

# The First Relationship

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INFANT AND MOTHER

Daniel N. Stern

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

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*For my children*  
*Michael, Maria, Kaia*



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## Introduction

I HAD NOT REREAD *The First Relationship* since it was published. When I did so, I was astonished to find in it almost all the ideas that have guided my work in the subsequent decades. At first I didn't know whether to be depressed or delighted. As I thought it over, though, I was encouraged by the realization that I had some basic perspective at the very beginning that was sufficiently well founded to guide twenty-five years of observation and ideas.

Three ideas were (and are) fundamental. First, we needed to view the infant and the mother in natural interactions. Only there could the largest range of capacities be seen, in both the baby and the mother. Infants are naturally social beings, so it is in a social environment that their abilities are revealed. Similarly, real maternal behaviors could only be seen in the presence of a real (and ideally, a beloved) baby who would elicit these behaviors. Experimental situations would not do, not alone. They capture too small a slice of life and lack the context needed for full understanding. Before experiments, we needed (and need) descriptive observations.

Second, we needed new methods for these observations, methods scaled down and adjusted to the split-second and nonverbal world of mother-infant interaction.

Third, a guiding concept was essential for a meaningful viewing



of mother-infant interaction, from both a clinical and a common-sense perspective. “Mutual regulation” was that guiding concept. It captured the notion that both mother’s and infant’s behaviors could largely be explained as mutual attempts to regulate the baby’s momentary state—which might be hunger, arousal, joy, excitement, and so on, depending on the time of day and the specific context.

Some of these ideas are present in full in *The First Relationship*, though of course I have explored them more fully since. Others are there as outlines or suggestions. This short book makes it possible to see, or foresee, the unfolding of an intrinsic design. In this introduction I will trace some of the paths followed in fulfilling that design.

The observations on which this book was based began in the late 1960s. At that time only a handful of people were observing parent-infant interactions, especially naturally occurring ones, in minute detail. Such close observations had only just become possible, thanks to the new availability of portable television and movie cameras that were reasonably priced and not impossibly heavy. TV became the new microscope for seeing behaviors that passed in a split second. You could look in slow motion, freeze a frame, review as often as needed. A fascinating world opened up—a small world, but the foundation for so much else.

When you have the wonderful opportunity to be among the first people to see a new world, many of its surprising features are striking enough that they force you to reevaluate your preconceptions. You quickly grasp a new perspective and new realities, such as the fact that nonverbal behaviors like those observed in animal ethology—a head pushed forward, or tilted up, or turned away rapidly to the side and down—need to be the starting points for observing human social behavior. This original perspective and the ideas that it



gave me have played leapfrog with the ideas of many others over the years, including (though this is not an exhaustive list) Roger Bakeman, Beatrice Beebe, T. Berry Brazelton, Judy Dunn, Alan Fogel, Catherine Garvey, Michael Lewis, Colwyn Trevarthen, Edward Tronick, and Peter Vietze.

Unexpectedly, the people who were initially most interested in these kinds of observations, even before some psychologists, were choreographers and dancers. These artists were fascinated by observational techniques such as stop frame, seeing action in reverse, speeded up, slowed down, all the choreographic techniques then being explored. In a sense my first collaborators were these dancers and choreographers. Once a month they would come uptown to Columbia and we would watch the interactive dance of mothers and babies. Then I would go downtown and watch these same viewing techniques used with their works in progress. The mother-infant interaction I was watching seemed to be an elaborate dance choreographed by nature. (In fact, the working title for this book was "The Dance between Us.")

