

# A Human Family: Commentary on Paper by Elisabeth Fivaz-Depeursinge, Chloé Lavanchy-Scaiola, and Nicolas Favez

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In discussing the paradigm shifting work of Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues, I illustrate how developmental conceptions have shifted from a narrative centered on the discovery of “an Other” to narratives emphasizing what these authors term “collective intersubjectivity.” In this latter view, humans simultaneously share affect and intention with *multiple others* from birth, and subsequently continue to develop increasingly sophisticated means for doing so thorough out their lives. I situate this phenomenon in philosophy, nonlinear dynamic systems theory and evolutionary biology in order to highlight the species specific, phenomenologically given, and ecologically situated aspects of our intersubjective condition. Intersubjectivity from the perspective of Fivaz-Depeursinge and her group opens us to this collective dimension of membership in a human family.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-Freudian interpersonal relations have been troubled by the presence of thirds to the mother–infant dyad. Indeed one might even say that one of the features that defines a classical approach in contrast to a postclassical approach has been not only an inclusion of a third to the dyad but a focus in theoretical models on the importance of an actual third person.<sup>1</sup> Object relational theorists struggled with according a third-person real status. “Preoedipal” necessarily came to mean just mother and infant, as father was definitionally disappeared from early interaction schemes. Melanie Klein (1928) as an example, (re)located the oedipal situation early in infancy, continuing in her reconception of the triangular nature of the complex to view the oedipal dynamic as a dyadic issue between the infant and a mother who may have other interests. Klein thereby made the suggestion that the infant has an awareness of the parents as having a relationship with each other, that is, separate from her, but placed the father “in” the mother, in a variety of senses. Klein’s reconception, while innovative in moving from the infant’s intrapsychic life to the infant’s social life, failed to admit a real father into that social world. As object relational approaches continued to attempt to distinguish themselves from classical approaches this accommodation per-

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<sup>1</sup>A truly authoritative consideration of triadic and triangular relations in psychoanalysis can be found in Aron (2006).

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sisted. Ogden (1987), writing in the Kleinian tradition, wrote that the “paradox of the little girl’s transitional oedipal relationship (created by mother and daughter) is that the first triadic object relationship occurs in the context of a two-person relationship” (p. 485). Benjamin (1995) too found it difficult to break the dyadic cast of object relational thinking and its emphasis on the primacy of the mother-infant dyad. When she affirmed, “the importance of a second adult, not necessarily a male or a father, with whom the child can form a second dyad” (p. 57), Benjamin stopped short of considering threesome relations by remaining in the dyadic scheme.

### AN ECOLOGY OF FAMILY

So much has changed over the short life of psychoanalysis. Infants once regarded as objectless and lost in primary narcissism became infants seeking objects. Those object seeking infants then became infants who participated in their socialization with others. More recently those infants have been seen through the prism of a relationality, “not as *drawn* into interaction, but as *embedded* in an interactive matrix with others as their natural state” (Mitchell, 2000 p. 117). The natural state of the infant has been a preoccupation of psychoanalysts, and as infant’s competencies have become increasingly recognized, the idea of what a natural state is for the infant has become greatly expanded.

What is the natural state of the infant? In attempting to answer that question we are immediately confronted with another question: What constitutes the unit of our study?

Do we start with the individual, the infant, and keep her as the focus of our attention? Or do we concentrate on the dyadic relation the infant has with her caregiver, the subject–object binary relation that has constituted most psychoanalytic developmental schemes? Mother–infant dyads remain the standard unit of study, our presupposed natural state for the infant. But as Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues observed, we have known for quite a long time that children are more frequently in multiperson contexts than in strict dyadic interactions. So already we know that the infant is embedded in larger contexts than the dyadic, and when we introduce a third term, say, a father, focus shifts from attention on an infant and its relation to an other, to the complex process of relationship itself. Louis Sander (2008), the noted infant researcher, observed that

if we begin with life, we begin not with the living organism itself, but with a “system”—the organism and its environment. However, if we begin with a system—the organism always within an ever-ongoing exchange with its surround—we are thinking of process, a continuing process with many levels of complexity occurring together” (p. 217)

Sander conceived of the functioning of such systems as an “ecology of life support” and this is a notion I would like to extend to family in my discussion of the paradigm shifting work of Fivaz-Depeursinge and her group. In discussing these researchers important contributions I draw on themes that are not normally a part of the relational discussion of intersubjective life, in an attempt to emphasize the foundational roles of innate, species specific behavior that form the uniquely human and universal ground of sociality and community.

