

A Serious Case
of Neglect: The
Parental Expe-
rience of Child
Rearing; Outline
for a Psychologi-
cal Theory of
Parenting
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'A SERIOUS CASE OF NEGLECT: THE PARENTAL EXPERIENCE OF CHILD REARING'

Outline for a Psychological Theory of Parenting

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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VOORWOORD Doctoral Thesis

SAMENVATTING / Summary in Dutch

Three decades of working with parents taught me sensitivity to the complexities of child rearing, and to the diversity of ways in which parents cope with them. One decade of delving into professional literature about parenting, child development, and work with parents made me aware of lacunae in current knowledge about parenting. If studied at all, parenting is approached from the viewpoint of child development ñ while no one would consider studying children solely from a parental viewpoint. The concepts 'parent' and 'parenting' remain implicit, even in the writings of theoreticians with a sincere understanding of parental dilemmas. A coherent conceptual framework is lacking, or is at best fragmentary. As many examples in these pages will illustrate, an integrative theory of parenting and problems of parenting simply does not exist. The gradually growing awareness of this theoretical void has been my incentive for undertaking this study.

Scholars of differing professional backgrounds have already been stirring the century-old, entirely child-centered discourse about parenting, and about its being never 'good enough'. The generally assumed centrality of parental influence on the development of children - from the child's earliest moments on, and into the period in which she becomes a parent herself ñ and its inherent determinism are beginning to be persuasively questioned. Finally, more attention is being given to the interrelatedness of social conditions and the quality of parental child rearing. Concern about increasing the insecurity of parents by demands for perfection inspires some of these treatises.

Child psychologist Scarr (1992, 1993, 1995), for example, ignited a fierce debate in the journal *Child Development* with her contention that, as long as parents are not clearly dysfunctional, their influence on child development is less crucial than

the child's genetic endowment. Her plea is for freedom for parents 'to care for their children in ways they find comfortable ... and for more freedom from guilt when they deviate (within the normal range) from culturally prescribed norms about parenting' (1992, p.15).

Harris (1998), writing for a wider public and not averse to iconoclasm, takes this point much farther, and argues that parents, and their much-heralded relationship with the child, have less influence on the child's development than the joint influences of genes and peers. Although 'very, very bad parents may cause irremediable harm to their children' (p.390), children's later psychological ills cannot be 'traced back to things that happened to them when they were quite young and in which their parents were implicated' (p. 4).

Dunn & Plomin and their co-workers (Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Pettit & Lollis, 1997; Plomin, Asbury & Dunn, 2001) introduced the ideas of 'nonshared environment' and of mere chance to explain the phenomenon that siblings are different rather than similar, long before they experience peer influence. 'Siblings are treated differently by their parents and by their siblings and, even if their treatment seems to be similar, they may experience it differently' (1990, p.41). A parent is not the same father or mother with each child, and problems with a child do not necessarily point to problematic parenting.

In tune with this view, twenty-one renowned authors questioned, in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (1997), the long-held assumption that parents socialize children to a greater degree than the other way around. Going far beyond Maccoby & Martin's (1983, p.436) focus on 'the importance of the match/mismatch between parents' socializing efforts and children's readiness to be socialized', this point of view opens up the possibility of different bidirectional effects in different relationships, in different domains of one relationship, and within the context of other relationships. In other words, not only does bidirectionality shape parenting continuously, it does so differently in each situation.

Adding the perspective of social-anthropology, Hrdy (2000) raises the importance of contextual constraints on mothering, and thus on parental effects. Mothers of all species are schemers, she posits, who give top priority to quality of offspring - not to quantity. But parenting does not come naturally, not even for human mothers: 'A woman predisposed to be a mother can learn to love any baby, while a mother not so disposed does not even learn to love her own'. Hrdy then continues with this ominous sentence: 'This is what it means to live with the emotional legacy of a human who evolved in a hominid context where mothers relied on assistance from others to help rear offspring' (p.116). Support and social conditions determine the quality of mothering, Hrdy avers.

The sociologist Hochschild (1997) presents the finding that parents may, indeed, not be so 'predisposed' to their task as is generally assumed. American parents of different social classes - given the opportunity to work overtime - prefer more work, plus the concomitant 'time bind', to the hassle at home. The social conditions which Hochschild considers responsible for this situation, i.e. 'the rising power of global capitalism, the relative decline of labor unions, and the erosion of civil society' (p. 258), are beyond the influence of an individual parent.

These authors do not see eye-to-eye in many respects, but they are in agreement about the following point. The impact of parenting is not as determinant of children's development as experts have claimed, and as parents hope and fear. Too many factors are involved as co-determinants of the parental impact - genetic endowment of the child, siblings and peers, chance, and

contextual constraints, for example. Parents tend to evade their task, because not even women are naturally endowed for child rearing, and any one parent - or two - can accomplish only so much.

The purpose of this study

The authors cited are sympathetic to the plight of parents, and they open up the discussion of parent-child relationships by bringing considerations which are unconventional in their field to the fore - non-linear, non-psychological, non-Western considerations. Their primary concern, however, remains child development. Their conclusions are not based on a theory of parenting, nor does such a theory result from their conclusions. And where do parents stand amidst their observations, statements and findings? How, exactly, do parents cope with time binds, with the rising power of global capitalism, bidirectionality of effect, unalterable genetic endowments, their children's peers ñ and with chance?

This study aims to address these questions, and to bridge the chasm between the traditionally child-focused discourse regarding parenting, and the perspective of those whom it concerns - parents themselves. The only way to make sense of both - academic discussion and parental reality - is to develop an overarching conceptual framework which allows for differing theoretical viewpoints, and for the differing ways in which 'parenting' manifests itself.

The angle from which this book is written is the perspective of the parent, and the first hurdle to be taken is a definition of the word 'parent' which represents core experiences of parenthood: the awareness of being responsible, and the vulnerability which this implies. The value of such a definition is threefold. (1) It enables us to describe child rearing in ways that make sense to those who bring up children and to those who work with parents, because it explains both parental accomplishment and failure. (2) It accounts for what I call the parental perspective: a perspective with which some existing concepts regarding child rearing can be put to better use. (3) Its ramifications lead to new concepts, to a clearer insight into the dynamics of parenting, whether successful or problematic, and should lend new inspiration to research regarding parenting.