### *The World Seen Small*

This new approach taught me that the important actions occurred in seconds and split seconds. If mothers and babies interacted on this micro-local level, then micro-techniques of analysis were needed. At this scale it became necessary to reconceive the units of discourse. As a psychiatrist, I had been taught to identify behavioral (clinical) "units" such as "intrusiveness," "sensitivity," and "rejection." These were too large, too global, too vague for what my colleagues and I were doing now. The new behavioral units became gaze aversions, head turns, speed of physical approach, duration of a facial expression, small shifts in arousal, and so on. Now we could unpack "intrusiveness" and see what tiny behaviors made it up; we



could even subcategorize types of intrusiveness. Just as important, the new smaller behavioral level permitted, even forced, us to see events (such as “intrusiveness”) from the baby’s point of view: the baby could perceive head turns, shifts in arousal, and facial expressions as the mother and we could, while a construct like “intrusiveness” could be meaningful only to an adult.

This perspective, a combination of human ethology and psychology with micro-analytic techniques, sparked a series of research projects to follow up many of the features first identified in this book. For instance, further studies were begun on the vocalizing patterns between mother and infant.<sup>1</sup> We found that mothers use systematically different melodic phrases for different messages—questions, orders, “Pay attention,” “Oh, that’s okay.” For the baby, the music comes before the lyrics.

Other projects were launched to explore the grouping of behavioral clusters and sequences. After all, for a totally naive observer, the behavior of others appears to flow out in a stream, like an unknown foreign language. Where do you cut it into units? How do you “chunk” it? The importance of real time, and the infant timing abilities discussed in *The First Relationship*, became the subject of further studies.<sup>2</sup> These studies showed that parents tended to group their actions and speech into relatively short phrases that were most often built around an intention. “Formatting” like this made the task of parsing or chunking much easier for babies, and made their parents more comprehensible to them. Parents were intuitively helping their infants not only to parse social behavior but to interpret it in terms of the intentions of others. A step toward intersubjectivity was under way.

These shifts in level and scale required reconsidering the basic units of parent-infant interaction. By the time I wrote *The First Relationship* it was clear that discrete behaviors such as a mother’s surprise-face might be the functional units of interaction, but that they



occurred in larger groupings, where their meanings seemed to depend on the sequence they were in or other contextual features.

For instance, a game of peek-a-boo does not consist of one single appearance of the mother's head accompanied by one surprise-face, but of a series of varied repetitions, in which the timing and the exact surprise-face differ slightly at each reappearance. The sequence builds, in a pattern characteristic of each mother-infant dyad (for example, explosively or surreptitiously), to some equally characteristic end point. The end point may be sustained and shared hilarity. The baby may become overstimulated, which stops the game. The game may end abruptly, before the baby's joy and excitement have peaked. These "packages of behavior," or "episodes of engagement," or "themes and variations" captured our attention because they are the material from which the baby learns what it is like to be with his mother. What can be expected to happen? What usually happens? What is normal? From there, it was only a short step to suggesting that these dyad-specific interactive packages are the experiences upon which the infant constructs a representational world of his caregivers.

This was the germ of a much larger idea: that the internal world of "objects"—that is, people—is made up of repeated sequences of interactive experience. In my view, the internal representational world has a solid base in the reality of lived experience. This is a view at odds with the traditional psychoanalytic belief that much of the internal object world is based in fantasy.

While I continued along these lines,<sup>3</sup> this book also led me down another path. Because of all the micro-analytic findings of what behaviors a baby could see, hear, and feel, I felt more grounded in hypothesizing about the infant's construction of his own world of experience. My task began to shift from developing an objective description of the mother-infant interaction to inferring how the baby might construct these interactive events into mental schemas or



representations. This seemed necessary if the enterprise was to be clinically useful.

What was the nature of the infant's internal world? How was it constructed and from what units of experience? Attempts to answer these questions, which began with this book, have taken several steps.

*The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985) was based on the assumption that the same basic unit of repeated interactive sequences with the caregiver presented in *The First Relationship* was generalized to form RIGS (representations of interactions that have been generalized). I proposed that these made up the internal world of the infant.