I suspect that the authors of this paper on threesome intersubjectivity would not object to the application of the term “ecology” in regard to thinking of the family as a system in the terms of nonlinear dynamic systems. Dr. Fivaz-Depeursinge, herself a professor of ethology, brings an approach to human intersubjectivity that puts one in mind of Bowlby’s focus on ethological science

and evolutionary biology, and recalls something of Bateson's focus on locating mind in its network of relations. Add to these thinkers the influence of Sander, and Fivaz-Depeursinge's group's appreciation of a continuing process with many levels of complexity occurring together, and you indeed get a multidimensional view of complex human interaction. In this paper, Dr. Fivaz-Depeursinge and Drs. Lavanchy-Scaiola and Favez illustrate young infant's capacities to engage in triangular interactions within a mode of primary intersubjectivity. They show us that infants share attention and affect, simultaneously communicating with two partners at a time, and make bids to trade affect with others, as illustrated so powerfully in the examples of little Alan and Lea. Striving to optimize their engagements with one or both partners, young infants are busy regulating not only their internal states but the interactive context. When this interactive context is itself disturbed, Fivaz-Depeursinge, Frascarolo, Lopes, Dimitrova, and Favez (2007) have recently shown that infants' triangular capacity is overactivated in an attempt to re-regulate the system by providing intimacy, parenting, or companionship to the adult parent, in effect reversing roles in the triangle. That infants seek to regulate not only their internal states triangularly but also the relationship of the parents to each other (e.g., Fivaz-Depeursinge & Favez, 2006) suggests a process view of the family as a system, seeking an ecology of regulation.

The authors upend a traditional developmental view in suggesting that triangular interactions pave the way for triadic ones. They write,

[person-person-person] interactions seem to precede [person-person-object] ones, leading to the hypothesis that triangular interactions pave the way for triadic ones. ... This is in sharp contrast with the traditional view in developmental theory according to which socio-affective development proceeds from dyadic person-person to person-object and then to person-person-object or triadic interactions by late in the first year. ... We suggest that triangular interactions may provide an essential link between primary and secondary intersubjectivity by introducing from early on a person as the third pole of attention. (p. 136)

If this is so, then it is really quite a substantial change in thinking. Triadic interactions have been relied on in developmental literature to illustrate the process by which the infant both learns about the world through another person as well as learns about the nature of persons with minds. An excellent explanation of such a process is provided by Hobson (2004), who described the triadic relation as a kind of pivot on the world, wherein both individuals, the mother and the infant, share attention to the same thing in the world, an object. Hobson gives the example of a 12-month-old repeatedly showing a toy to an adult. But as many times as the child presents the toy, it is not the toy that is the focus of the child's curiosity, but the reaction of the adult. The child is scanning the adult for their attitudes about a third thing, about an object, and in this process learning that others react differently to the same object, that others have minds, or perspectives of their own.

But if what Fivaz and her colleagues suggest is true, that triangular interactions pave the way for triadic ones, then development is rooted in a far more complex socio-affective processes than previously thought. Given changing notions of the infant and of her emergence into the world, this new view suggests that prior to being introduced in triadic fashion to the world and to other minds at the end of the first year, she is already engaged with others as others in that world, and that it is this engagement that will itself develop additional complexity as secondary intersubjectivity. The affect sharing that the authors begin their paper talking about allows infants "an inborn and early capacity to share others' feelings and mind-states" (p. 125). Little Alan's laughing delightedly

with both parents allows him access to their mind states (“we’re all happy, this is pleasure we’re sharing”) and Lea’s triangular bid of turning to her father during the still face portion of the Lausanne trilogue play situation reads, as Fivaz and her colleagues suggest, like “the precursor of the social referencing process appearing in full at the end of the first year when the uncertain infant uses the information from her parents’ affective expression to guide her behavior” (p. 133). Should this be surprising to us? Only if we maintain a notion of other minds as closed systems should we be surprised that mind states are manifest in bodily comportment. Other’s perspectives are not hidden from us, they are all the time experienced by us through our sharing intersubjective embodiment. What Fivaz and her colleagues have done with such skill and carefulness is to illustrate just how complex this socio-affective process is by introducing a third person into an interactive context, which had at best only been conceived as containing two persons.

