedness' theme is about mother & baby's ability to attune and develop a relationship. These two themes elucidate the potential psychodynamic meaning of Van der Pas 'workfloor' activities for the mother. Stern's 'Supporting matrix' theme, like Van der Pas' 'social network' buffer, is about establishing

a network of people to help, and his fourth theme, 'identity reorganization' articulates the permanent changes brought about by parenthood in terms of mother's self/ identity.

**Fatherhood**

Despite a spate of new interest in fatherhood in recent years, there is still no 'comprehensive and cohesive body of theory about fatherhood in the psychoanalytic literature' (Etchegoyan (2002:33). From an evolutionary perspective, fathers are often unreliable, and in modern times, over half of divorced fathers stop being involved (Hrdy, 2009). Indeed, humankind's history of shared childrearing has largely depended on the roles of mothers and their female networks. Important exceptions are many non-monogamous native societies where women have several partners, increasing their chances of getting support (World Science, 2010). The involvement and experience of fathers is clearly context dependent, yet much theory about fathers seems to accept the problematic premise that men have biologically determined 'natural' functions.

Psychoanalytic theorizing describes three conflicts in becoming a father: 're-aroused sibling rivalry, intensified dependency needs, and reawakened oedipal conflicts' (Zayas, 1987:8). These themes center on the notion that a father may experience the pregnancy and birth as a displacement from his central role in the life of the mother. Why and how these conflicts are gendered is insufficiently addressed. Another anxiety for fathers, linked to traditional male gender *roles,* is the pressure to provide for the family's material and physical security (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998). Zayas' (1987) notes that the 'development of some kind of coherent father role' furthers men's adjustment to being a father. (p. 18). This need not be a traditional role, only a clearly articulated one that paves the way for internal representation of paternal identity. The Sterns note that fathers in egalitarian role patterns feel the experience 'has made them better fathers than they would otherwise have been' (1998:193). How might this work? Clearly much remains to be understood about the experience of fathers.

### Parenting Together

Cowan & Cowan (2000) found that becoming a parent is a profoundly disruptive experience for a parental couple. Parenthood decreases marital satisfaction, and causes mothers great heartache about returning to work. Multiple longitudinal studies show increased anxiety *and* depression, a 900% increase in marital stress, decreased communication and sex, a 40-70% decrease in overall marital satisfaction, and for women especially, a 'profound personal philosophical transformation...of values, goals and roles'. This challenge leads to growth when couples don't split up, but many *do* split up. The Cowans considered many levels of experience within and around the couple, including family and the broader context. Not just one element in this matrix changed significantly, but everything did. At the core of these changes is the complete re-negotiation of the couple's relationship. Yet, the baby does not allow much processing time, and parenting adds many new issues for negotiation. Stakes are higher, feelings more intense, and sleep deprivation forms the backdrop. They write, 'new parents are vulnerable and uncertain…They see their partner doing something that surprises, displeases or even frightens them. Given rushed schedules and high tension, they may read their partners mind in an attempt to understand what's going on – and easily come up with an interpretation that leads to misunderstandings and hurt feelings' (p. 91). Regulating feelings is also a capacity that suffers through parenthood stress. The Cowans point, aghast, to the structural lack of attention to this fact. Just as the parental perspective has been neglected in the theory about child rearing, so it has been ignored when it comes to couples.

### Complex parenthood

Here I touch on the many kinds of parenthood outside of the 'norm' of the culturally homogenous, biological, nuclear family – an institution Hrdy (2009) points out is less than a century old. She wonders why we haven't asked about the alternative family constellations and extended caretaker networks that may be equal or better than two parents. The essentialism of the nuclear family prevails in countless models of re-

search and theorizing, not to mention politics. Alternatives to this standard include parenthood in divorce and single or blended families; lesbian or gay parenthood; adoptive parenthood, complex biological forms such as donor insemination; and culturally diverse parenthood in cross-cultural couples or in the context of immigration. Complex parenthood is clearly not a small phenomenon, despite its marginalized place in theories about parenthood.

Having established the exceptionality of the intact, nuclear family, let's consider divorce, which impacts much of the population and has a larger impact on family constellation than any other factor. There is a wealth of research literature on divorce and stepfamilies, most of it stressing the negative impact of divorce on children (Wallerstein, 2005). Less is understood about how parents continue parenthood and parental relations in the face of a failed marital relationship. Van Leuven (2002) writes of separating the parental from the partner relationship, helping parents work together while bringing their other relationship to an end. Cottyn (2009) writes of blended families, being partners but not parents together, and the sense of not being 'natural' families. Once parents can open up to non-normative, heterogenous forms of relationship, a happier post-divorce life becomes possible.

Cottyn's ideas are equally applicable to non-biological, complex-biological, and non-traditional parenting. Shapiro et al (2001) view their research on complex adoption and assisted reproductive technologies as a study of the diversity of modern families, and suggest creating family narratives as a way of re-writing and expanding the traditional nuclear family narrative. Noting the pathologizing, even criminalizing rhetoric with which same-sex parenting is regarded, Thompson calls for a 'reconstructed conception of lesbian motherhood' which must 'account for the multiple ways in which heterosexuality functions as political institution' (2002:132).

One of the effects of this diversification is that the term 'family' is released from the hold biology had on it. Rather, like 'parenthood', family develops as a result of proximity, emotional investment, and ethical commitment.

Finally, complex cultural identity in parenthood is a topic

warranting further investigation. Meurs (2005) writes that normative western notions of 'development' and 'progress' create a powerful message to immigrants that our culture is more advanced and adjusting to it equals 'progress'. This is especially complicated for new parents who are re-connecting as part of their parenthood with cultural traditions. As with other complex parental identities, a more heterogeneous view is needed.

