

***Primary intersubjectivity:***

***Accessed gradually or present in early infancy? A third alternative***

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**Abstract**

There has been a strong debate among developmental psychologists concerning the emergence of self in infancy, the ability to differentiate between self and other and the time when infants understand that ‘me’ and the other make two different human beings. Classical psychoanalytic theory, postulates that during the early phases of infant mental development there is no internal, external differentiation. On the basis of recent infant observational studies C. Trevarthen and D. Stern propose that infants have a primary intersubjectivity that develops as an adaptation for social life before birth, and there is no initial psychic undifferentiation as psychoanalysts believe. Considering these two opposite views, Bernard Golse psychiatrist, psychoanalyst offers a third alternative of infant psychic development. This proposes that intersubjectivity is created in a dynamic way between moments of transient intersubjectivity and moments of undifferentiation until intersubjectivity is stabilized.

**Keywords:** communication, psychic development, Primary Intersubjectivity.

**Introduction**

There has been a strong debate among developmental psychologists concerning the emergence of self in infancy, the ability to differentiate between self and other and the time when infants understand that “me” and the other make two different human beings.

Classical psychoanalytic theory, deriving from clinical experience, postulates that during the early phases of infant mental development there is no internal, external differentiation. The sounds, the smells, and the face are not united together in one person. Thus, psychoanalysts believe that infants go through an initial phase of primary

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unintegration. During this period, the feelings derived from the body are not pieced together to form the self. The initial fusion with the mother, during the symbiotic period, gradually leads to separate functioning (Freud, Klein, Mahler, Bick, Bion, Winnicott, Tustin and others). Infants who are cared for in a nurturing environment eventually develop a wholesome ego capable of bringing together all unintegrated parts and grow in healthy adults.

On the other hand, according to recent infant observational studies, the basis for mental development seems to be determined during the first months of life by the earliest organizations of subjective experience of self-and-other. Colwyn Trevarthen, Jerome Bruner and Martin Richards studied infants at Harvard University in order to determine whether they perceived objects and persons in a different way. They filmed them with an object and with the mother weekly from birth up to the age of six months. Their results showed that by three weeks after birth infants approach persons and objects in quite different ways. This was observed in the different expressions of face, hands and voice. Trevarthen and his colleagues (Penelope Hubley, Lynne Murray and others) continued for more than thirty years to film spontaneous play between infants and their mothers at Edinburgh University. Descriptive micro-analysis of these films revealed movements of lips and tongue which resemble rudimentary speech and were therefore called “prespeech” movements. These analyses also showed that infants display hand movements which were related to the gestures of adults in conversation. The interactions of infants between 6 and 12 weeks after birth were called proto-conversations (Bateson, 1979; Trevarthen, 1979). According to Trevarthen, some of these expressions have the motive of eliciting maternal care, but others transmit emotions about subjective experiences when communicating with an attentive adult, sharing them (Trevarthen and Aiken, 2001). Furthermore, the vocal, oral and gestural expression of infants was shown to be effectively coordinated with those of another person, having regular patterns

in time which indicated a mutual adjustment of the infant and its partner in communication. From these analyses of communication with very young infants it was hypothesized that the behaviors observed were innate. Stemming from this observational research Trevarthen proposed the theory of Innate Intersubjectivity which holds that children have a dual representation of self and other at birth and have innate motives to communicate with other persons.

A similar view is held by Daniel Stern (2000) who said that the newborn infant can perceive, represent and feel that he is the agent of his actions. Stern postulated a model of development for the first year of life identifying four “senses of self”, which contribute to the formation of an integrated pattern of object relatedness that is sustained throughout the life cycle. He suggested that the first to emerge is the “emergent sense of self”. This sense of self is both composed of the experience of the process of “emergent organization” and is also the product of that organization of experience. Therefore, both Trevarthen and Stern propose that infants have a primary intersubjectivity that develops as an adaptation for social life before birth, and there is no initial psychic undifferentiation as psychoanalysts believe.

Both Trevarthen (Trevarthen and Aitken, 2003) and Stern (2000) report age-related developmental changes through infancy, acknowledging that mastery of interpersonal skills is transformed. But both affirm that a sense or representation of Self and Other is present and active in body and brain of a newborn. In a new introduction to the second edition of his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Stern updates a detailed review of the evidence, and says, “the most important point is that a primary intersubjectivity starts from the beginning, as does the sense of an emergent self, as does the sense of a core self” (Stern, 2000, p. xxii)

Experimental studies on development of particular abilities seem to support Trevarthen’s and Stern’s theories of an innate readiness for both subjective and

intersubjective awareness, and for ‘ways of being with’ another person (Stern, 2000, p. xv). More specifically, research has consistently shown that infants have a preference of human stimuli over objects. For example, human faces are preferred to other stimuli (Fantz, 1963) and the voices of humans are preferred to non human sounds (Eisenberg, 1975). Neonatal imitation of a wide range of expressions, facial, vocal and gestural movements also shows that infants, even those born prematurely, imitate actively and intentionally during interactions (Maratos, 1973, 1982; Meltzoff and Moore, 1977, 1983, 1992; Kugiumutzakis, 1985, 1998; Kugiumutzakis and Trevarthen, 2015).