Ten years later, in *The Motherhood Constellation* (1995), the same unit for internalization took on a new incarnation, in the form of "schemas-of-being-with." With the terminology of schemas-of-being-with, vague as it can sound, I hoped to include any and all manner of interactions between a mother and an infant: how a feeding is likely to proceed, how they play exciting games together, how the mother quiets the baby down, how putting to bed is ritualized, how prohibitions are handled, and so on. I wanted to cover all the sequences that take on a regular, almost canonical form and that can become internalized models used to evaluate current experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The next step along this road was to pay attention to the vignette-like quality of these experiences. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end and a line of dramatic tension; they are tiny narratives. The "proto-narrative-envelope" represented the next incarnation of the internalized interactive unit.<sup>5</sup> This unit was fully subjective, temporally dynamic, multi-modal, and narrative-like but remained correspondent with objective behavioral "reality."

The path, then, led from the interpersonal process units and characteristic interactive sequences described in *The First Relationship*, to "RIGS," to "schemas-of-being-with," to "proto-narrative en-



velopes.” Perhaps there will be yet another development, another turn in this narrative. Looking back, I see that all the basic elements were already present in the original conception laid out in this book. Different variations with different emphases have been needed to deal with the basic idea from various perspectives: clinical, metapsychological, empirical research, or parent-oriented.

The attempt to imagine the *Diary of a Baby* (1990), as if a baby could describe his experience, was a new (and enjoyable) way for me to continue struggling with the same questions about the infant’s internal world. Of course I fully recognize the problems of taking imaginative leaps in constructing a baby’s experience, even though the leaps were made from the trampoline of empirical observations, but the effort had two useful consequences. First, parents found the book illuminating. Second, writing it led me further in my explorations of the nature of subjective experience, as imagined or actually lived, moment to moment.<sup>6</sup>

I am still moving along this path. The curiosity about subjective experience that began for me with *The First Relationship* continues in a book I am now writing, to be called something like “The Present Moment: A View of Subjective Experience in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life.” In it I am exploring many questions that were implied in *The First Relationship*. How can we imagine an infant’s experience if it is confined to the present? It may not be. If it isn’t, in what ways does it reach beyond the passing moment? What happens in the psychological present? How long is it? Even more basically, is it long enough for anything to happen in it? After all, the view of time given to us by the physical sciences is of a moving point; as it moves, the present instant eats up the future and leaves the past in its wake. But the paradox is evident: the present itself is so thin that it effectively has no duration, so how could anything happen in the present? How can we imagine a subjective present moment that endures long enough to “hold a world in a grain of



sand”? How do such moments of experience get strung together to make larger meanings? How is the present moment influenced by the past? *The First Relationship* opened the door a crack to such an approach. *The Diary of a Baby* pushed it ajar. Now I am flinging it open.

### *A Normative Prospective Approach*

A second major line of inquiry begun in this book concerns the adoption of a normative reading of infancy as it unfolds, rather than retrospective theorizing in light of later psychopathology. At the time that my research began, developmental psychology was largely a normative endeavor, but clinical psychologies as applied to infancy were not. The dominant theories, greatly influenced by psychoanalytic thinkers—Freud, Klein, Mahler, even Erikson—described the phases of psychological development in terms of some later form of psychopathology. This resulted in concepts of clinical development—“normal autism,” “normal symbiosis,” “the depressive or paranoid position,” and so on—all applying to the first years of life.

However, within the new framework and time scale presented in this book, these pathomorphic and retrospective notions seemed not simply unfounded empirically but wrong-headed. My colleagues and I simply did not see these things when looking at the micro-local level. For instance, a young infant in the proposed “normal” phase of primary narcissism should, according to that theory, be largely uninterested in and inattentive to the external world and minimally attracted and related to other human beings. But quite the opposite is true when you observe real babies. They seek external stimulation. They have clear preferences for certain stimuli. They attend carefully. This is especially true when the external stimulation is human. They engage their caregivers fiercely, avidly.