### 2.3 On ambivalence

*My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves and blissful gratification (Rich, 1977:21).*

In this section I explore the ambivalence of parenthood: under-studied and under-acknowledged, ambivalence is perhaps the most central experience of parenting, careening back and forth between intense enjoyment and loving feelings, and furious, frustrated, even hateful ones. In fact, ambivalence occupies a central place in the human psyche, featuring prominently in all intimate relationships where love and hate take up close quarters, and dependencies conflict with the drive for independence. These conflicts have particular intensity for parents, and herein lies a number of themes I will take up. The first of these, the 'illusion of complementarity,' sheds light on the broader problem of theorizing from the perspective of parents. Secondly, there is the problem of unacceptable or transgressive thoughts and feelings. Finally, ambivalence can be constructive. In the discussion, I use Parker (1995) and Kraemer (1996), the only authors to write in any depth on ambivalence, though both are indebted to a range of work on maternal subjectivity. Both focus primarily on early childhood, but extrapolate to parenting older children and beyond. Parker notes for example the ambivalence inherent to parenting teenagers, and motherhood in old age, with the twinned love and fury at being dependent on adult children.

Kraemer defines ambivalence as a disruption to any parent's 'primary need' to experience oneself as competent to meet one's children's needs: 'When nothing seems to satisfy the children, a sense of deprivation grips…along with intense frustration' (1995:87-88). Kraemer also notes how bound up ambivalence is with the bi-directional matching and mismatching of both parent's and child's subjective needs. Ambivalence is as easily caused by frustrated attempts to soothe and satisfy, as by *not* feeling like soothing or satisfying. Parker writes about the conflict of a mother who watches with great trepidation as her children run off down the street, hoping they will survive the dangers of the busy road, hating them for making her feel so insecure, yet knowing they are old enough. So entwined is ambivalence with the core of parenthood, that it becomes as complicated a phenomenon to unpack as it is universal.

Both Parker and Kraemer focus their work on mothers, largely because of the stigma attached to maternal ambivalence, rendering it more shameful and problematic than that of fathers. Indeed, there is no literature on paternal ambivalence, other than in the classic sense of fathers feeling ambivalent about committing to the responsibilities of parenthood. However, many of the maternally focused points in the discussion that follows, may apply to fathers and to parenthood as a whole.

**Myth of complementarity = Neglect of parental perspective**

Both Parker and Kraemer 'believe we suffer from a long tradition that requires us to foreclose on our thinking about mothers' anger, aggression and hate.' (Kraemer 1996:768). Why is this? Here, we can think of the expectations of parenthood more generally, and how the task of parenthood has long been formulated as a 'complementary relationship' (Benjamin,1995) with one member of the dyad exclusively caretaking, while the other is cared for, one in the background, the other in the foreground: The parent is 'object' while the child is 'subject'. *Suddenly, something falls into place: A construction of parenthood with complementary relations as a primary mode, has set the conceptual stage for difficulties in seeing the mother or father as subject. It means that parents can never be considered beyond*

*their function, as caretaker and responsible for a child. No wonder, then, that so much theory and practice has wound up stuck in the limited discourse of parents as child rearers*. No wonder the incessant focus on the 'responsibility' of parents, as opposed to the parent's own awareness of being responsible and all of the tensions, contradictions, and struggles associated with this – that is, its elaboration through the subjectivities of any parenthood. *We must start thinking about parents as 'autonomous, changing and developing subjects, rather than as their children's "objects"'(Parker, 1995:9).*

There are two powerful ways in which we are held hostage to the myth of complementarity. One way is through injunctions about the child's helplessness, greater need, and hence his *right* to a complementary relationship without any of the requirements of intersubjectivity – a relationship of two subjects. This 'inescapable reality of the baby's greater dependence and need for the mother as…object' (Kraemer, 1996:768), overthrows any move to consider the mother as subject, even derailing the mother herself from admitting or coming to terms with her own subjectivity. Indeed, the second grip the myth of complementarity has, is on the parent's own ego ideal. Parents want to be good parents, in line with their parental ambitions. And yet, as we have seen, the parent is never that *unitary* as a subject, the ideal doesn't match the reality on the ground. The problem is what it does to a parent to *not* feel intuitively attuned to the child. We must 'begin to examine what experiencing her subjectivity means to her', Kraemer writes, (p. 768), and what might this examination entail? 'How does the mother survive the moments in which she discovers that she has emotionally dropped her baby or wishes to do so?' Kraemer asks, and then answers that it requires 'self-holding and internal struggle' (1996:771). Struggle, indeed, with the parent's own internalized 'myth of complementarity', and the self-reproachment it generates.

**Unacceptable feelings!**

If the mother is not only a 'container' but is also 'subjectively present', Kraemer notes, we must then 'confront the possibility of her refusal, of retaliation, or even of collapse… the reality

of even the good enough mother's unwitting uses of her baby as a container for her own needs and emotions.' (1996:775). Herein lies a real difficulty posed by parental ambivalence – the unacceptability of a parent 'using' a child, emotionally or physically. The very notion catapults us to the other end of the spectrum from parental goodness to images of abuse, making it difficult to contemplate those feelings or interactions about which a parent might feel ashamed without actually damaging children. This is the spectrum of parental feelings 'from thoughtful containment to retaliatory abuse; a spectrum from pulling up a zip roughly to outright acts of violence. It is perhaps reassuring to think in neatly bifurcated terms of those mothers who contain and those mothers who retaliate, but small moments of aggression will well up and pepper even the most caring of mothers' (Parker 1995:87). This is about aggression, and the other 'unacceptable' range is sexuality. Oxenhandler (2001) writes about widespread anxiety and confusion about sensuality and eroticism in the context of child-parent relationships, following an epidemic in revelations of traumatic sexual abuse. Her thesis that eroticism pervades intimacy in all its forms, differentiates between abuse and the universal experience of unacceptable or forbidden thoughts, and feelings. Conscious awareness of transgressive feelings does not automatically create transgressive *acts*.