Contents of this Foreword

In the following section three different versions of an imaginary child-rearing situation illustrate both the angle from which I view parenting, and the level of conceptualisation which in my view is necessary. These vignettes are followed by a description of how I went about gathering my data, how I made pre-reflexive experience explicit, and developed and tested new concepts. For the reader who is not familiar with the field, this necessitates a brief history of professional work with parents in The Netherlands. A review of my professional wanderings and struggle with mainstream literature may clarify my dissatisfaction with current practice, and justify my uncomfortable position in relation to much of the mainstream literature. More than just a few words are needed to explain how an understanding of widely different manifestations of parenting necessitates a level of theorizing which has a wider range and a larger scale than those usually applied.

A summary of each chapter introduces the book's plan; a clarification of some basic terms, and of my use of pronouns, rounds off these introductory pages.

Different vantage points

Three vignettes of an ordinary child-rearing situation exemplify how the lens of the parental experience works, and what it can uncover. They also indicate the theoretical level of my argument. First, I zoom in on a seemingly simple unit of parental behavior.

Vignette I - Father A helps his two-year-old to get dressed, and remains cheerful despite the fact that the girl decides, after a green shirt has been pulled over her head, that today she is going to wear the blue one, which is in the washer.

A slow-motion film of this father's behavior, however, would show this unit of behavior to be a complex fabric of doing for the child what she is not yet capable of doing herself, while coaxing her to do what she can; allowing her time to experiment with zippers and buttons, until father takes over because time is running out; a mixture of compliments and raised eyebrows, of saying 'good' or 'oh-oh'; of protecting her from falling or failing, without interfering with her awkward efforts; of controlling impatience, while keeping her focused on the task.

This complex fabric of behaviors, decisions, and emotions becomes a major achievement when we widen the lens to the surrounding situation - to siblings and family.

Vignette II - The girl's four-year-old brother screams that the seven-year-old sister has hidden one of his shoes. The mother reacts grouchy, partly because she has been up twice during the night, when the two-year-old had one of those nightmares that are not uncommon at her age; partly because the four-year-old is slightly retarded and should not be poked fun at by his older sister; and partly because the eldest - who is her stepchild - needs to leave for school in fifteen minutes and should be doing other things. The parents have to leave for work and wonder whether the neighbor, who takes care of the two-year-old today, will be on time. The telephone rings. Father answers, while still directing the two-year-old. Grandma needs someone to buy her medication. Father resumes helping the two-year-old to get dressed.

In family B, with the same background and composition, and at the same time of the day, the following scene occurs.

Vignette III - Father B yells at the two-year-old when she demands the blue shirt instead of the green one. He criticizes mother for her gruffness with his seven-year-old daughter, then 'helps' mother to scold her, causing the girl to use some forbidden words. He is curt when grandma calls. Both parents get worked up about the neighbor being late, and take their frustration out on the children. The two-year-old angrily threatens to rip the green shirt. Father tightly grabs her wrists. She screams. Mother tells father to get out of the way: she herself will get her dressed. Both parents leave late for work.

On the basis of these data, father B seems a rather incompetent parent. A professional helper feels tempted to advise him on how to handle a 'terrible two'. This might be of help, but of course the father's problems with the two-year-old may be related to problems in his childhood; or perhaps the 'fidgety' girl is hyperactive and father's 'insensitivity' a symptom of parental burn out.

From an observation post with a wider view, as assumed in vignette II, one wonders how anyone can function in such turmoil! A professional feels tempted to discuss with the parents B how to restructure the morning ritual, and to advise father B not to help mother, nor to disqualify her when she scolds his daughter. And are the two-year-old and the seven-year-old perhaps acting out resentment towards the retarded brother because of his getting too much attention? Do they mind the fact that both parents work? Or is this remarried family simply coping with new step-parenthood, and does this prevent smooth cooperation of the newlyweds? Might grandmother be interfering, with claims for filial attention? Yet family B is not necessarily problematic. It shows common characteristics of double-wage-earner families during the morning rush hour, of remarried families in the throes of trying out new ways of interacting, and of families with a mentally handicapped child.

A multitude of hypotheses presents itself to explain why one father can cope, while the other father falters. For the clinician to make an informed guess, another, still wider, view is needed: a level of analysis which integrates the combined ideas of Scarr, Harris, Dunn & Plomin et al., Pettit & Lollis, Hrdy, Hochschild, and many other creative thinkers to whom I shall refer in this study. An eye for the large patterns and mechanisms of micro-micro linkages, that are typical for parenting, is crucial to the level of analysis which is needed to explain why one father can cope, while the other father falters.

The method behind this study

This study may be classified as a hermeneutic exercise, in that it 'seeks to elucidate and make explicit our practical understanding of human actions by providing interpretations of them' (Packer, 1985, p.1088). As such it has a double stake.

Its first aim is to argue that current theories and concepts regarding child rearing, including much concomitant empirical research, tend to accentuate the 'product', child outcome, while almost turning a blind eye to the 'producer', the parent, and to the parental experience of child rearing. A definition of the word 'parent', which underlines the inherently impossible nature of the parental responsibility, serves as a sensitizing concept in my perusal of the relevant literature.

The second aim is to remedy the relative neglect of the parental viewpoint, not only by making preliminary attempts to fill in some conceptual gaps, but also by introducing an alternative and more adequate theoretical framework for the study of child rearing by parents. As an heuristic device this framework should improve the quality of the widespread praxis of 'professional work with parents'. My argumentation strives for the level of lucidity (or 'intersubjectieve navolgbaarheid', Van IJzendoorn & Miedema, 1986) necessary to inspire a scholarly debate about the usefulness of this framework, and directed at refining it. It should also be sufficiently persuasive to inspire empirical research which tests the framework's credibility.