### COLLECTIVE INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Interesting implications arise in expanding our conception of the intersubjective from a dyadic to triangular scheme. Fivaz-Depeursinge et al. posit a “collective intersubjectivity,” which recalls the work of the phenomenological philosophers. Heidegger (1979) famously asserted that the world we are engaged in is not a private world but a public and communal one. His idea was that human beings could not be understood except as inhabiting a world they necessarily share with others (Heidegger, 1962). His term for human existence (*Dasein*) was thus understood as a being-with (*mitsein*) others (Heidegger, 1989). The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1945/1995) built on the ideas of Heidegger as well as Husserl, to suggest an idea of an embodied intersubjectivity as “anonymous” intersubjectivity (p. 353). Merleau-Ponty’s often misunderstood idea is not meant to remove subjective experience but to focus subjective and intersubjective experience at an implicit, prereflective and bodily level. This pre-personal level is the same level that infant researchers refer to when they write of the experience of primary intersubjectivity. On this level of experience there is immediate contact with others through gesture, gaze, tone, and rhythm of voice, movement, and feeling, many of the same levels of observation that Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues (de Roten, Darwish, Stern, Fivaz-Depeursinge, & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) attend to in assessing infant–parent(s) relations and the therapeutic alliance. Contrary to traditional analytic schemes wherein the object must be destroyed to create a sense of externality and contact with that externality, this level of participation with others is seen as an a priori intersubjective condition for human beings.

In a previous contribution Fivaz-Depeursinge (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Favez, & Frascarolo, 2004) remarked on the young “infant’s ability to ‘interface minds’ through intentional communication. Thus infants have a sense of a shared mental world, a primitive ability to take on the role of the other” (p. 24). The conclusion that Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues reach, that the infant is in possession of a bodily self-awareness and is able to ascribe mental states to other people before she is able to draw on any developed theory of mind, bears strong resemblance to Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1995) ideas of a body-subject:

If I experience this inhering of my consciousness in its body and its world, the perception of other people and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. ... If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not “have” consciousnesses? Clearly this involves a profound transformation of the notions of body and consciousness. As far as the body is concerned, even the body of an-

other, we must learn to distinguish it from the objective body as set forth in works on physiology. This is not the body which is capable of being inhabited by a consciousness. We must grasp again on visible bodies those forms of behaviour which are outlined there and which appear on them, but are not really contained in them. (p. 351)

What phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty were suggesting was not so different it seems to me from what Fivaz-Depeursinge, her colleagues, and other prominent infant researchers are reporting. Infants, like other people, are embodied subjects, and it is at that level of perceptual embodiment that we are all the time already in conversation with others. There is a level of bodily intentionality and affective life that precedes considerations of minds within individuals and takes us past a conception of minds as inhabiting or situated in bodies to immediate contact with others in a shared world.

### FROM KNOWING TO SHARING

The developmental paradigm that held sway in psychoanalysis until recently posited an infant who needed to negate or destroy the quality of externality in order to discover others in the world as separate from herself (Winnicott, 1969/1971). As psychoanalysis considered intersubjective relations from these beginning assumptions, the paradigm of negation and destruction was dialectically counterpoised with recognition between subjects (Benjamin, 1995) and often posed in terms of the difficulties in knowing the other as other, and being known by the other. But I would suggest that this emphasis on knowing and being known is itself an artifact of a now-disputed developmental model that begins with the presumption that others must be discovered outside of the self. Because of the way that the issue was posed initially, there remains an emphasis on knowing the other that has become the dominant problematic in psychoanalytic thinking about intersubjectivity. I believe that this model is grounded in and reflects the modernist preoccupations of a psychoanalysis still reliant on highly conjectural models of infant development. Instead of a model of competing wills, infant research suggests we apply an alternate model of a priori intersubjectivity that emphasizes the innate, biological capacities of the human infant underlying the increasing layering of complexity of human sociability. Trevarthen (2006) succinctly made the matter most clear:

