
The Ebb and Flow of Relationships: a developmental perspective

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Abstract

The nature and the vector of relationships are not constant but change at different stages in the human life cycle. Relationships are dynamic not static, the relational state being affected, amongst other things, by the developmental stages of the individual and of the social unit within which the individual exists. This paper addresses the developmental aspect of relationship, taking a generalized position rather than considering cultural alternatives and the wide variations in what now comprises a family.

Individual development and the relational vector

The younger the individual, the more relational capacity is driven by ontogenetic factors, ie developmental factors common to the species and which proceed in a predictable order and, by and large, at a predictable pace. This applies provided there is good-enough care and nurture of the individual.

I will review briefly the developmental sequence of relational capacity, identifying what I have termed 'the relational vector'.

At first and up to around 6 months, there is an undifferentiated relationship with the nurturing parent, and a lack of distinction between me and not-me. The relational vector at this stage is toward the self with the object experienced as an extension of self. However, even at this early stage there are clearly relationships forming with consistent and familiar figures in the child's immediate environment.

From 6 to 9 months, with ability to distinguish between me and not-me, the first true interpersonal relationship occurs. The relational vector is now outward (that is, seeking) with increasing discrimination between familiar and strange. The child forms dyadic relationships, which are not constrained to biological parents.

Attachment behaviour is at its height around 12 months, with distress experienced on separation from attachment figures and the avoidance of strangers.

From 18 months to 3 years, there is waning of separation anxiety, extension of relational capacity, formation of multiple attachments/relationships with frequently present individuals. Transitional objects assist in maintaining the relationship with an attachment figure in his/her absence. Interest in peers develops with imitation and parallel play.

By 5+ years, there is an increased capacity to sustain separation from attachment figures, that is, to maintain relationships in the absence of the object through internal representation of the object. Cooperative play develops and the child establishes friendships, with the capacity for empathy. The child starts to relate as a member of a group and to participate in cooperative endeavour. The relational vector is directed increasingly outward beyond attachment relationships. Relational capacity by this stage accommodates at least two social systems, home and school, and the child learns rules which enable social and group relationships to flourish.

The importance of peer relationships increases through 'latency' and adolescence, when there is further working through of separation-individuation issues with the relational vector moving increasingly toward the peer group and away from the family.

For adolescents, group relationships are strong and contribute to the sense of identity. Intimate relationships develop, first with same sex and later with opposite sex peers. Sexualization of relationships occurs, sometimes on an experimental basis outside the context of a significant or enduring relationship.

The adolescent needs to diminish dependence on parents in order to establish him/herself as an 'independent' individual. Rather than becoming truly independent, some of the dependence is transferred to the group or to a particular peer with whom an intimate relationship develops.

The development of an exclusive, usually sexual, and interdependent relationship can isolate the adolescent pair to a greater or lesser extent from the peer group, the relational vector being almost entirely toward one another. Perhaps increasingly, however, social mores are encouraging the maintenance of relationships with same sex peers in addition to the romantic partner.

The relational vector at this stage is very much away from the family of origin.

So, to recap, the relational vector is at first inward to the self, then outward in the primary attachment relationship(s), then further outward in multiple dyadic relationships. The relational vector then moves toward group relationships outside the family, then back to dyadic relationships within the context of peer

group relationships and then to the exclusive dyadic relationship of the young adult couple, the future parents.

The family group

Now to consider the family group rather than the individual in isolation.

The task of parents is to understand and facilitate growth and development of their children. But families develop, too, and the needs and tasks of the family as a group change over time. The relationships of a family with preschool children, both internally and with extended family and the community, are very different from families with school-aged children or families with teenagers.

Individual development continues throughout the life cycle. Adults do not stop developing when they become parents. Tension therefore exists within families due to the competing or differing developmental needs of the various members, adults as well as children.

This is not just a reference to parents needing time for themselves either as individuals or as a couple. It is a more dynamic issue and is most obvious in families with teenage children and may become an increasing problem with the current generation of parents who are having children in early middle age.