In other words, I argue with the existing literature on child rearing, and I argue for a relevant definition of 'parent', for alternative descriptions of child rearing, and for a framework for analyzing problems of parenting that makes sense to parent, practitioner, and scholar alike. The resulting whole of definition, analysis of the literature, new concepts and theoretical framework represents a qualitative research endeavor, which can be defined as 'the process of making sense of narrative data' (Tesch, 1990, p.4).

My narrative data are the experiences and perceptions of parents, as related to me and my colleagues during many years of working with parents, and my observations and those of my colleagues, as documented in so many case files. Data never exist as such, however, or speak for themselves. They have to be 'made': observed, gathered, interpreted and combined, and it is the observer-gatherer who, by making combinations of data and interpreting them, makes them speak. In both empirical research and clinical practice, data are endowed with meaning only within a theoretical framework, and both gathering and (re-)arranging are guided by more or less well-articulated concepts. It is within such interpretative interaction ñ between theory and reality ñ that reality becomes coherent and meaningful, and that observations and ideas develop into an organized whole: a theory.

My contribution to a hoped-for psychological theory of parenting is based on a critical confrontation of 'narrative data', on the one hand, with relevant concepts and theories regarding parenting, child rearing and development, on the other. It is, thus, an exercise in the systematic application of so-called practice wisdom: 'The accumulated and well-integrated whole of knowledge, convictions and values with regard to praxis which a professional collects on the basis of personal and professional experiences' (Hutschemaekers, 2001, p.24). 'Such practice wisdom', Hutschemaekers continues, 'is partially personal, partially typical for one's profession or discipline' (ib.). And, one may add, such practice wisdom is related also to scientific knowledge. That it is personal is inevitable, in so far as it concerns knowledge that has grown from the clinical experience of a specific person. But precisely because this practical knowledge is connected with a discipline and a profession, and with a body of scientific knowledge, it can surpass the level of private insights. Systematic accounting for practice wisdom reinforces its profession-related character, and contributes to the development of theory regarding its subject ñ in this case parenting.

The subjective experiences of parents helped to polish and sharpen the lens with which I 'read' and analyzed the literature, and reconstructed and analyzed my work experience. And 'insightful analysis' (Dehue, 1996, p.278) was used to build a bridge between praxis and theory with regard to parenting. In the course of this process the idea arose which is the foremost theme of this study: that psychology as a science has neglected the parental experience of child rearing. A by-product of my review of the literature is my conjecture that a psychology of parenting cannot be developed 'organically', on the basis of existing knowledge. The existing knowledge is inherently child-oriented, while a veritable psychology of parenting must use the parental viewpoint as its point of reference. Therefore, and to do justice to parenting as a central function of adulthood, a new graft on the old and respectable tree of psychology is needed: parentology, or the parental experience as a separate object of study.

Personal professional development preceding this study

In this section I describe how I gathered my data, what prompted new interpretations and combinations, and how I approached this task. But I begin with the backdrop of this study: the past and present state of professional work with parents in The Netherlands.

The history of professional work with parents in The Netherlands

In 1928, the American child guidance movement (Joint Committee, 1926; Robinson, 1930; Stevenson & Smith, 1934) had already been introduced in The Netherlands, but it was only with the introduction of social case work, after ww ii, that the Dutch child guidance clinics grew in number and quality. The clinics were modelled on the American example, and they developed their own training centers for the psychiatric social workers (psw's) who worked with the parents before and after diagnostic study of the child, and who coordinated the helping process.

When I entered the field, in 1958, child psychiatry had just begun its development as an autonomous branch of psychiatry (Crutcher, 1943; Harms, 1960; Selesnick, 1965; Bowlby, 1988; Chess, 1989; Sanders-Woudstra, 1986, p.5; Baartman & Weidner, 1987); child psychotherapists were few and far between (De Bruin-Beneder, 1992), except in the few psychoanalytically oriented agencies (De Levita-Isaac, 2000); intelligence tests and other psycho-diagnostic instruments were few in number and lacking in sophistication (Evers, Zaal & Evers, 2002). But, although the instruments for the diagnosis and treatment of children were not optimal, these professionals were devoted to helping the children who were presented to them. The work took place in an unhurried fashion, and every clinic had up to eight psw's: almost without exception women, the majority of them unmarried, and working full time. The theory at their disposal consisted of psychoanalytic concepts and those developed by social case work. Their function was clear-cut, and they knew their trade. In fact, they were the backbone of the multidisciplinary teams - although these were, invariably, headed by a psychiatrist.

Some scattered remarks in historical overviews by psychiatrists testify to the competence of the old psw. Szurek, Johnson & Falstein (1942) mention 'the many years of excellent and successful collaborative work that has been done with the psychiatric social worker seeing the mother [!] and the psychiatrist seeing the child' (p.511). Selesnick (1965) writes: 'The psychiatric social worker became a core participant in guidance clinics and the contribution from that profession's work with parents kept the eye of child psychiatry upon the dynamics of family life. ... Indeed, it distorts the story somewhat to speak of the history of child psychiatry without recognizing its dependence upon psychiatric social work' (p.378). In a recent historical overview of training for child analysis in The Netherlands, De Levita-Isaac (2000) mentions the 'specially trained psychiatric social worker, from whom a child psychiatrist who saw a child for assessment or treatment, could learn a lot' (p.70).

Their's was, alas, an exclusively oral tradition. Considerable knowledge and practice-theory were handed over from one generation of psw's to the next through individual supervision. psw's did not write down what they did, knew, or thought. As Virginia Robinson had already pointed out in 1930, complaining about 'the case worker's timidity in the interpretation of her own material', the psw hesitated to raise her voice in the multidisciplinary team, let alone in professional journals.

In 1963 the Dutch child guidance agencies delegated the training of psw's to generic schools for advanced training in social work. The absence of specific courses, from then on, led to the decline of this tradition of solid practice. In 1967 family therapy made its entry here, and working with parents became 'old-fashioned'. Problems of parenting were to be viewed as family problems; children's problems as having a function in maintaining the homeostasis of the family system, or as caused by dysfunctional communication. The solution lay in family interviews. The decades-old, 'rather controversial questions about which

professional members of the clinic staff - psychiatrist, psychiatric social worker, or clinical psychologist - can, may or should be encouraged to learn to work with which member of the family' (Szurek, 1952, p. 296) evaporated. Every member of the clinical staff saw families. For some staff it was, actually, the first time they saw parents.