Research has also shown that infants as young as 2 months old have clear expectations about how a nurturing adult should respond to them and when this is not the case they become distressed. In a series of studies, known as *perturbation studies*, infants are placed in a situation where they interact pleasantly with their mother. Once the baby is really engaged in the interaction the mother stops responding and looks at the infant holding a blank expression on her face. Infants’ initial reaction was to try to re-engage their mother in communication and when their efforts were not effective they became distressed (Tronick et al., 1978; Murray and Trevarthen, 1985). Thus, while psychoanalysts maintain that initially there is no self-other differentiation, experimental studies show that infants recognize other persons and have expectancies of how adults should respond to them.

Considering these two opposite views, Bernard Golse psychiatrist, psychoanalyst (2010) offers a third alternative of infant psychic development. This proposes that intersubjectivity is created in a dynamic way between moments of transient intersubjectivity and moments of undifferentiation. The developmental task for the infant is to progressively strengthen these first moments of intersubjectivity, making them take precedence, in a more stable and continuous way over the primitive undifferentiation. In order to illustrate his

position, Golse presents the example of breast feeding as described by Donald Meltzer (1980). According to Meltzer, during feeding time the infant feels that the different sensory perceptions from the mother (smell, visual image, taste of milk, warmth, her tactile quality, her holding...) are not independent from one another. They are not splitting or “dismantling” the sensory apparatus of the baby, but they are temporarily united. In these conditions, the infant has access to the experience that there is a real external ‘pre-object’ that exists in a moment of primary intersubjectivity. After the feeding, this feeling of being ‘mantled’ in intersubjectivity fades, and a splitting of awareness into the components of the sensory apparatus becomes predominant. From one feed to another the infant oscillates between being mantled and dismantled in experience of the ‘other’ until finally an experience of intersubjectivity is stabilized. Golse admits that this process of development would not be possible if there did not exist nuclei or moments of intersubjectivity in every infant. Accessing a more coherent and persistent state of intersubjectivity, is seen as a gradual convergence of these nuclei of intersubjectivity.

Winnicott would probably not exclude this third perspective as he was the first psychoanalyst to mention, in his paper on *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena* (Winnicott, 1958), first published in 1951, the existence of a space between the “inside” and the “outside”. The transitional phenomena refer to a dimension that is neither internal nor external but rather a place that connects and separates inner and outer. Before Winnicott there is no mentioning of a space between inside and outside in the psychoanalytic literature.

This third model of psychic development allows a convergence between those theories which hold that intersubjectivity is an innate faculty with those that believe that it is learned, and also explains research findings from experimental studies which measure epigenetic development of skills of relating.

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## ***Πρωτογενής Διωποκειμενικότητα:***

### ***Έμφυτη ή σταδιακά αναπτυσσόμενη, μια εναλλακτική προσέγγιση***

**Ζαΐρα Παπαληγούρα**

#### **Περίληψη**

Στο άρθρο αυτό αρχικά παρουσιάζονται οι δύο κυρίαρχες θέσεις σχετικά με την ανάπτυξη του εαυτού στη βρεφική ηλικία, με την ικανότητα των βρεφών να διαχωρίζουν τον εαυτό τους από τον άλλον και να κατανοούν ότι *εγώ* και ο άλλος συνιστούν δύο διαφορετικά άτομα. Σύμφωνα με την ψυχαναλυτική θεωρία, στις αρχικές φάσεις της βρεφικής ανάπτυξης δεν υπάρχει διαφοροποίηση εαυτού και άλλου. Ωστόσο, με βάση τα δεδομένα από τις πρόσφατες έρευνες της Αναπτυξιακής Ψυχολογίας ο C. Trevarthen και ο D. Stern θεωρούν ότι η διωποκειμενικότητα είναι έμφυτη. Ο παιδοψυχίατρος Bernard Golse πρότεινε μια περισσότερο δυναμική θέση σύμφωνα με την οποία τα βρέφη έχουν στιγμές πρώιμης διωποκειμενικότητας οι οποίες σταδιακά ενώνονται ώστε να κατακτηθεί μια σταθερή αντίληψη διάκρισης εαυτού και άλλου.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** επικοινωνία, διάκριση εαυτού και άλλου, Έμφυτη Διωποκειμενικότητα, Πρωτογενής Διωποκειμενικότητα.