**How ambivalence can be helpful**

Parker's central thesis is that ambivalence is not a bad thing; rather it is an *avoided* thing about which we have become fearful. Her argument is that maternal ambivalence, by provoking a crisis, brings new and useful elements of mother's experience into view, which can be worked through, and which spur the mother's curiosity about her child. Only by acknowledging her difficult feelings, can she find her way to the other side of the crisis. The irritated mother who pulled the child's zipper too harshly, catching his skin and rupturing it, is likely as shaken by the experience as the child, and will pause to reflect on how this situation came about. Perhaps it is long overdue that he zip his own coat, yet in the rush of the morning routine, she has been giving in to his refusal, his

demand to remain a baby, complicated by her desire to allow him that space that she didn't have as a child in wartime, when she had to grow up too quickly. The crisis prompts reflection; something shifts.

A second way in which ambivalence can be constructive, is in the benign and not so benign ways it scrambles the subject-object relationship between parent and child. Samuels (1989) notes there is also an important place for parents responding to children authentically, even when this may not appear to be optimal from the perspective of a childrearing manual. Parker gives an example of a mother, driving and screaming at her kids to stop fighting in the back of the car, her uncontrolled outburst meeting shocked silence, after which the children become sweet and soothing. This example can be pathologized as bad parenting or it may be read as usefully showing the children how they impact others: either way, it is an example of unbridled parental subjectivity which temporarily demands a containing response on the part of the children. In the same vein, but looking in the opposite generational direction, ambivalence enables retrospective views of our own parents' subjectivity. Kraemer writes, 'in experiencing herself as drained, for example, she wonders about the ways in which she may have drained her mother with her need; in discovering her feelings of hate, she wonders about her mother's despair or fury' (1996:776) This connects with Stern's (1995) triad, *baby-mother-mother's mother*, and with his emphasis on mother revisiting her relationship with her mother in order to develop her own maternal identity. My adult client recently discovered that her mother's withdrawals had been caused by depression. It was a huge relief for her to suddenly have a means to make sense, retroactively, of her mother's inexplicable absences.

Finally, Kraemer writes of the complexity of the mother's feelings about the child's response to her: 'Paradoxically, the mother may be most able to sustain her inner balance precisely when her child's response is...vigorous and penetrating, and not collapsed' (1996:787). The mother, at the same time she feels hateful and destructive, equally wants the child to survive her destruction: 'just as the baby relies on the

mother's ability to survive his or her aggression and ruthlessness…the mother gains an enormous sense of relief, satisfaction, and even pride when she sees her baby's vitality confirmed through his or her angry protests, even when they are expressions of the baby's feelings about her and how she makes him or her feel.' (1996:788). *Mother's hatred is but a temporary obliteration of the steady base of parental ambition (wanting the child to thrive, wanting to parent well), rooted in a sense of being responsible.* Feeling safe or allowed to have ambivalence exerts a containing effect on the experience.

**Conclusion: Parents torn between ideal and reality**

The first part of this chapter established the existential grounds for what I will call the 'split parental subject', torn between the 'parental ego ideal' or awareness of being responsible and one's inability to ever fully make good on the ethical commitment implied by this awareness. This theme proves to be perhaps the most comprehensive element of parental experience, both forming its broader cognitive and existential context, and punctuating the particularities of its practice. Though most theories of parenting prove at best incomplete in elucidating parental experience (whether generally or in relation to fathers, couples, or other forms of parenthood), those models that *do* consider the parent as subject, further explicate this tension between the 'parental ego ideal' and the compromises parents inevitably make. Indeed, these theories illustrate the considerable intrapsychic and social resources required to juggle the parallel demands of parenting practice and all its circumstantial stressors. Finally, ambivalence emerges as the heart of parental subjectivity, the sudden, upset, pressured, frustrated, forbidden, and furious condensations of intensity, both destructive and, potentially, constructive. Here, the tension of 'ideal' versus 'actual' is at its most heated, enabling us to see the 'complementary' discourse about parenthood in its starkest relief – the idea that parents are defined by the needs of their offspring, and should 'naturally' act accordingly, which accounts for the inability of so many theories, models, paradigms, and approaches to consider the parent or person behind the child rearing role.

# 3. Surviving parenthood

*Ring the bells that can still ring / Forget your perfect offering*
*There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in (Leonard Cohen)*

After exploring what it means to become a parent, and how that affects people in existential, emotional, social, and material terms, we may truly wonder how it goes so well. How do parents survive the complex assault that it is parenthood? How do most succeed in rearing their children in spite of the great challenges that parenthood presents? We have seen the stress and the intensity of parenting, the ambivalence, shame, and powerless fury that it can engender, in all kinds of everyday moments in the lives of any parent. Statistics suggest that 1 in 20 parents commits some sort of abuse or neglect (van der Pas, 2010). Indeed, abuse and neglect are part of the same slippery slope upon which all parents struggle to find their balance. What we must truly wonder, is how 19 out of 20 parents do *not* abuse in spite of the stresses of parenting. In this chapter, I explore parental resourcefulness and what that might consist of, as a phenomenon and as a construct. Secondly, I explore the 'village it takes' to help parents raise children, and in particular the role of experts in the village, for whom adequate training is an important element of this Lectorate. Who are the experts and how do they help parents, or not?

### 3.1 On resourcefulness

For much of my first two decades of clinical practice, I was fascinated by resilience, and by understanding how parents

managed to work through trauma and shame, disadvantage, and marginalization (Weille, 1994; 1999; 2002). Today, I chose the word 'resourcefulness' because it is broader than resilience. While resilience entails recovering from adversity, resourcefulness implies the use of resources for managing a wider range of circumstances, including those stresses and strains that may not to as readily be conceptualized as adversity but which are nonetheless trying indeed. For this describes parenthood: 'circumstances' that impact every parent so ubiquitously as no longer to warrant special status. In this section I will make some remarks about parental resourcefulness as seen in theories of parenting, before moving into an explication of resilience, which lends further insight into parental resourcefulness.

