

EDITORIAL

Couples as parents in families

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The voice of parents is the voice of gods, for to their children they are heaven's lieutenants.

Double Falsehood (Theobald, 1727)

We are pleased to present seven fascinating articles in this special edition of the journal on couples and parents in families, extending the complex landscape of couple and family relationships first presented in the book, *Couples as Parents: Explorations in Couple Therapy* (2025).

In this set of articles, we have attempted to broaden the focus beyond couples as parents into the individual and family domains. They speak to the delicate balance and ongoing negotiation of the conscious and unconscious relationships between the individuals, the couple, parents, the needs of children, and ultimately the needs of the family system as a whole. Oftentimes, when the balance between these competing forces is out of sync, stress and distress ensue. Yet, in the absence of hard and fast rules that guarantee positive outcomes, and subject to changing societal forces, families are often required to intuitively manage the demands of family life, and can be left feeling exposed, ashamed, and without nourishment.

We acknowledge there are many more areas to explore and regret insufficient room or time to include articles exploring subject matter such as the unique needs of stepfamilies or the whole-family relationship with the internet and modern technologies such as AI. There are also many more articles to be written about the changing nature of family life in many cultures and cultural difference itself and how this affects couples as parents in families.

In the meantime, however, we are pleased to introduce you to the seven articles contained within this edition. First off comes Martha Doniach's excellent article which considers solo parenting by choice amongst cisgender heterosexual women. Due to contemporary cultural and demographic shifts in the concept of family and advances in artificial reproduction technology, Doniach's piece looks at this phenomenon through a psychoanalytic lens, curious as to how thirdness and difference is sustained without the existence of an external couple.

The article contemplates the phantasy of the perfect union that must be relinquished by the solo parent and weaves in and out of the nuanced emotional, psychological, and ethical questions, for individuals and society as a whole, alongside the challenges to the psychoanalytic frame presented by solo parents by choice, which has regarded the parental couple as central to

psychic life. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the child of the solo parent is thought about and how psychoanalytic ideas around the internalised parental couple may need to expand to contain this growing trend.

Linked to Doniach's article, we are fortunate to have a piece by Jill Savege Scharff which explores the personal and societal ramifications for a heterosexual couple, split in their desire to have, or not to have, children. Illustrated by a fascinating and in-depth piece of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy, Scharff makes clear the need for therapists to listen intently, without judgement or bias, to the narratives brought by each partner. The task is to listen on both conscious and unconscious wavelengths, to consider more logical environmental concerns against over-population, for instance, alongside more unconscious fears relating back to a client's experience of being parented or anxieties of not being "enough" for the partner intent on having children.

Weaving her themes skilfully, Scharff considers the weighty residue of childcare inequalities between the sexes alongside unpicking both gender's likely motivation to become parents. She examines the influences and pulls within wider society and extended family on the couple to procreate, linking with developmental consequences to childlessness that are part of psychoanalytic thinking and perhaps calling for some boundaries and psychoanalytic truths to be challenged.

Wayne Bodkin's important piece describes his work running a therapeutic group for parents and siblings of young people in transition. His group enables these parenting couples the opportunity for respite through a sense of recognition and validation; other families understand what they are experiencing, and, perhaps, respite from shame. Again, loss and mourning are central themes in Bodkin's article, as couples contemplate the seismic changes to their own couple and parenting relationship. New relationships and identities need to be forged within the immediate and wider family, including siblings of the transitioning child. The shared phantasy of a child that all parents carry, containing wishes and hopes for the future, must metamorphose to encompass this new, and not new, family member.

Ann Hardy, raised by an amah for the first two years of her life in Hong Kong, takes a look into one of the more neglected areas of child-rearing in that she considers the impact on a couple choice and relationship if one or both partners were raised by a "second mother", such as a nanny. Beginning and ending with the oedipal myth, and the overlooked Merope, wife of Polybus, King of Corinth, Hardy looks at how "split parenting" may have ramifications within an intimate adult relationship. Illustrating her ideas with three clinical case examples, and utilising her own countertransference, Hardy considers such emotions as shame and envy between the sometimes colder "upstairs" and warmer "downstairs" childcare on offer in middle-class homes in the 1950s to 1980s and, at times, confesses to feeling like the therapeutic "hired help" herself.

Does the child raised by a delegated carer suffer feelings of rejection, or confusion on receipt of their dual mothering, further complicated by splits in class and status between "first" and "second" mother? Hardy notes that many

foundational psychoanalytic thinkers, such as Klein and Freud, were raised by a “stand-in” and is curious how that might have influenced their views of parent–child bonds. Finally, Hardy poses a question in looking to the future and the 1.27 million (Ofsted) state-funded nursery places available in England in 2024. With the increasing agency and power women are wielding in the workplace taking them out of the nursery, do relationships with childcare providers merit more focus within assessment of couple psychotherapy?

