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## Family as a Cradle for Human and Spiritual Formation

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### *Abstract*

The article explores the crucial role of understanding the perspective of a psychological-spiritual-neurobiological-and-Biblical role that family plays in human and spiritual formation. The family is symbolized using the metaphor of a cradle to explain the early formative period in the person's life. Research on neuroscience and brain plasticity did on infants in the womb to those in their later years shows promising data that the human brain is conducive to change. Therefore a positive and intentional program in formation, which focuses on the family as the key to the change, can accelerate development of personality dimensions previously considered as fixed for life.

### **Introduction**

One of the long-held hypotheses about the family is its crucial role in the social, psychological and spiritual development of an individual. In the past, these assumptions were based on theories evolved by social scientists from diverse disciplines such as social anthropology, psychology, sociology, human development and religion, and spirituality. Several of these theories, though valid regarding theoretical formulation lacked critical evidence to ascertain the claims that the family played a significant role in human development. However, in the past few decades, effective research tools have contributed to a vast body of knowledge that reinforces the assumptions made by early

scientists, thereby giving room for a more specific understanding of the role of the family in human development. This fund of knowledge is likely to enable religious formators to integrate what we already know from theology with empirical evidence from developmental sciences such as neuroscience and developmental psychology.

Scriptures have long emphasized the unique role of the family in human development. The concept of the family is important in the Bible both in a physical sense as well as a theological sense. In the book of Genesis (see Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:24) the role of the family as an economic, biological and psychological building block of society is clearly established. God dealt with families as in the case of Noah (Genesis 6:18), Abraham (Genesis 12:4-55), the Mosaic covenant dealt with at least two of the Ten Commandments speaking about the cohesiveness of the family. The fifth commandment regarding honoring parents is meant to preserve the authority of parents in family matters, and the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery protects the sanctity of marriage. From these two commandments flow all of the various other stipulations in the Mosaic Law which seek to protect marriage and the family. The health of the family was so important to God that it was codified in the national covenant of Israel. The New Testament too emphasizes the importance of the family, both in the gospels as well as the doctrines in the letter of the apostles. The New Testament goes to add a newer dimension speaking about the spiritual family that transcends the physical family.

The integration and validation of biblical notions of the family with the scientific understanding of the family both from a social science perspective and a biological science perspective are challenging. While social science conceptualizations of the family have reflections in the descriptions of the family in the Bible and extra-biblical narratives, the biological (a psychological) dimensions are harder to understand. For instance, the notion of the subconscious, or the role of genetic factors in human development may not be easy to correlate with direct scriptural references. However, considering that scriptures not meant to be a scientific treatise, it is not, therefore, imperative to look for those allusions. What is however of great interest is that modern science is unraveling several descriptions of human life described in Scripture. For instance, the account of Gods' creation by the Psalmist in Psalm 139:13-16 shows great similarity to the way modern neuroscience understands early human development.

For you created me in my mother's womb;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame  
was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret  
place when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body...

### **The cradle as a metaphor**

In this paper, the term cradle is used in a metaphorical or symbolic manner to explain the role of the family in the early formative period of an individual's life. The cradle is traditionally a small bed where babies sleep. It often depicts comfort and safety and can be considered as an extension of the mother's womb. In different cultures, the form of the cradle may vary depending on the local contexts. For instance, there are rocking cradles that are used to rock the baby to sleep, cradles with handles that facilitate the movement of the child from place and cradle made from more natural materials like sticks and hay. In certain cultures, parents especially mothers keep the child close to them either on their backs or in front in extensions of their garments or flexible carriers. Irrespective of these variations, the cradle symbolizes the space that infants require for their early growth and development. The primary function of infants in the cradle is to sleep, and sleep is vital for the growth of infants. It is, therefore, essential that infants get adequate and healthy amounts of sleep in safe and comfortable spaces. The cradle often provides that space for infants.

### **The Family as a cradle**

In this paper, the metaphor of the cradle is used to describe the family as a space that contributes substantially to the growth and development of children. The influence of the family in the spiritual formation of individuals can be traced to the early developmental history of children. The growth of the human child in the mother's womb is a critical period in the development of the child. Not only does the womb provide a safe and healthy place for the human fetus to evolve and differentiate, but it also serves as a context for transmitting positive emotions and messages to the growing child. If there is a significant stress on the mother, then it is likely that that growing infant can be affected. After the birth of the child, the patterns of relationships that the child derives from the family members and especially the immediate caregivers can determine emotional and social development outcomes in the child both during childhood as well as in later adult life. There are several

How often I wanted to gather your children together like a hen gathers her own brood under her wings (Luke 13:34).