In chapter 2, two kinds of resourcefulness emerged, which are so intricately bound up with each other as to be inseparable in more than a conceptual sense. First, resourcefulness corresponds to one's own abilities or competence as a parent, both in relation to the tasks of parenting, and in relation to managing the circumstances that strain parenthood. Secondly, there is resourcefulness in garnering all manner of social support. Van der Pas' (2005) four buffers follow this pattern – two of them about the parent's competence and reflective function, and two related to society and the social network. Stern (1995), traces the ways that a new mother builds up intrapsychic resourcefulness, which relies both on finding herself able to care and attune to the baby, and on organizing a team of helpers in both practical and identificatory senses. This theory particularly illustrates the interweaving of intrapsychic and social dimensions of resourcefulness. Finally, Parker's (1995) idea of 'surviving ambivalence' generates resourcefulness in the form of a greater capacity to tolerate internal contradictions and destructiveness.

In a concept-analysis of resilience, Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) notes that as an overarching concept, resilience is more a dynamic process than a trait. Indeed, the word has the vital, active connotation of bouncing back. The overall gestalt is one of effective coping, mastery and positive adaptation. Rutter (2006) defines resilience as 'an interactive concept that refers

to a relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity' (p. 1). He differentiates resilience from traditional concepts of risk and protection. Where resilience focuses on 'individual variation in people's responses to the same experiences', 'risk' and 'protection' both 'start with a focus on variables, and then move to outcomes, with an implicit assumption that the impact of risk and protective factors will be broadly similar in everyone, and that outcomes will depend on the mix and balance between risk and protective influences' (p. 3). Rather, resilience entails a 'move from a focus on external risks to a focus on *how* these external risks are dealt with by the individual' (p. 8). This prioritizes exploration of the unique and active ways that parents cope with parenthood, in spite of whatever statistical profile they may occupy. For that is precisely where too little attention has focused, as too often risk and protective factors are seen as sufficient information to determine the professional approach to parents.

### 3.2 The village it takes

There is much to be said about the role of the 'village' in enabling parents to survive the difficult elements of parenthood, making more space to enjoy all of parenthood's positive sides. In the first two chapters, we saw that the 'village' can be a significant source of criticism and insecurity, or it can function as a buffer (van der Pas, 2005).
In the previous section, the social dimension of parental resourcefulness emerged strongly, and that is what I take up in these last two sections. I begin with the village in evolutionary context, and then look at the role of experts – school and clinic; social discourse within the parent-professional relationship, and parents as peer experts.
Hrdy notes that only among humans, is maternal and alloparental generosity sustained for so long. Contrary to common assumptions, the 'continuous-care-and-contact mothering' assumed by Darwin to be the 'natural gold standard' and later advocated by Bowlby, is actually a 'last resort for primate

mothers who lack safe and available alternatives' (2009:85). Because humans produce such costly and slow young, extended family and allo-networks are the more logical 'gold standard', increasing both child survival and the quality of parenting (2009:103). Indeed, researchers conclude that 'an extended network [is] the best predictor of later advanced functioning' (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999:723). Hrdy writes, 'it's not that having a responsive mother does not matter (of course it does) but that infants nurtured by multiple caretakers grow up not only feeling secure but with better-developed and more enhanced capacities to view the world from multiple perspectives' (2009:132). In a crucial caveat, Hrdy notes that shared care works for children when the carers are well known and available over time, as would be expected in kinship networks or small communities. Cowan & Cowan (2000) document the painful struggles of mothers without such networks – the reluctant trust in the child-care they are able to organize, and the complexities of finding care of any sort that fulfills the 'extended kinship longings' for a fantasized ideal grandmother or an enthusiastic older cousin.

### 3.3 Experts in the village

Cowan & Cowan (2000) noted in their study of new parents, that professionals, though invariably supportive and well intended, enquired about the baby, and the childrearing, but not the parent. This all too common experience seems to be the corollary of the problem of professional thinking on parenthood having limited itself to child development and parents as child facilitators. Van der Pas (2007) notes that when the parent's 'audience' is 'Experts', whether real or imagined, the parent tends to feel easily criticized or shamed. She suggests that what makes the difference, is whether or not the expert advice is clearly suffused with an awareness that parents are their own worst critics. Rather, the expert becomes helpful by recognizing the fundamental difficulty of the parent's task, and shifting the professional focus from an analysis of parental weaknesses (which the parent can do him or herself)

towards helping parents to reflect on their parenting experience and practice.

### Everyday experts: Parents and the school

A quick perusal of the literature on parents and school, makes a clear first impression: Parents have been thought about, in 99% of the literature, in relation to the impact they have on children's school performance (e.g. Carpentier & Lall, 2005). A few writers have investigated parents' experience of their children's school, or the school's experience of the parents. Knop & Swick (2007) explore the effect of parent perceptions of their relationships with teachers on parent involvement in school. Citing a number of studies, they note that 'most literature describing parent involvement strategies takes a 'school-centric' view of parent involvement which ignores the needs and perceptions of the parents…Too often early childhood professionals assume they understand parent perspectives and that they have established meaningful relationships with the parents that they serve. Many parents, however, indicate that they are rarely consulted on important issues regarding their child's schooling and the family-teacher relationship' (p. 291). They describe the importance for parents of trust in the teacher and a sense of the teacher projecting a 'positive attitude toward the parent and the child'. They also address the complexities of differing cultural and other norms regarding the parent-school relationship, which may lead to unspoken differences in expectations. For example, a parent may avoid school involvement, thinking it to be a sign of disrespect or not trusting the teacher, whereas the teacher will interpret the same parent's behavior as uninterested or not caring about their child. Finally, parents are 'powerfully impacted by how early childhood professionals relate to their children': It makes a crucial difference for a parent to feel that a teacher really understands – moreover, likes – their child.