With the rise of child psychotherapy in the nineteen seventies, parents came to be viewed as 'facilitators' of the child's therapy, and they were seen, preferably, by the child's therapist. While a special training and rigorous selection were requirements for those who wished to become a child psychotherapist, hardly any special know-ledge, expertise or supervision were required to work with parents. What remained of the expertise of the full-time parent specialist, the psw, seemed to become definitively superfluous.

The 'laboratory' of practice and related activities

My first experience with parents was at a child guidance clinic in Amsterdam, in the late nineteen fifties. Although not psychoanalytically oriented, this clinic functioned otherwise according to the classical child guidance model (Joint Committee, 1926), with a team of well-trained psychiatric social workers who saw parents, but never a child, and of child specialists who diagnosed (and seldom treated) the children. Hardly ever did they see parents.

After this experience with parents, I was employed for four years as a marriage counselor, and became acquainted with the intricacies of neurotic partner conflict, the imbalance of power between husband and wife, and the burden of fertility for Roman Catholic couples in the days before the Second Vatican Council.

Taking courses in psychology at the University of Groningen and undergoing psychoanalysis during those years were an excellent follow-up to the training for psychiatric social work, and laid a basis for the post-graduate program at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Mass., with its rigorous academic standards and its strong investment in both psychoanalytic thinking and empirical research.

This stay in the u.s.a. also comprised nine months of practical work with Family Service of Philadelphia and almost two years of in-service training with Family Service of Cleveland. Weekly supervision, with emphasis on differential diagnosis and treatment process, regular workshops for staff, and the daily company of highly skilled colleagues added up to an intensive schooling in rock-solid, ego-oriented social casework.

Back in The Netherlands in 1967, I immersed myself in an intensive, three-month course in family therapy, and took part in a government-sponsored project to explore the (im)possibilities of this new-fangled method for handling parent-child problems. Five years of lively debate in a multi-disciplinary group, initiated by the Dutch Journal of Social Work, laid a solid conceptual groundwork (Van der Pas et al., 1973a). I immensely enjoyed working with families, promoted and taught this approach, and while observing families and the effects of interventions, I saw 'bidirectionality of effect' (Dunn, 1997) at work: how parent and child subtly shape each other's behavior, and how their relationship and interaction continuously affect each other, and the other relationships in the family. Nevertheless, I remained hesitant to call myself a family therapist ('Do we have a family problem, too? Do we need therapy?'). I had difficulty with the limitations of systems thinking as a central metaphor, and with most of family

therapy's jargon, because both metaphor and jargon turn a blind eye to the parents' dilemmas, and invite callousness towards parents.

I was working again in child guidance, but - as described above - the field was changing drastically. Family therapy and child psychotherapy came to replace the 'old-fashioned' work with parents. Interdisciplinary boundaries almost disappeared. For about a decade, child psychiatrists worked with families; social workers did psychotherapy; and everyone 'saw' parents. Knowledge of child psychopathology had, however, made considerable progress; clinical diagnosis of the child replaced the minute description of its development and behavior by the child's parents; and psychotherapy for children was available in every clinic or agency.

As I had been among the first to write about family therapy (Van der Pas, 1969, 1971) and to actively support its introduction in The Netherlands, had interviewed a number of family therapists of international renown (Van der Pas et al., 1979; Van der Pas, 1992), and had been one of the editors of the Dutch 'Handbook of Family Therapy' (Boeckhorst, Compennolle, Hendrickx & Van der Pas, 1983-1989) as well as the Dutch journal of family therapy, 'Systeemtherapie', I was in a position to evaluate the methods and teachings of family therapy against the background of my continuing work with parents. The conceptual gaps (a) between systems theory as a frame of reference - as understood and applied by family therapists - and the actual practice with families, (b) between the ever more sophisticated discussions about, for example, postmodernism, and their relevance as experienced by colleague X for his work with families Y and Z, and (c) between therapeutic practice and the actual goings-on in parent-child relationships, looked bothersome. These gaps can lead the therapist to faulty hypotheses in cases of serious problems, such as family violence (where victims were perceived as partners in a relational dance or game) and, more generally, can distract attention from the original root of many familial problems: unresolved dilemmas of parenting. Even though many family therapists deal competently with problems of parenting, family therapy as such lacks the conceptual instruments for understanding these problems (Van der Pas, 1994). Or, as stated more poignantly by Taffel (1990, pp. 29): 'If family therapy were a book about child rearing, the pages would be just about empty.' While still seeing families and teaching family therapy - and continuing to collaborate with child psychotherapists and psychiatrists - I kept pondering over my original profession, the field of working with parents. These musings led to the sobering discovery: 'This profession has no theoretical foundation, no specific body of know-ledge, no journal, no handbook, no specific courses or training - it is a profession that does not exist' (Van der Pas, 1990). When I pronounced these words to an audience of child psychotherapists and social workers, the response was heartwarming. This became the starting point for a search for relevant literature; for rallying experienced colleagues in discussion groups; for encouraging them to teach and to revive supervision as the backbone of work with parents; and for testing my ideas against the experience of professionals of various disciplines in disparate settings. I started a journal for the study of parenting and parent counseling, and encouraged colleagues, young and old, to write: 'Let's not repeat the mistake of the psychiatric social workers!' Working with parents is becoming respectable again in The Netherlands, and as a method it has acquired new life. And not only female social workers practice it.

Professionals of both sexes, of various disciplines, and varying theoretical backgrounds are taking an interest in parents and in working with parents. All are hindered, however, in the acquisition of the necessary insights and skills by the absence of a conceptual framework ñ of a coherent theory of parenting. This seems the principal impediment to further progress in praxis, and to the development of educational facilities.

Formulating questions

In 1988, I had with considerable embarrassment to admit, after twenty-five years of working with parents, that my field could best be characterized as amateurish: no theory or body of specialized knowledge, and none of the paraphernalia of a profession: no journal, no handbook, no training courses, and I asked my audience six questions (Van der Pas, 1990). I repeat them here because they are as relevant now as they were then.