### **Attachment theories- Cradle of interpersonal behaviors and emotions**

One of the bodies of knowledge that has significantly contributed to our understanding of the role of the family in the emotional, social and spiritual development of children is attachment theory. Research on attachment theories has examined the close relationship between family members and the child and especially the caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). Research indicates that the attachment between the caregiver and the child begins prenatally. There is significant research from the area of obstetric care that indicates that the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that are developed by caregivers prenatally influence postnatal attitudes towards childcare. Scientific research indicates that third-trimester fetus is aware of and reacts to stimulation of sound and touch, discriminates stimuli and learns associatively, and has physiological and motor responses to maternal emotions and maternal stress (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011). While we can argue that the relationship between a caregiver and the unborn child will be different when the child is born because the child is now distinctly different and outside the mother's body, there is evidence that suggests that the caregivers will project their feelings, attitudes, and intentions on to the fetus (Sherman, Rice, & Cassidy, 2015). These projections can predict the nature of the relationship between the mother or caregiver and the child in later years. Moreover, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the emotional pleasure and distress that a pregnant woman expresses toward her fetus will be characterized by her ability for expressing these feelings in attachment relationship. So the nature of current relationships of an adult caregiver can predict the nature of the relationship of the caregiver to the child. For families, where familial or relationship related stress is present; the growing fetus will get affected by the stress transmitted by the parents to the child. Evidence from attachment theory models, therefore, suggest that the nature of relationships that is prevailing in the family especially among the parents can affect the growth of the infant (Cassidy, Jones, & Shaver, 2014).

The founder of the attachment theory is Psychoanalyst John Bowlby. Using a combination of case studies and statistical methods which was unusual at that time for psychoanalyst, John Bowlby examined the precursors of delinquency and arrived at his initial empirical insight: The precursors of emotional disorders and delinquency could be found in early attachment-related experiences, specifically separations from, or inconsistent or harsh treatment by, mothers (and often fathers or

other men who were involved with the mothers). Over the subsequent decades, he built a very robust theory of human interpersonal attachment and development.

His colleague Mary Ainsworth further developed Bowlby's work. Her careful observations, first in Uganda and later in Baltimore, led to a detailed specification of aspects of maternal behavior that preceded individual differences in infant attachment. Her creation of the Strange Situation provided a gold standard for identifying and classifying individual differences in infant attachment security (and insecurity). Children were considered based on her theory to be either secure or insecure and if insecure to be preoccupied.

Today, researchers and practitioners in human development believe that "early situations matter and sustaining connections are basic (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 4) Children develop and flourish with regards to close and tried and true connections that give love and nurturance, security, responsive collaboration, and consolation for investigation. Without such relationships, advancement is disturbed, and the results can be serious and durable" (p. 7). This reasonable and solid proclamation could be made in extensive part in light of the exploration propelled by Bowlby's hypothesis and Ainsworth's innovative research techniques.

A long time after Ainsworth's Strange Situation was proposed, Mary Main and partners (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) gave an approach to concentrate the intergenerational transmission of connection examples. They and different specialists found that a parent's "perspective concerning connection" anticipated his or her newborn child's example of the connection. Additionally, since the 1980's there has been some research looking at connection forms past the parent-tyke dyad (e.g., in grown-up sentimental connections), which has bolstered Bowlby's (1979) conviction that connection is a procedure that portrays people "from the support to the grave" (p. 129).

In 1985, Researcher Main and associates confirmed that there is an intergenerational transmission of connection: a connection between a mother's connection representations and her newborn child's connection to her. In view of discoveries from Ainsworth's underlying investigation of the forerunners of individual contrasts in newborn child connection (Ainsworth et al., 1978), scientists anticipated that maternal affectability would clarify this connection: That is, they trusted that a mother's perspective concerning connection controls her touchy conduct toward her baby, which thus impacts newborn child connection quality.

The transmission theory has been a standout amongst the most puzzling issues confronting connection specialists amid the previous 15-20 years. Prompt endeavors to comprehend it concentrated on the estimation of maternal conduct (how mothers behave towards children). Many reviews have been gone for understanding why the quality of the relationship between maternal affectability and newborn child connection, while not insignificant, is lower than the especially solid impact found in Ainsworth's unique review, and lower than connection scientists anticipated. These reviews have given vital bits of knowledge, yet no accord has risen about how to comprehend maternal conduct as an indicator of baby connection.