In a list of characteristics parents want from early childhood professionals, the notion of partnership between parents and teachers emerges strongly in Knop & Swick's study, with a high level of communication and a strong sense of collaboration or even seeing each other as colleagues in a mutual team,

featuring the most clearly. They also stress the importance of the teacher sharing more of her experience of the child with the parents, and learning more about the parents' view. Shields' (2009) study found these elements to be missing. Parents suggested that they were 'positioned as outsiders' to the school. For example, 'you just feel slightly scared...I do get a bit told off sometimes...you get talked to like you're a pupil'; or 'you almost feel guilty asking a question...' and 'you feel a little bit nervous because you don't want to be seen as a bit of a troublemaker...' (p. 244). These remarks suggest parents feel almost like they are children in relation to the teacher, which flies in the face of the parents' decidedly adult responsibility for their children's upbringing and education.

Krapels (2004) considers both school and parental perspectives, lending additional insight into the ways in which their relationship might suffer or even break down as the result of misunderstandings and differences of perspective. He notes that the parent is not just impacted by his own relationship with the teacher, but also by his child's relationship to the teacher. However, while the parent is primarily concerned with his own child, the teacher is concerned and responsible for a whole class. This situation is further explicated by Frank (1992) who describes education as an emotionally laden project, in which children carry to school the anxieties, aspirations, and investments of their parents, to which teachers respond with their own vulnerabilities and investments as professionals. Such a situation is ripe for humiliation, escalation, and injury, the anticipation of which makes parents *and* teachers defensive.

### Clinical Experts: Parents and helping professionals

The helping professions span a broad range of disciplines, settings, types of parental or child problems, and seemingly more methods and techniques than there are parents. What sort of 'experts' do parents deal with when they enter the clinic – for evaluation, prevention, advice, guidance and therapeutic intervention – for their children and/or themselves? Such professional contacts may involve medical, pedagogical or psychological issues, on the part of parent and/or child,

and practitioners ranging from nurses to pedogogues. Parents may feel supported or judged, seen as a child rearer and/or parent, and treated as a colleague, patient, nuisance, expert, or child. How this goes, depends on the situation, the reason for the visit, the kind of child, the parent, and the professional. But one thing is certain: the professional probably had no specialized preparation for professional contact with parents.

Kraemer (2009) writes about her consulting work with parents, and staff, in a Neonatale intensive care unit. If anywhere there is a place where professionals are important for parents, it is this moment of new – often first time – parenthood of a baby whose fragile life is on the line. Kraemer writes that 'nursing studies report that mothers identify nurses as the number one factor in their NICU experience and the *number one influence on their mothering*' (italics mine) and yet, 'most NICU staff have virtually no formal training in working with and communicating with families, and very little is understood about the psychological complexities of conditions such as postpartum depression' (2009:154). Her work, as it turns out, is not only to hold the parents, but also the staff, who are stressed and overwhelmed by their relationships with parents.

For students from social work to psychology, it can be confusing to imagine what kind of professional works with parents, as indeed parents are worked with in many different ways. Some of these may involve intensive contact with parents, such as dedicated parent guidance positions within clinical settings ranging from medical to psychiatric. These practitioners might come from a professional and theoretical background of social work, psychology, pedagogy, nursing, couples therapy, family systems therapy, child psychotherapy, psychiatry, and more. Alternatively, practitioners might work in settings where contact with parents is briefer, less intensive, or more advisory. One discipline that straddles both sides of this *rather unclear dividing line* is Pedagogy. Based mainly in learning theory (Janssens, 1998), Pedagogy is a heavily subscribed professional domain in the Netherlands, unlike the Anglo Saxon world where it is virtually unheard of. The prac-

tice of 'Childrearing Support' tends to be exclusively focused on childrearing. However, that is not to say that there is no interest in parents. Blokland, a major author in this domain, writes 'what is good for parents is also good for children' (2009:56). My own contact with this professional group, has yielded the impression that those who work with parents on matters of childrearing, become increasingly interested in delving further into the parenthood from the perspective of the parent. Ehlers & Kuipers (2009) for example incorporate Van der Pas' theory into a method entitled 'parent-oriented pedagogical advice'.
What various practitioners *do* with parents, depends on their theoretical approach. As a result, each touches on a relevant part of the parental picture but doesn't address the parent specifically as parent. Parent training and child protection contexts use protocols and certified methods, the one more evidence based than next, approaching parents as childrearers. Adult psychotherapies may view parenting as a life cycle phase, or as a complicating factor in a couples treatment. Family systems approaches work on the whole system (Wiebenga, 1998). Child therapies may view parents as facilitators (or hindrances) of children's development. Exceptions to this trend include the Belgian Interactie-Academie, where parental subjectivity receives a significant place in the context of narrative social representation (Baert, 2001). In the field of child psychotherapy, parent-infant psychotherapists may work, in the tradition of Fraiberg's (1980) 'developmental guidance', with great sensitivity and depth with the parent's internal world (Hopkins, 1992), as do many child therapists (Siskind, 1997; Tsiantis, 2000).

**'Parent-guidance position' in professional-parent contacts**

Van der Pas' (1994) 'parent guidance position' recognizes that parents who seek help, do so on behalf of a third party, their child, and are thus a special kind of client, neither patient nor colleague, but something of both, with an independent psychological make up that while intricately bound up with the child's psyche, is also separate from it. The parent guidance position views the parent as a 'consultation seeker' and considers him or her to be in charge of the professional contact

and its trajectory. Further, the parent guidance position holds as central the notion that all parenthood creates enormous vulnerability for parents. Van der Pas is not alone in recognizing the need to adopt a specialized approach to working with parents. Stern (1995) also finds it important to abandon the classical (therapeutic) position with new mothers, and to become more actively supportive and concrete, acknowledging their 'real' vulnerabilities. Professional organizations such as the Dutch Association of Child Psychotherapists have set up committees to re-think the needs of parents in clinical work with children, resulting in sensitive and useful practice guidelines (Alexander-Martijn et al, 1994).
What binds these efforts to think about parenthood as a phenomenon in its own right, is the shared recognition that parenthood is a developmental, life changing experience with profound impact. And what binds the associated efforts to take up a parent guidance position, quite possibly in very different ways from different professional angles, is the shared understanding that parents, by always involving the triangle *child-professional-parent*, present complex methodological dilemmas. What makes the parent guidance position effective – *a question that bears further exploration* – seems to be the inherently empathic stance that is generated in any professional by realizing the vulnerability of parents sitting in front of them, combined with the inherent respectfulness of recognizing parents' quasi collegial awareness of being responsible. This stance has immediate impact on the tone and tenor of any professional conversation, from the routine well-child medical check-up to the acute psychiatric clinic.

