

REDUCED FATHER IDENTIFICATION IN PARENTAL DISCORD AND IN MENTAL DISTURBANCE

EDITORIAL

The following two papers, "Father Identification as a Function of Mother-Father Relationship" by James C. Baxter, David L. Horton, and Ronald E. Wiley, and "The Disturbed Child's Perception of his Parents" by Leslie Y. Rabkin have one important finding in common: Subjects expressed less identification with their fathers than would normally be expected.

In the first paper this is a function of perceived parental discord. Male and female college students from intact homes who reported conflict between their parents saw significantly less similarity between themselves and their fathers than did subjects who did not report such conflict.

In the second paper, disturbed children from intact homes identified less with their fathers than did normal children. Ten-year-old boys classified as schizophrenic, neurotic, or as cases of behavior disorder said more often that they wanted to grow up to be like their mothers rather than like their fathers, than did normal controls.

What would be the theoretical bond for these two similar findings? The answer would seem to lie in an inference regarding the mothers of the subjects in both studies. This inference is suggested by Adler's conception of the function of the mother (*The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, New York: Basic Books, 1956, pp. 372-374).

According to Adler, the mother is the child's first and most important human contact, the person whose duty it is, so to speak, to introduce the child properly to the social world so that he will be able to cooperate with it and to become interested in it, on which relationship the solution of his life's problems will depend. To be unprepared for the solution of the life problems and to fail in them, is understood by Adler as the basis of mental disturbance. To prepare the child well for the solution of life's problems the mother must awaken the child's innate potentiality for social interest and must develop and spread it. Thus from the initial cooperation with the mother the child's social interest would at first be concentrated on the mother and would gradually spread to the father, to other members of the family, to wider circles, and ultimately to all of mankind.

The specific inference regarding the mother in the first study would be: When there is conflict among the parents, the mother is not likely to encourage, as she should, the development of the child's social interest toward his father. This would reduce identification with the father, identification being a function of social interest, according to Adler (*ibid.*, p. 136). The authors of the first study themselves give this explanation. It should be noted, however, that in cases of parental discord the mother may very well still encourage in the child social interest toward others, thus merely by-passing the father.

The specific inference regarding the mother in the second study would be: Since the subjects were disturbed children, i.e., children who could not solve their life problems successfully, the mother had probably failed to develop the child's social interest in general. Or, in her failure to extend the child's social interest beyond her own person, she did not even encourage its extension to the father. In the view of Adler the mother may fall short here through neglect or, most often, through pampering the child. In the case of pampering the mother "accustoms the child to an imaginary world which is not ours and in which everything is done for the child by others. In consequence the child declines to extend his social interest toward others and aims to withdraw from the father, the siblings, and other persons who do not meet him with the same amount of warmth" (*ibid.*, p. 374). While the author of this second study also makes inferences with regard to the mother, he does not attempt to explain how she may have exerted an influence toward reduced identification with the father.

The findings in the following two papers, while statistically significant, refer of course only to general tendencies, to statistical probabilities. Adler reminds us particularly with regard to pampering on the part of the mother, "Again in this connection one must not underestimate the child's free estimation and the participation of his free creative power, which account for the diversity of the results. The child makes use of external influences to mold them according to his own interpretation" (*ibid.*, p. 374).