### **Neuroscience and family attachments**

Recent advances in tools that can study brain development such as the functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have empowered analysts to explore the neural associates of connection in people. Theory followed by experimental discoveries from the incipient subfield of "connection neuroscience" (Coan, 2008) have started to give answers to important inquiries concerning the neurobiology of connection.

Today with advanced technology it is possible to distinguish key brain parts such as cerebrum structures, neural circuits, neurotransmitter frameworks, and neuropeptides required in making connections between children and parents. Brain imaging techniques show how the human brain responds to changes in the family in situations like danger, love, threat, abuse and so on. Positive reactions in the family lead to certain parts of the brain evolving more rapidly while danger triggers other parts of the brain that wire children to see the world as a dangerous world thereby generating fear and caution as the possible architecture of their personality. Research conducted on young children between the age of four and five which age has indicated that positive parental styles lead to the development and reinforcement of neural connections that are necessary for a confident and successful life in the future (Kolb, 2009).

Over the last two decades, scientists at leading laboratories and medical centers around the world have been able to map the development of the brain using very sensitive and effective imaging tools such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Single Photon Emission Computerized Topography (SPECT). So if a researcher needs to understand what is going on inside of the human brain, then they have the opinion of capturing both video images and photographs of the brain that helps us to understand the brain growth and activity. Data obtained from these tools indicate that

the human brain goes through a state of constant change in response to changes in the environment. The changes in the human brain are best explained through a process that scientist call neuroplasticity. "Neuroplasticity is an umbrella term referring to the ability of the brain to reorganize itself, both physically and functionally, throughout your life due to your environment, behavior, thinking, and emotions."

The brain remains 'plastic' throughout life, but trajectories are set during the prenatal period and early childhood. Brain development is very rapid in the womb and continues at an accelerated rate in the first two to three years in particular. Although the sculpting of the brain actively continues for the next 20 years or more, early life experiences will affect your responses throughout life. Many health and behavioral disorders are related to how the brain developed in its earliest period. If we want to change developmental trajectories for children, early interventions can make a huge difference. One of the implications of this research is that significant adults can play a role in influencing the development of growing adolescents and young adults. Therefore, formators may take a cue from this finding and develop programs that can enhance the neural connections towards positive and pro-social behaviors. The positive interventions made during the formation can result in actual changes in the brain development of formees leading to more positive personality development.

### **Changing Family Structures and implications for formation**

The changes in family structure across the globe partly attributed to globalization have deep impacts on the formation of an individual. In countries like India, where the family cradle was held by the joint and extended family and kinship ties, the nature of these ties and binds have changed significantly over the years. Intact families have been known to be essential in the psychological, social and spiritual formation of individuals. The rapid changes in the family structure and functioning place immense stress on an individual. In India, there is a possibility for a significant increase in the number of families that will go through a parental breakdown in the coming years. Consequently, the family who earlier played a crucial role in the psychosocial development of children will no longer be able to play that role shifting the responsibility perhaps to other such as the church, school systems and so on. The rise of counseling and psychotherapy as popular responses to life challenges in India indicates that the support that families used to offer to individuals is no longer available nor sufficient. For the millennial generation, peers have taken a more prominent role in the affairs of life such as relationship management and important life decisions, which

were earlier the force of families. Data from the child and adolescent mental health indicates that the prevalence of childhood problems is significant both in school-based studies as well as community samples in India. The changing demographics of the family in India, therefore, pose several challenges to formators and practitioners. The most evident one being the need to play a more careful role in the psychosocial formation of individuals considering that the basic foundation that the family needs to play may no longer be available. Data from neuroscience and brain plasticity is, however, promising because the human brain is still responsive to change in later years. Positive and intentional program in formation can, therefore, accelerate development of personality dimensions earlier seen as fixed for life.

Integrating both neurobiology and religious science can enhance the effectiveness of formation.

Formation programs may consider integrating theories and evidence from neuroscience into the training program. Formators may also be trained in competencies that enable them to provide holistic skills to formees incorporating knowledge from both neurosciences as well as spirituality. Considering the breakdown of the traditional family structure, formators now may take the role of 'parenting' formees and the religious community is in many ways the new cradle for psycho-spiritual formation.

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