**Impact of social discourse on parent-professional contact**

In a social constructionist approach, Fontelli (2009) suggests that the exploration of social representation may be useful in systemic therapeutic work to help clients unpack implicit assumptions – their own, and those of the culture, which by definition are intertwined – about their difficulties and about themselves more generally. This seems especially applicable for parents, who are besieged by societal judgements and pressures. By becoming conscious of these assumptions, par-

ents can feel less stigmatized for not adhering to a perceived norm. Moreover they can develop a wider repertoire of ways to view their approach to parenting and their relationship to the broader culture. Equally, practitioners of all kinds, in all settings, are suffused with socially constructed narratives about the parents they work with. Rains et al (2004) describe how three agencies construct 'the teen mother' according to public discourses: as a problem-teen mother, as young mothers, and as potential social activists…and then treat the young women accordingly. The 'problem-teen mothers' are handled punitively; the 'young mothers' are treated as mothers but with a paternalistic tint that blames their families for letting them become 'fallen women'; and the 'social activists' are encouraged to support each other and take more responsibility for themselves. The key issue, is the degree to which the client is construed as *teenager* or as *mother*, and the clients *act accordingly* – for example, more resistant and immature when treated as naughty teens. Agencies and professionals everywhere, have a discursive 'margin of maneuver' that makes a difference, though many are unaware or choose to ignore this.

**The informal network and parents as 'experience experts'**

Here, I turn to the notion of parents as experts for each other. First, a caveat about the 'informal network'. We know that social isolation is associated with abuse and neglect, and evolutionarily speaking, Hrdy reminds us it is linked to survival altogether. And yet, as Hoek, Miley & Remmerswaal (2010) point out, it is not enough for a parent to *have* a social network, rather, the network only 'buffers' parenting when the parent is able to *use* it. Countless factors – shame, social anxiety, distrust – can prevent a parent from dipping into the pool of social resources. Indeed Parker (1995) notes the uneasiness and complications of mothers supporting – and simultaneously judging – each other: Cusk (2001) provides a direct example of trying to befriend another new mother, but being thwarted by their ricochet of mutual anxieties about appearing too extreme, too pathetic, or not in line with the one or another internalized set of expectations. This too, is complicated.

One of the terms to emerge in recent years, is 'pedagogical

civil society', by which is meant the informal climate and resources for parents in rearing their children. Hermanns (2009) makes a plea for a less professionalized and clinicalized approach to the problems of childrearing, noting within the psychological and psychotherapeutic disciplines in particular, an unfortunate turn towards diagnostically-driven overclassification. In contrast, social network interventions such as the 'family group conferences', mobilize social resources to support parents in crisis. Indeed, parents prefer support from peers or family (Nys 2010). Parent support groups offer this, even when facilitated by professionals. I have led groups for parents of sexually abused children (Weille, 1999) and believe, with Nys (2010), that these are helpful for isolated, difficult to reach parents. Van der Zwaard (1999) describes the peer support of poor, 'neighborhood mothers', who function as translators, advocates, and trusted teachers. Cowan & Cowan's (2002) pregnant & postnatal couples groups, illustrate the huge value for parents of opportunities to reflect about being parents and partners, at a crucial time. Finally, in a constructivist group for abusive and neglectful parents, Aderman & Russell (1985) note that the parents act as a peer reflecting team. Empowered to make their *own* judgements rather than accepting therapist-authority, the parents often come up with the same conclusions.

**In conclusion: What *does* it take to support parents?**

If we approach this question in relation to working with parents in multi-problem families, we can perhaps best glean the core properties of good parent practice, and from that, draw some overarching conclusions to this chapter about what it takes for parents to survive parenthood.

Last summer I was talking to an old colleague from graduate school, who now directs the intensive home based family intervention and treatment programs for multi-problem families at an agency where she has been working for almost 25 years as a clinical social worker. She is used to calling social services on a regular basis to report abuse and neglect, and working with parents with Big Problems, requiring extensive community liaison with guardians, foster carers, social ser-

vice workers, and many other treating agencies. Something about her stories, over the years, has impressed me. First, her unending enthusiasm for her work, and secondly, the way she talks about the clients. I couldn't put a finger on this until she described the words of a visiting colleague. He said, 'you know the thing that always strikes me about your agency? You *like* each other, and you *like* your clients'. Indeed, all her stories about clients exude friendliness, even when parents are making a mess of things, or drunken fathers are making threats. She talks about setting limits on manipulative abusers, about struggling with a mother to make the difficult call to report that she has lost control and hit her kids. Yet she doesn't seem to judge them as people, she knows that they do this because they invariably have trauma histories and other problems they can't resolve overnight. She has as much compassion for the parents as for the kids. 'The great thing for me about this work' she told me, 'from being there so long, I get to see how things *do* slowly get better: In some cases I know three generations of a family I worked with when I first got here. We know exactly how *their* problems developed! But they're a little bit better from having gotten the help.'

### *Old principles in new clothes*

What exactly supports parents? This conversation with my old colleague sparked off a longer discussion of the principles of good practice with vulnerable, faltering parents. We both noticed the emergence over the years of many patented programs and evidence based interventions. We wondered to ourselves, what makes a program effective? After brainstorming about 'multi system therapy', 'functional family therapy', 'dialectical therapy' and others, we concluded, simply: they follow the principles of good, trauma-informed, clinical social work practice. Programs and interventions work when the workers build a good therapeutic alliance (respectful, empathic, authentic, and culturally/ diversity sensitive); they think systemically; are client centered and strengths based; and they integrate practical with emotional help. The meta-perspective of these methodologies of help is less about shaming or judging and more about taking a functional-

flexible approach, which helps workers to empathically meet the client where they are at. For parents, this includes the elements of Van der Pas' 'parent guidance position', as the parent's complex and difficult position is respected along with their vulnerability.