This realization opened up another path for exploration. How to explain various forms of psychopathology? It was clear that “normal” forms of psychopathology were not phases of normal development that the child or adult could return to in an act of regression. How then was the development of psychopathology to be explained from what we saw during development at the micro-local level? In *The First Relationship* I approached this question by examining the characteristic patterns of mutual regulation by the mother and infant at the micro-local level of interaction. This examination yielded broader categories of regulatory failures such as overstimulation, understimulation, and paradoxical stimulation for the several basic states that need to be regulated in the first year of life: arousal, sleep, hunger, activity, joy/pleasure, and so on. We observed that some mother-infant pairs evolved patterns of, say, chronic overstimulation, for all states that wanted regulation. Others were only overregulating in dealing with one state, such as sleep.

At the same time, we realized that perfect regulation was neither possible nor desirable. What was important was the patterns that evolved within the dyad for repairing derailments in the regulatory process, since these occurred often. The way misregulations were repaired taught the infant important coping mechanisms.

A conceptual shift began—toward explaining later pathology in terms of the accrual of characteristic regulatory patterns and the establishment of coping styles to repair misregulations that only later proved maladaptive. These potentially pathogenic patterns could be seen prospectively and viewed at the micro-level of interaction, allowing some preventive/therapeutic strategies to be formulated. For instance, if play sessions began well but always ended with the baby crying and the mother feeling angry and inadequate, we could examine what went wrong. Perhaps the mother was being insensitive to the baby’s signals of impending



overstimulation, pushing him over the edge of his tolerance until he cried and withdrew. (This might never have occurred with her older daughter, who had a much higher tolerance for stimulation.) These observations also left a therapeutic door open to explore with the mother the reasons (including psychodynamic ones) why she might have this selective insensitivity, or how she might best handle a temperamental mismatch with her infant.

The notion of identifying regulatory patterns has since spawned an array of therapeutic/preventive approaches to problems in the parent-infant relationship. Such approaches have met with considerable success and are now widely used. These are described in detail in *The Motherhood Constellation*, which has carried forward the line of thought started in this book, as have other publications.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that attachment research was pursuing the same basic assumptions during this time, though placing its emphasis on the patterns of regulating the specific states of attachment/security and exploration/curiosity. The long-term predictive success of the systematic observations of early attachment patterns is now well known.

The normative prospective approach based on perceived interactive realities also led to a different way to conceptualize the development of stages in the sense of self. I proposed that the sense of self that was possible at any point in development depended on the micro-interactive capacities available to the infant—including interactions with his own body, actions, feelings, and thoughts, as well as interactions with others. As new capacities appeared in development, new ways of sensing the self would be possible. Ultimately, the recognition of new capacities depended on micro-observation of behaviors. This new use of our old method provided a more empirically based view of the evolution of the self with new clinical implications. For instance, it proposed that an infant had a core



sense of self already differentiated from the mother well before the end of the first year of life. In contrast, traditional psychoanalytic theories saw the infant as still undifferentiated from the mother and unable to discriminate self from other.<sup>8</sup> All this was present in an embryonic form in *The First Relationship*.

The normative approach at the micro-local level developed in this book permitted a different view of the mother's caregiving repertoire. For the vast majority of normal and even neurotic mothers, this repertoire is effectively intuitive, as shaped by each mother's cultural context. In other words, the book suggests that under most conditions a mother's caregiving repertoire need not be taught, in fact cannot be taught, but it can be disinhibited. It is possible for latent maternal behaviors to be "discovered," so to speak, and put to use with the right supportive context. There are, however, a few mothers who seem not to have this basic intuitive repertoire and need almost to be taught how to be mothers. These ideas later led to some of the central points elaborated in *The Motherhood Constellation* (1995) and *The Birth of a Mother* (1998), where the role of the psychotherapeutic relationship with a mother is seen as a, perhaps *the*, major curative element in reestablishing this intuitive repertoire.

### *Implicit Knowing*

Implicit versus explicit knowledge in the mother-infant relationship is another key theme in this book. Studying interactions at the micro-local level made it clear that infants schematized interactive patterns well before they could talk. Before events could be verbally and symbolically represented, infants' early interactive knowledge was somehow encoded in a nonverbal register. What is more, most of the mother's behavior seemed to be intuitive—that is, implicit,