We seem to know much about the experience of the child who has a 'domineering mother' or a 'marginal father'. What do we know, however, about the experience of the mother who has to be strong all the time, or of the father whose opinion is often not asked? Do these and similar positions reflect personality problems of these parents? Or are they practical solutions to the puzzle of raising children together?

We know, or think we know, how parents damage children, but what do we know, to paraphrase the title of Miller's first book (Miller, 1987), of the drama of being a parent?

We know quite a bit about marital relationships and their problems, but hardly anything about 'parental' relationships. And yet, a marriage breaks up as often due to parental strife, as a child develops problems due to marital conflict.

We know much about 'normality and pathology in childhood' (A. Freud, 1965): about for instance the normality of the stubborn rage of toddlers, and of depressive moping by adolescents. What, however, is normal in parental behavior? Are parents expected to cope with the various and sundry 'normalities' of childhood without ever getting lost in stubborn rage or sinking into depression? Is it ever 'normal' for parents to lose their balance or their cool?

We know about children who are at risk for developing pathology, but who are the parents at risk - besides, of course, those who have an 'at risk' child? Or should we perhaps consider everyone who raises a child 'at risk' to some degree? What kinds of pathology are typical for parents; what diagnoses do we have for problems, dysfunctions or pathologies of parenting, except gross categories like neglect and abuse?

A new start

Apart from describing the dismal state to which professional work with parents had fallen, these questions mapped out a route for remedying this state. As my next step, it seemed logical to focus on the last question: what kinds of pathology are typical for parents? Problems of parenting were my expertise. But this turned out to be a false start. Without the conceptual framework which underlies any categorization, it is not possible to classify such clinically disparate and theoretically incomparable phenomena of parenting as, for example, post-partum mood disorders and sexual abuse, the apathy-futility syndrome and overprotection, learned helplessness and abandonment. Problems of parenting

cannot be diagnosed, I concluded, without sound knowledge of normal or good enough parenting.

Some years of frenzied reading followed, but I found discouragingly little to build on. As I shall argue in various chapters, the knowledge base of developmental psychology, family therapy, psychoanalysis and pedagogy regarding parenting lacks sophistication and congruence. In treatises on life-span development, interest in parenting merits ten pages at the most, with the birth of the first child and departure of the last one being the only 'life events' of parenthood worth mentioning (e.g. Colarusso, 1992, pp. 138-142; Bideaud, HoudÈ & Pardinielli, 2001, pp. 542-544). In books on child rearing, providing safety and emotional availability appear to be the main parental requirements with young children, and authoritative control the optimal mode for later parenting. Deviant modes of parenting have received more attention, either in a theoretical sense - as from psychoanalysts - or by linkage with negative child outcome in research projects. The latter often 'repeat with minor variations the experiments on which (they) were originally based' (Morison, 1963). All such studies reveal a similar central problem: the absence of a relevant conceptual framework.

While continuing to address various forums of parent, family and child specialists with articles and presentations (Van der Pas, 1999a; 1999b), step by step I developed new ideas about parents, parenting, and problems of parenting.

Increasing disappointment in the literature stimulated this process: the continuous confrontation with generally held theories and assumptions regarding parenting deepened my conviction that they miss the mark.

Perhaps I should say that, instead of developing new ideas, I clarified, rejuvenated and elaborated old ones. The years of tenacious reading had made me delve into my experiences in working with parents, and led me to formulate the notions and convictions that had been the foundation of my work, to refine and reconstruct them into usable definitions and concepts, and to combine these into an outline for a theory of parenting. Comparing them with existing theoretical notions and convictions forced me to formulate, and face up to, the differences. Testing my definitions and concepts against the experience of those who presently work with parents, suggested that their effect on praxis in this field may be beneficial. Without compromising the best interest of the child, these definitions and concepts make working with parents less stressful for both professional and parent.

I cannot say which was the toughest test for their plausibility: the prickly scepticism from practitioners and scholars in related fields, or the critical curiosity from supervisees, students, and the many colleagues who were interested in my pursuits. In the end, both were equally helpful.

An uncomfortable theoretical position

Now that the moment has come to present my conceptual scheme to the academic community, I find myself (a) uncomfortably positioned vis à vis much of the mainstream literature, and (b) on a different level of theorizing.

(a) My particular perspective, the parental experience, is responsible for the uncomfortable position. The breadth and width of this subject forced me to draw some firm lines. Many related subjects are omitted, or are touched on only cursorily. A telling example is the relatively small space given in this study to attachment theory. Because it concerns a theory which presently dominates a

particularly important area of research regarding parent-child relationships, I briefly expand on my reasons for omitting this theme.

The development of attachment theory has been 'a hugely important step for developmental psychology' (Rutter, 2000a), and any professional working with parents must be thoroughly familiar with it. Attachment theory is, however, about child development; with regard to phenomena of parenting its explanatory power is limited. Only fairly recently has its horizon of interest widened itself to include fathers, non-shared environment, and contextual factors (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1998, pp.28-29). Too long has its attention been focused almost exclusively on such parental (i.e. maternal) behaviors as responsive or frightening behavior (resp. Kobak, 1999; and Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1999). Secure attachment to a trusted figure is of tantamount value to the human infant; the parent, on the other hand, is not made more secure by the presence of the baby. For parents, being a trustworthy figure is only one among a range of parental roles and concerns, and this role can be shared with or delegated to 'alloparents' (Hrdy, 2000). While the formation of secure attachments is of crucial importance for a child's personality development, from a parent's perspective this phase in the child's development may be less demanding than potty training, or teaching the child to share toys with other children. As Rutter states it: 'People have overgeneralized the idea [of attachment] in ways that are unhelpful and damaging, because if attachment is the whole of life, then what?' (ib. p.77). We need to remember that 'the attachment system is one of many behavioural systems that have evolved to promote survival and reproductive success' (Hinde, 1982 in George & Solomon, 1999, p.649), and that it is parents and families who evolved them ñ not scientists.