Finally, transparency is a crucial element in an approach that takes the parent guidance position. My colleague speaks to her client who got drunk and left the kids alone all night, as a mother whose being a mother by definition means that she is not happy – *even if she is defensive* – about what she did, and that she agrees, *even if she is ambivalent* that *if* she is not able, as childrearer, to keep her kids safe, then she may need more assistance in doing so. There is no furtive calling of social services and avoiding this mother's humiliated rage, but rather a transparent, realistic assessment together with the parent. Turnell and Essex (2006) and others echo this approach, even when abuse has been denied. Schrever (1999) talks about writing 'parent friendly' reports, echoing the refreshingly iconoclastic suggestion made by the psychoanalyst Stoller (1988), that practitioner reports should always be a joint project, both readable and read by all parties, and reflecting accurately the concerns of the clients.

Finally, a word about empathy, which can be tricky: Marcelis (1994) writes that empathy is a condition 'sine qua non' for parent guidance. If practitioners 'can be sensitive to, and empathise with the enormously complicated task of parents, then they will help them to be sensitive to, and empathise with their children' (p. 4). Echoing Fraiberg's (1980) approach Marcelis notes that 'only when mother is comforted, can she hear her children cry'. Indeed, empathy is the crucial turning point where parents move from primary identification with the child's distress, to a secondary position from which it is possible for that primary identification to be transformed into a motivation, and act, to comfort the child (Benedek 1959). In my own work with parents with abuse histories (Weille, 1994, 2002), an issue that emerges in relation to this process is the block in empathy caused by the dangers of post-traumatic 'flooding' triggered by a primary identification with the child. This is where the 'trauma-sensitive' part of good

practice comes into play, and yet, seemingly this perspective and training is not automatically a component of training for child protective workers. Why might such an obvious piece be missing? Possibly because, yet again, the parental perspective has not been thought through, or received any significant attention in a program of training that focuses exclusively on children, their development, and parents as childrearers.

***The eternal parallel process: vulnerability, support and reflection***

This description of how empathy is blocked in a parent, may be applied to practitioners too, in whom blocks in empathy can appear for a host of reasons. Confrontation with an angry, defensive parent, or identifying with his hurt child, are obvious examples of how it is difficult to empathize with a parent. Here we see the issue of parallel process in the face of parental intensity, or as Adriaenssens (2009) writes, of child protection work, the 'fear of the fear'. In analyses of the challenges of working with parents in that domain, Taylor et al (2008) and Waterhouse & McGhee (2009) draw on Menzies' famous study (1960) of the unconscious ways of containing anxiety in a hospital where staff were faced with suffering patients whom they had a limited ability to help.

Menzies' conceptual framework helps understand the splitting and other defenses against overwhelming anxiety and pain – the 'powerful existential threats' – generated by work with human suffering, arguing that workers in child protection contexts face a similar degree of overwhelming and indigestable trauma, adversity and suffering which they too are limited in their power to help. Menzies described how the hospital organized shift work so that no nurse would have too much contact with a particular patient; how excessive use of protocols attempted to contain and control the unpredictable course of illness and suffering; and responsibility was consistently transferred upwards or elsewhere. Both sets of authors note the 'Judements of Solomon' involved in difficult and uncertain decisions about child protection, which create fears, splitting in the system, and attempts to simplify complexity that result in polarization and the 'institutionalization of suspicion'. Reflection and support are essential in counter-

acting the fear, paranoia, and parallel processes that get enacted. Waterhouse & McGhee discuss how clients, more often than not entrenched in the social conditions of poverty and disadvantage, in turn are worked with by workers who are underpaid, poorly supported (yet hugely criticized for their mistakes) and overwhelmed by high caseloads.

But these issues are not limited to child protection. Practitioners who work in multidisciplinary teams with parents and their children, invariably experience parallels between team, treatment and parent-child dynamics (Zaat, 2001). De Gouw (2005) suggests that there are numerous parallels between collegial intervision and parent guidance, not to mention parenting itself. All entail the navigation of a complex relationship with conflicting requirements: Trust, emotional safety and containment, but at the same time, flexibility and a willingness to lose one's way in a perilous land without a map. Ironically, it is the wilingness to admit uncertainty that has been identified as the most important factor in minimizing child protection error (Turnell & Essex 2006). That implies a willingness to admit and tolerate vulnerability in oneself as a professional, which in turn parallels the commitment of the professional to respect the vulnerability of parents. And parents in turn must both hold their children and set them free, tolerating their own uncertainty and ambivalence in the process. These are the eternal parallels, running all the way up to the need for 'societal solidarity' in social and political discourse.

# 4. Conclusion & Lectoral plans

### 4.1 Professional training and practice

In the first section of this chapter, I propose a basic program of education as a foundation for the strikingly wide range of disciplines in which professionals have contact with parents – not just helping and clinical professions, but also in the domain of healthcare and education. In addition to curriculum development and implementation, this requires dealing with issues of professional identity and the question of what everyone who has any professional contact with parents should know and be capable of, as opposed to what sort of professional work with parents may be more specialized, requiring additional knowledge and skills.
In a review of social work and social pedagogical curriculum that I conducted as part of a vision statement for Leiden University of Applied Science, last year, I found that there were no courses that dealt with the phenomenon of parenthood in its own right. While there are courses on support for childrearing, on family therapy, and even a masters in child protection, not one of these programs or the multiple methods they teach, actually includes psychology of parenthood from the perspective of parents, nor a related methodological approach. In fact, this situation is common and widespread, and not limited to one type of institution – I hear the same complaint from post-graduate psychologists and orthopedagogues, and it is also true for schools of education, nursing and medicine, to say nothing of training for clergy, lawyers, judges, etc. Yet, all these professionals will have contact with