Next up is Corinne Masur, who writes a compelling article describing the life-changing blow of a parent’s death, and how it affects the children and their surviving partner. She explores possibilities for relational regression and development for the living family members, alongside the painful work of grieving and, finally, acceptance. Masur describes possible blocks to mourning and the near impossible challenge of the grieving parent to address their own sadness alongside parenting their bereaved children. One thing, however, is certain, the relationship between surviving parent and child is forever changed, as neither are who they were before their loss.

Molly Ludlam, founding editor of this journal, contributes a thought-provoking piece that looks at the assessment of a couple in distress for couple psychotherapy. The assessor is faced with an array of options: is couple therapy what is needed? Or is it parenting support they are seeking? Or child and adolescent therapy for their children? Or, as a final alternative, family systemic support for the whole family? Beginning with Donne’s 1624 quotation: “No man is an island”, Ludlam considers that dysfunction and pain in the family cannot be considered without sight of the wider family context, either as reported context or actual face-to-face work with different family members. She also links this need for a wider network to the therapist in private practice and the dangers inherent in lone therapists working outside of multidisciplinary teams. Ludlam clearly fears and recognises, as I am sure we all do, that clinicians can be lulled into working with complex cases without the necessary experience because their knowledge of more appropriate specialist referral networks, and what other, more appropriate treatments might entail, is lacking.

Finally, we have included an article that illustrates ways of working with adoptive couples and families that may not appear familiar to readers of the journal. Child and adolescent psychotherapist, Louis Sydney, describes working with compassion-focused therapy, defining compassion as being open to distress, far from familiar ideas of being kind. Approaching the couple through the lens of working with the child, Sydney utilises techniques to help couples reflect on different parts of themselves, alongside symbolic representation to facilitate change, such as sand tray and chair work.

Much of Sydney’s work is with couples, beset with guilt and shame, suffering from blocks to their ability to care for their adoptive children. Sydney maintains, along with many of the authors featured in this special edition, that if the parenting couple can develop compassion towards themselves, each other, and their relationship, they are more likely to be able to attune to their adoptive children’s communications of distress. He brings a detailed composite

case that illustrates working first with the two parents individually, followed by couple therapy, and, finally, assimilating change through working with the whole family. Some of Sydney's thinking and ideas may be familiar to those of us who work psychoanalytically and psychodynamically with couples but we hope that his behavioural, embodied, compassion-focused ways of working make for thought-provoking reading.

We are also delighted to introduce the arts and book review sections of this edition of the journal.

First up, Sanna Aavaluoma offers an in-depth review of the film *All of Us Strangers* directed by Andrew Haigh in 2023. She suggests that the film "is a story of internalised homophobia and loneliness, filled with sadness yet also with love and hope". Following the loss of his parents at the age of twelve and a chance encounter with a drunken flirtatious male neighbour in the block of flats where Adam lives, the film portrays the search for his parents, alongside a whirlwind affair with the neighbour. However, the film is a moving portrayal of Adam's inner journey of reconciliation and self-realisation.

The first book review by Molly Ludlam enthusiastically embraces Deborah Baum's reflections *On Marriage*. Baum, drawing on a range of resources, some related to her own family, suggests that problems with communication lie at the heart of marital discord. Despite its contradictions, evidenced in increased rates of divorce, marriage remains a central organising tenet for couple relationships. Moreover, the concept of "re-marriage", in which parting couples redefine their relationship (Fisher, 1999) reinforces the primacy of marital relationships.

Krisztina Glausius reviews *Love Songs: Listening to Couples* by Perrine Moran, which she lyrically describes as Moran's "love letter to the theory and practice of psychoanalytically informed couple psychotherapy". Moran uses the medium of popular music to understand, enrich, and connect to themes such as couple enmeshment, separation, and disappointment, common presenting problems in the consulting room. Glausius clearly appreciates the author linking music to the innate rhythmic communication between infant and caregiver, and her generously offered vivid clinical vignettes, alongside fascinating descriptions of the music that comes into her mind, inviting us "into her melodious countertransference, the product of her analytic reverie".

Victoria Walsh comprehensively reviews *Couples as Parents: Explorations in Couple Therapy*, a collection of fourteen chapters by experienced perinatal, couple, child, and psychosexual experts, that maps the development of the couple relationship onto its parallel counterpart, the parental couple relationship. In sharing both theoretical frameworks and practical application of therapeutic work with couples and families, from conception, birth, raising teenagers, and facing the empty nest, the book, edited by Thompson and McCann, also explores pressures to the boundary around the couple relationship, for parents that adopt or those that have a disabled child. Walsh's review emphasises the unconscious resonance of aspects of the couple's own experience of being parented and its influence in the raising of their own children. Walsh "reminds the reader that parents are not only navigating their

relationship with their child, but their relationship as a couple, as well as their own past conflicts, unmet needs, fears and defences which parenthood can trigger in new and unforeseen ways”.

We hope you enjoy this special edition of the journal that focuses on couples as parents within the wider family system. We welcome any thoughts or reactions you may wish to share with us on the reading of it.

References

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