A second reservation regarding current attachment theory relates to the concept 'internal working model'. Attachment theorists generally assume that 'beyond infancy, attachment relations come to be additionally governed by internal (or mental) working models that young individuals construct from the experienced interaction patterns with their principal attachment figures' (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999, p. 89). These models become 'the largely unconscious interpretive filters through which relationships and other social experiences are construed and self-understanding is constructed' (Thompson, 1999, p. 267). The concept 'internal working model' is, thus, posited as predictive of the quality of later parenting by that person. Rutter, questioned about this, says: 'My view on this subject is the same as Robert Hinde's. He made the point that, at one level, the internal working model must be a correct idea. We are thinking, feeling beings, and obviously we process our experiences. We form models about them. We therefore have to have something that could be called an internal working model of relationships, in the same kind of way that one has internal working models of everything else. Hinde's reservation was that this is such a generality. It has no predictive value, unless we can say more about it. ... I would not necessarily assume that the adverse effects of earlier negative attachment relationships will go into the parenting you give your child. One learns from that experience, and the effect can go either way' (Rutter, 2000a, p.84). In other words, being a parent involves a new kind of relationship, with new dynamics, and sets in motion a new phase of personal development. Whatever preceded it, this phase runs its own course, whether positively or negatively. A parent's internal working model is one among various knowledge structures, and parents do learn, aided also by purposes, intentions and valuations. More than current attachment theory envisions, parents are free agents. Child rearing as an

institution would be in a sorry state - as would children - if this were not so. And, as Thompson (1999, p.274) states: 'The theoretical relation between attachment in infancy and later psychological functioning is neither clear, simple, nor straightforward'.

(b) My wish to explain widely different manifestations of parenting necessitates a level of abstraction which offers the distance needed to include both the unsolved dilemmas of the earlier mentioned, rather unfortunate father B, and the apparent ease with which father A deals with a similar situation. This search should result in concepts which aim for applicability with parenting in all its shapes, forms and appearances, but these are not the subject matter of the majority of theories in the field. In order to get a handle on the great diversity of literature, I had to assume a 'helicopter' position, and took a perspective which, of necessity, is rather global, but which allows for a fresh look at a great deal of professional literature regarding child rearing and parenting. The concepts put forth contain elements from such diverse frames of reference as: social work, with its concern for the socio-economic aspects of a client's functioning; psychodynamic theory, with its interest in the darker corners of a person's psyche; systems thinking, and its concern with larger systems and intersystem conflict; developmental theory, as a rich source of information about the object of parenting, the child; and theories of emotion and cognition, which offer possibilities for micro-analysis of parent-child interaction. I attempt to juxtapose these elements in such a way that, singly and together, they support the theoretical structure of an integrative conceptual framework - one which allows space for many theories and methods.

The questions I presented in 1988 described the specific professional stance which I had been taught during my training as a psychiatric social worker, which I had - without being more than dimly aware of it - continued to use throughout the years, and which still is the hallmark of sound work with parents: the stance of taking the parent's perspective. My questions implied the need to replace - when working with parents, that is - the child's perspective by a parental perspective. Consequently, 'the drama of being a child' becomes 'the drama of being a parent', and questions as, for instance, how a parent stirs up anxiety in a child are switched around, so that one starts to wonder whether, perhaps, this child stirs up anxiety in the parent. To my relief, the latter perspective turns out to be not opposed to the former. Rather, as I hope to make clear in these pages, the parent's perspective embraces the child's perspective, and enriches it. No child-expert need feel alarmed by attention to the parental perspective.

The plan of this book

Its subject is not parents or problems of parenting as such, but different ways of thinking about parents and their problems. This approach touches on a great many theoretical topics, and reviews of pertinent literature alternate, throughout the book, with the introduction of my concepts and ideas. The main body of the book consists of three parts, reflecting the principal issues of this study.

(I) Neglect of the parental perspective of child rearing in the field of

- psychology. A definition of 'parent' is put forth, which has the parental experience at its core.
- (II) The superficiality of academic knowledge about the realities of everyday child rearing. The universals of child rearing as experienced by parents are analyzed, and are described in a non-normative manner.
 - (III) The deceptive nature of the concept 'risk factor' in the explanation of problems of parenting. The idea is proposed that adverse influences on parental child rearing are moderated by a self-regulating system of societal and personal mechanisms.

Part I - The aim of my study

The need for a thirteen-page foreword merely to introduce the idea of describing child rearing from the parental perspective underlines the neglect to which this aspect of both adult life and child rearing has been subjected. Correcting this state of affairs is a matter, first, of choosing to take the parental perspective (ch.1). Second, a definition of the word 'parent' is formulated which aims to capture the core of the parental experience - the awareness of being responsible for a child - which can serve as a frame of reference for further thinking about parenting, and which facilitates the professional dialogue with parents (ch.2)

Part II - The parental 'work floor'

The term 'work floor' is chosen for its associations with manual labor and physical exertion, and with learning a trade. I wish to emphasize this side of parenting. Attention to work-floor aspects of child rearing is scarce in developmental psychology (ch.3). Writers about parenting seem to shy away from the mechanics of ordinary, daily child rearing, as an analysis of Belsky's often-cited study (1984) on determinants of parenting illustrates (ch.4). The amateurish quality of customary ways of assessing parenting is elucidated, as is the importance of getting well acquainted with the ordinary particulars of child rearing. A review of the results of studies of parenting which apply the Social Information Processing model supports my assumption of three major work-floor domains: behaviors, deliberations, and the management of emotions (ch.5). These domains are investigated and charted (ch.6-8), with due attention to characteristic parental concerns and vulnerabilities, the importance of hands-on routine, and the continuous processes of parental learning and growth. My aim is to describe universally observable behaviors, deliberations, and ways of dealing with emotions.