parents, often about very emotional matters – a sick child, or one who is failing in school; a parent who is divorcing, or experiencing a spiritual crisis.
The Lectorate in parenthood and professional work with parents holds as a starting position: Every professional who has contact with parents, should learn about the psychology of parenthood, with all of its vulnerabilities, and its moral and social embeddedness. Every professional should be able to take up the parent guidance position, no matter how minimal their contact with parents may be.
This past fall, we began a Minor in parenthood and professional work with parents, in collaboration with Hogeschool Zuyd. This program includes both of the above elements, integrating practice and theory, and additionally considering some of the judicial, policy, and special contextual elements of parenting, which are useful and important for grounding the subject in the societal context in which both parents and professionals operate. I hope eventually to incorporate these elements into customized basic curriculum for *all* students in *all* departments of the school for whom it is relevant. Eventually other schools may be inspired to take a similar approach.
Developing and planning further curriculum requires an assessment of what is needed for practice, which I aim to achieve through a multidisciplinary dialogue with the professional field. Elements of this process, which began almost a year ago with a discussion on professional standards for working with parents, is also needed to address the question of what sort of professional skills and knowledge for working with parents may be specialized, as opposed to what is generalist.
Alongside the discussion of professional questions, the Lectorate will host symposia and workshops for practitioners and students with experts from the field. The first of these is planned on the afternoon of the inaugural speech. Another plan in the works is for the Lectorate to host the renowned Lekkerkerker symposium which brings international speakers to the Netherlands.

### 4.2 Research: On parental resourcefulness

The central research focus emerging from this paper, is to query what goes well with parents, and why. Here, I identify two potential lines of investigation on this topic, and discuss their relevance to the goals of the Lectorate.

First, I would like to explore how parents generate and use community, particularly when community is not readily available. When the network is fragmented by divorce, or left behind by immigration; or when there is a sense of not 'fitting' in or being able to draw on 'standard' community resources. Such investigation would enable a better understanding of how parents generate resources, in spite of these barriers. This has wide relevance, including for practice in child welfare contexts where social isolation is common, as is feeling 'outside' the mainstream.

Following on from this first topic, is 'Support that works': what are the key elements of professional practice that help parents? This is a question to consider across a wide variety of professional contacts ranging from parents and the school, to parents in medical contexts. We know from a large clinical literature, that the parent guidance position is crucial and effective, simple yet difficult but ever so profound in its impact. How might this practice wisdom be studied in a research context? What might we learn from it that can be taken back into practitioner education?

### 4.3 Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, it emerged that parents, who are besieged by collective fantasies and illusions of a perfect childhood, are equally 'under fire' from a *core tension* inherent to being a parent, between the parental ego-ideal and the less than perfect reality on the ground. At the heart of being a parent, lies a philosophically and materially unbridgeable gap between the parent's awareness of being-responsible – forever – and his or her inability to ever make good on that existential promise. The vulnerability this creates for parent

and child alike, and all the ways it is constructed, embedded, repressed, and managed, form the core existential or foundational experience of becoming and being a parent.

This theme continues throughout parenthood, modelled by various theories, and centering on notions of parental struggle, growth and needs for social support, personal competence and reflective function. Attempting to articulate the inarticulate messiness that constitutes much of parenthood, these models illustrate parental efforts to maintain equilibrium – whether by hanging on to shreds of 'good parent' experiences that bolster the sense of congruence with the parental ego ideal, or by employing reflection as a means of containing the strain of ambivalence and transforming it into a more integrated, committed and yet realistic perspective. Social support weaves in and out of these processes, acting on many levels to promote them – whether in the form of babysitting that enables reflective time, or a child friendly restaurant that eases the shame provoked by overly boisterous children.

The discussion of ambivalence reveals how parenthood has been set up as a 'complementary relationship' that occludes thinking about parents as subjects, or paternal or maternal people in their own right. This brings the tension between ego ideal and reality to a head, with huge consequences for how society construes parents and what it expects of them. *If we can allow parents more subjectivity, so we can also develop more respectful and realistic policies and programs, rather than the frustrated 'blame' policies that we see in the discourse of recent years*.

Finally, parental resourcefulness emerges as a co-production of the inner capacities for motivation and reflection and the ability to mobilize and use the social supports that both bolster these capacities and provide the endless forms of practical and moral support that parents are continually in need of. Here, the role of experts emerges as a critical and tricky element in the repertoire of parental resources. For it seems that a crucial 'parent guidance' stance is needed for *any kind of professional practice to be able to truly support parents.* This stance finds multiple parallels, and is ultimately about what *everyone* needs: to be recognized and treated as the fully subjective human beings we all are, and to feel contained and understood.

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# About the author

Katharine-Lee H. Weille earned her bachelors degree from Wesleyan University in 1986, and a masters in clinical social work from the Smith College School of Social Work in 1989. Between 1987 and 1995 she worked as a psychotherapist in inpatient, outpatient and day treatment settings with children and families; with adult men in a medium security prison; and as the director of a clinic treating sexually abused children and their families. Through these experiences, she developed interests in trauma and the complexities of working with parents.

Between 1995 and 1997 she worked and studied at the Tavistock Clinic in London. In 2004, she received a Phd in Psychology, from the University of London, Birkbeck College. Since 1997, Dr. Weille has engaged in a variety of postgraduate teaching, clinical and research supervision, and research at several universities and institutes for postgraduate training in the UK and Holland. Throughout this time she has maintained a clinical practice where she sees adults and couples, many of them parents. In October 2009, Dr. Weille took op the post of Lector on Parenting and Professional Work with Parents at Leiden University of Applied Sciences.

Dr. Weille's interest and engagement with issues of parenthood and professional work with parents, forms part of a broader interest in groups or individuals whose identity is sufficiently complex as to render the available norms and theories inadequate for making sense of their experience. Examples of her engagement with this theme have included, in addition to parenthood, complex cultural identities and non-normative sexualities.

## Colofon

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*Dr. K.L.H. Weille*

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