Let me illustrate:

A parent's, particularly a mother's, relational vector is usually primarily toward the couple's offspring, whereas it had been directed almost exclusively toward the partner prior to the arrival of children. We have all seen the sense of abandonment this shift of relational vector may mobilize in a partner. The emotional investment in the children and the vicarious satisfaction obtained through them continue over the years, while the marital relationship may struggle with the withdrawal of emotional investment in the mental and emotional life of the couple.

Middle age is typically a stage of plateauing or declining abilities, reviewing one's life and achievements, a time when one's emotional (and financial) investment in one's children is supposed to pay off. Parents whose sexual prowess and sexual interest in one another are naturally diminishing are confronted with the emerging, even rampant, sexuality of their teenage children.

Further, what do the adolescent children want to do after all the care and nurture they have been given? They want to leave home, leaving behind an emotionally depleted marital relationship and two people at a stage of life when

they are naturally becoming less adaptable and more inward looking.

Little wonder there can be so much strife and such a battle for autonomy and control in families at this stage of development.

The transition from a family of parents and children to a family comprising two generations of adults is a complex process which may take years and may never be satisfactorily accomplished. This process involves a transmutation of attachment, not detachment, in order to be successful. The best adjusted adults are those who retain significant attachment to their parents, typified by warm, caring, respectful relationships in both directions.

Relationships with aging parents

In the adult family, there is a fluidity of roles, allowing healthy dependence when conditions require it. As later years approach, there is a more consistent role reversal. Parents have to come to terms with their own increasing dependence and loss of capacities and adult children with a more caretaking relationship toward their parents.

With increasing longevity, there is again a potential conflict between the developmental needs of individuals within the family group. That is, the adult children who have just navigated the change in relationships with their own adolescent or young adult children, who are adapting their life-style to loss and focussing their emotional energy once more inwards to the marital relationship and outwards to new freedoms and life opportunities, may again find themselves thrust into caretaking responsibilities.

Personality traits become more pronounced with old age. Rigidity increases and emotional energy is again more inwardly directed. Interest becomes more ego-centric and increasingly withdrawn even from those with whom highly invested relationships have been held. The relational vector again becomes directed inward to a greater or lesser degree. Increasing ambivalence commonly develops toward the adult children upon whom the elderly parents are now becoming dependent for day to day care.

Disillusionment with parents comes twice, once in adolescence, when one discovers they do not know everything and are not perfect, and again in their old age, when admired and valued attributes and capacities may no longer be obvious, when they may no longer be relied on as mentors and have in their own ways become child-like. The battle with impatience, frustration, sadness, despair and guilt can be difficult to master.

Grandparenthood

Perhaps the greatest reward of middle age and later life is grandparenthood. It is qualitatively quite different from being a parent.

With being a grandparent comes the discovery of a type and quality of relationship like no other. It is not just about being able to hand grandchildren back to their parents when you have had enough. Nor is it about having entered a 'second childhood' oneself.

I suggest there is something about a sense continuity which invests the relationship with extra significance. This concern about continuity is fed by the developmental changes of later middle age. One becomes aware of one's own mortality. One tends to take stock and review one's life, becoming more aware of and interested in those who have gone before and in those who will come after. This is in contrast to the developmental stage of parents which is much more invested in the present.

Grandparents also have a number of practical advantages over parents, such as having more time, broader life experience, not being sleep-deprived nor focussed on day-to-day economic survival. These factors facilitate mutual enjoyment in the relationship between grandparent and grandchild. I do not think it is just due to overindulgence or novelty that children are commonly more amenable with grandparents than with parents. At times a grandparent seems freer to identify with a child and to respond empathically.

Further, I suggest that it is easier to be a good grandparent than it was to be a good parent. Grandparenthood provides the opportunity to make reparation - to make reparation for the things which, looking back, we would like to have done better with our own children.