Part III - Moderator mechanisms protecting child rearing

Child rearing manifests itself in innumerable different ways. Its finely woven interrelatedness with the immediate and wider contexts is best described by cultural anthropologists, who convincingly illustrate the fact that parents adjust their child rearing to an endless variety of contextual factors - while sometimes managing to make circumstances adjust to their needs. Ecological systems theory, with its emphasis on process and time as main variables, illustrates the complexity of the web of processes on and around the parental work floor (ch.9). In sum, child rearing seems prone to as many risks as there are risk factors in its context. On closer examination, however, the concepts 'risk factor' and

'protective factor' stand in the way of understanding the fact that many parents manage reasonably well despite adverse influences, while others falter in spite of favorable circumstances. A re-thinking of risk versus protection is proposed, and the idea of four moderator mechanisms as playing a key role in buffering the parental work floor from adverse contextual effects. As an error-activated system these mechanisms are super-ordinate to other contextual factors, and capable of adjusting to varying circumstances. Dysfunctional parenting threatens as soon as these dynamics dysfunction, and efforts at help should be directed primarily at remobilising moderator mechanisms. Several authors seem to point to the idea of buffering, and when using the proposed framework, dysfunctions of parents can be explained as resulting from a dysfunction of one or more moderator mechanisms (ch.10).

Epilogue

Once embraced, this perspective has far-reaching consequences for professional work with parents, and for the organization of services for children. Utilization of the framework in existing practice has demonstrated its value, but further developments in theory and methodical refinements are urgently needed. Research efforts will hopefully follow suit.

On some terms, personal pronouns, and quotations

I have not been able to find a really satisfying English name for my own field of expertise. Is it parent counseling? parent guidance? working with parents? maintaining a parental alliance? Milieu therapy? parent treatment? parent therapy? Some of these terms have an overtone of underqualified workers. As for 'parent treatment' and 'parent therapy': even though much work with parents involves psychotherapeutic techniques or takes place in a child-therapeutic setting, I prefer to avoid a 'therapy'-overtone when speaking about my field. Parents are not patients. They apply for help in their parental function, and ought to be addressed with this in mind. They commission the advice, help, or support they need for themselves and/or the child. The function of the expert, helper, therapist or counselor whom they consult is, indeed, that of a consultant. Therefore, the term 'work with parents' will be used most often by me. When speaking of 'the Western world', I refer to those parts of the northern hemisphere which are generally affluent, industrialized, and largely dominated by white, Judeo-Christian-European culture - as opposed to what I shall call 'the non-Western world': the culturally rich and endlessly varied amalgam of peoples who surround the so-called 'developed' countries, and inhabit ever-larger areas of the Western world.

A definition of the word 'parent' will be given in chapter 2. The word 'child' refers to the relationship of that individual to one or more members of the class of people who are the subject of this thesis, parents. 'Child' refers, therefore, to persons who have one or more parents, regardless of their age. For their parents they are and remain a child. (Van der Pas, 2001a).

As an antidote to the overrepresentation of mothers in research literature and clinical work, and to stress that this study is about male and female parents, I should perhaps use the personal pronoun 'he' when indicating a parent in the singular. It would sound odd, however, and do injustice to the mothers who still,

and all over the world, do most of actual child rearing. As an antidote to the underrepresentation of males in my field, I could use the personal pronoun 'he' for practitioners in the singular. Again, it would sound odd, and do injustice to the women who, for decades, were the sole developers and occupants of this field of work. I therefore alternate between he and she, for parents and for professionals, as I see fit and as befits the context. For children I do the same. Neither boys nor girls should feel underrepresented in this book. The source of the majority of examples is indicated. A few examples have been made up for the occasion, or are based on personal observations. This is indicated in the text. Other examples, often in quotation marks, carry only initials and a date. These are personal communications, and need to remain private.

SAMENVATTING/SUMMARY IN DUTCH

De drie delen van het boek betreffen de hoofdthemas van mijn onderzoek:

(I) Verwaarlozing in de psychologische literatuur van het perspectief van de ouder op het grootbrengen van kinderen. Als aanvulling op het kindgerichte perspectief van vooral ontwikkelingspsychologie en pedagogiek wordt een definitie van ouder gepostuleerd met de ouderlijke ervaring als kernpunt.

(II) Het oppervlakkige en onsamenvangende karakter van wetenschappelijke kennis betreffende de alledaagse werkelijkheid van het grootbrengen van kinderen door ouders. De grote lijnen van het grootbrengen van kinderen zoals door ouders ervaren worden geanalyseerd en in niet-normatieve termen beschreven.

(III) Misleidende aspecten van het concept risicofactor met betrekking tot het verklaren van ouder-kindproblemen. Het idee wordt voorgelegd en beargumenteerd dat de invloed op opvoeding van ongunstige omstandigheden gemeenlijk wordt gemodereerd door een zelfregulerend systeem van maatschappijgebonden en persoonsgebonden mechanismen.

Niet ouders of ouderschapsproblemen vormen mijn onderwerp, maar de sterk uiteenlopende manieren van denken daarover. Deze benadering raakt aan een groot aantal onderwerpen, en vraagt om een andere opzet dan het gebruikelijke literatuuroverzicht aan het begin van een studie, gevolgd door eigen bevindingen van de auteur. Om die reden wisselen door alle hoofdstukken heen literatuurbespreking en de presentatie van mijn ideeën elkaar af.

Voorwoord

Steeds vaker worden vraagtekens gezet achter het idee dat vooral ouders de ontwikkeling van het kind bepalen. Bij onstentenis van een kader voor theorievorming over ouderschap en problemen van ouders hebben die vraagtekens bijna uitsluitend betrekking op de ontwikkeling van het kind. Dertig jaar werken als ouderbegeleider als etnografisch voorwerk voor de onderhavige studie heeft me geconfronteerd met het ontbreken van een theoretisch referentiekader betreffende ouderschap als autonoom onderwerp van onderzoek.

De lezer hoeft niet te vrezen dat de uit die lacune voortkomende dichotomie van kindbelang versus ouderbelang wordt vervangen door een leer die het ouderbelang stelt boven het belang van het kind. Er is behoefte aan nieuwe definities en concepten niet aan nieuwe disputen. Het hier besproken perspectief biedt bovendien de mogelijkheid om het belang van het kind en dat van de ouders te beschouwen als congruent en lijkt zo de vaak veronderstelde onverenigbaarheid van beider belangen te kunnen overbruggen.