The newborn infant already has an effective interpersonal intelligence. Nevertheless, it has been generally assumed, somewhat paradoxically, that human sympathetic consciousness is not a set goal in development, but an acquired skill. The new evidence from infancy was incompatible with this belief ... [thus a] theory of innate intersubjectivity was proposed. ... The claim made, while not questioning that development involves learning or that infants depend on care, underlined that a child is born with motives to find and use the motives of other persons in “conversational” negotiation of purposes, emotions, experiences and meaning. (pp. 15–16)

More recently, Trevarthen (2009) has referred to the infant’s capacity and wish to “share the good company of others.” What Fivaz-Depeursinge’s observations reveal is precisely this effective interpersonal intelligence as very young infants are shown to moderate social states of aloneness and belonging through interpersonal negotiation and charming of others. It is important to recognize that these exchanges go well beyond simple attunement to include the infant’s joyful experience of other’s differing perspectives, affects, and intentions. The self–other distinction pres-

ent from birth is utilized by infants to communicate with others about their likeness and differences in ways that psychoanalytic theory has traditionally reserved for developmentally later transactions.

A different developmental model is in ascendance. In this newer model it is understood that subjects are not in need of discovering others since they are already in contact with those others, sharing affect and intention from the time of birth and subsequently throughout their lives. A new metaphor, more suited to our digital age, is taking hold. We now speak of the sharing of states, not merely of information or knowing, but of intention and affect. This sharing takes place, as in the digital world, in the blink of an eye; it is an instant messaging that is not limited to a one-on-one exchange but may be accessed in real time by multiple users. I would situate the work of Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues in this emerging paradigm, as they chose to not problematize the relation of a single subject to an Other but instead see communication with others as occurring in immediate ways, *simultaneously* among members of groups.

Primatologists such as Tomasello (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007) have thought a new grounding for the development of such sharing in ethological terms. In comparing the behavior of apes to that of human children, Tomasello and his colleagues concluded that apes are most concerned with their own individual goals. They interact with others, but to use them for their own benefit, Tomasello (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007, p. 124) wrote that they “exploit” others by gathering information from them, manipulating them as social tools, or coordinating actions with them for their own benefit. His description of primate behavior brings to mind for the psychoanalyst the normative developmental conceptions of the infant who, in Winnicott’s scheme, is presumed to “relate” to the object in a similarly exploitative manner. By contrast, Tomasello described human children to be

concerned with sharing psychological states with others by providing them with helpful information, forming shared intentions and attention with them, and learning from demonstrations produced for their benefit. The emergence of these skills and motives for shared intentionality during human evolution did not create totally new cognitive skills. Rather, what it did was to take existing [primate] skills of, for example, gaze following, manipulative communication, group action, and social learning, and transform them into their collectively based counterparts of joint attention, cooperative communication, collaborative action, and instructed learning—cornerstones of cultural living. (p. 124)

To interact with more than just the maternal caretaker is evolutionarily advantageous for the infant. But the skills of human living, as Tomasello observes, go well beyond the development of a single individual to form an evolutionarily designed cornerstone of cultural life.<sup>2</sup> The observations of Trevarthen and Tomasello taken together with the research of Fivaz-Depeursinge suggest that the natural state for humans is as an already interacting member of a hypersocial group (a family, a tribe). The maternal dyad is a subsystem embedded in these larger social contexts (the family, sibling relations, larger cultural values that differentially weight the positions of the members of the triangular relation). One important result of Fivaz-Depeursinge’s research is to have psychoanalysis reexamine its presuppositions regarding intersubjectivity as a developmental achievement; as exclusively situated in a mother–infant dyadic system; as socially constructed, but with little attention to the bodies of human subjects and the unique and universal attributes they share as members of a human family. It would seem that our a priori being-with others appears to define our spe-

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Stern (2004) made a similar point in regarding intersubjectivity as a primary, innate motivational system.



cies as human. Dr. Fivaz-Depeursinge and her colleagues' illustration of the infant accomplishing this sociability with such élan reveals a bit of beauty built into the setup.

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