Deel I Het doel van deze studie

Dat dertien paginas voorwoord nodig zijn om het idee te introduceren dat opvoeding ook kan worden beschreven vanuit het perspectief van ouders, onderstreept hoezeer dit aspect van de psychologie van de volwassen leeftijd en van opvoeding is verwaarloosd. De inhoudsopgaven van een aantal handboeken illustreren dat bestaande kennis betreffende ouderschap fragmentarisch is en onsamenhangend. (ch.1). Om dit te kunnen corrigeren wordt een definitie van het woord ouder gepostuleerd die de kern van de ervaring van ouderschap onder woorden brengt: het besef van verantwoordelijk-zijn voor een kind. Deze definitie fungeert als uitgangspunt voor verdere analyse en beschrijving van ouderschap, en als een kader dat de professionele dialoog met ouders faciliteert (ch.2).

Deel II De ouderlijke werkvloer

De term werkvloer ter aanduiding van uitvoerend ouderschap, ofwel opvoeden, is gekozen vanwege de associaties met handwerk, lichamelijke inspanning, en het aanleren van een vak. De aandacht voor die technische aspecten van ouderschap is minimaal in de ontwikkelingspsychologie en bijbehorende onderzoeksprogramma's, terwijl het in hulpverlening aan ouders en bij beslissingen over ouders en kinderen juist daarover gaat (ch.3). Ter illustratie van dit manco wordt Belskys nog altijd geciteerde literatuurstudie uit 1984 over determinanten van ouderschap geanalyseerd. Ouderschap blijkt een leeg hokje te zijn in de schematische weergave van zijn onderzoek, hetgeen de vraag oproept hoe determinerend de onderzochte variabelen werkelijk zijn (ch.4). De amateuristische wijze waarop ouderschap in de klinische praktijk doorgaans wordt beoordeeld wordt met voorbeelden belicht, als ook het belang van een grondig kennis nemen juist van de laagbijdegrondse details van kinderen grootbrengen. Een kort overzicht van studies van ouderschap die uitgaan van Social Information Processing lijkt mijn aanname te ondersteunen dat drie werkvloerdomeinen kunnen worden onderscheiden: gedrag, cognities en emoties, oftewel elementaire opvoedgedragingen, overwegingen betreffende hoe en wanneer een kind iets te leren, en het reguleren van emoties (ch.5). Deze domeinen worden verkend en in kaart gebracht, waarbij steeds aandacht wordt gegeven aan de overwegingen en kwetsbaarheden die eigen zijn aan ouderschap, aan het belang van routine, en aan het nooit ophouden van leren en groei (ch.6-8). Ik richt me hierbij niet op locale fenomenen, maar voorzover mogelijk op universeel waarneembare gedragingen, overwegingen, en manieren van emotieregulatie.

Deel III - Moderatormechanismen die opvoeding door ouders beschermen

Kinderen grootbrengen gebeurt op ontelbaar veel manieren. Hoe en hoezeer deze steeds verweven zijn met de nabije en met grotere contexten wordt

beschreven door cultureel antropologen. Zij illustreren dat ouders hun opvoeden aanpassen aan elke variant van omgevingsfactoren. En hoe zij het ook klaarspelen om die naar hun hand te zetten. De ecologische systeemtheorie, met zijn nadruk op proces en tijd als hoofdvariabelen, belicht scherp de complexiteit van de processen op en rond de ouderlijke werkvloer (ch.9).

De hoge mate van verwevenheid van werkvloer en context suggereert dat opvoeding door ouders overgeleverd is aan elk potentieel risico in zijn context. Anders gezegd: dat het aantal risicofactoren voor opvoeding nagenoeg ontelbaar zou zijn. Voor een common good als opvoeding is dit onwaarschijnlijk, want te riskant voor de gemeenschap in al zijn geledingen. De concepten risicofactor en beschermende factor blijken bovendien obstakels te zijn wanneer men wil verklaren dat veel ouders redelijk goed functioneren ondanks ongunstige omgevingsfactoren, terwijl andere disfunctioneren ondanks schijnbaar gunstige omstandigheden. Nader doordenken van de vigerende formule risico versus bescherming leidt tot het onderscheiden van enerzijds een zeer beperkt aantal cruciale want ouderschapsspecifieke variabelen, en anderzijds een limietloze reeks a-specifieke omgevingsvariabelen. De eersten worden hier aangeduid als moderatormechanismen. Hun functie is het afschermen van de ouderlijke werkvloer tegen de invloed van onverschillig welke negatieve omgevingsvariabele. Vier moderatormechanismen worden geïdentificeerd en kort beschreven. Tezamen passen deze zich aan, als een error-activated systeem, aan wisselende omstandigheden. Men kan ze daarom beschouwen als bovengeschild aan andere contextuele factoren, en als determinant in de zin dat ouderschapsproblemen optreden zodra het systeem van moderatormechanismen stagneert, en dat men ouderschapsproblemen kan verklaren in termen van stagnerende moderatormechanismen (ch.10).

Epiloog

Om ouderschap, opvoeding door ouders en ouder-kindproblematiek te beschrijven en te interpreteren in termen die relevant zijn voor de klinische praktijk en voor empirisch onderzoek is een verandering van perspectief nodig: van het kindperspectief naar het ouderperspectief. Het geschetste theoretisch kader heeft ver reikende consequenties voor hulpverlening aan ouders, en voor de organisatie van hulpverlening aan of zorg voor kinderen. In de praktijk heeft dit referentiekader zijn nut bewezen, maar verdere theoretische ontwikkeling en methodische verfijning zijn dringend noodzakelijk, en hopelijk zal empirisch onderzoek daarbij steunen.

We zijn behept met een instinctieve voorkeur voor het kindperspectief. Ook is het emotioneel en theoretisch lastig om twee perspectieven in acht te nemen die soms haaks op elkaar lijken te staan. Toch is dat wat ouders dagelijks proberen te doen terwijl ze hun kinderen grootbrengen de ouders van morgen. Het lijkt alleszins van belang onze beste krachten in te zetten voor een beter begrip van beide perspectieven van opvoeding door ouders.