

CO-Identity with Son Is Core Component in Father's Development: Same-Gendered Father/Son Relationships foster Relational Development in Fathers

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Abstract

What is the crucible of a father's relationally transformative growth in connection with his sons? In this article, the author first contextualizes relational theory, and then explores the idea that co-identity with a son provides the mortar and pestle for a father's development in same-gendered relationships. In connection with his son, a father revisits and reconnects with his childhood self, re-engaging and rejuvenating his core-relational being. In the data for exploring fathers' relational growth and development a subtheme emerged. This subtheme, an intrapsychic phenomenon I have coined Myson/Myself, is expanded in this article. This hypothesis is based on the data from a qualitative study of 23 fathers, who are reflective of the Greater Boston demographic.

Keywords: fathering, fathers and sons, co-identity, same-gendered relationships, male relational development, relational-cultural theory

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

The narrative for gender roles, expectations and goals of development are intertwined with socio-historical, economic and cultural time. Theories are established, and scripted behaviors follow. However, with the impact of time, paradigms continue to evolve and new story lines emerge. The evolution of gender goals for male relational development has spurred new interest and direction in viewing the impact of fathering on men (Watson-Phillips, 2006). As the effect of fathering unfolds, and the evidence that fathers do indeed grow in parental relationships is collected, an exploration of *why* fathers grow and develop in relationship can be studied. In addition, the question of whether same-gendered father/son relationships have a particular potential for transformational growth can be asked. Studying fathers of sons presents a unique opportunity for understanding the power of connection and the process of growing in and through relationship. Studying same-gender male/male relationships affords further understanding of male relational development. Using a Relational-Cultural Theory lens opens a window on the dynamics of male development in same-gendered father/son relationships and offers a possible theoretical framework for understanding how growth happens in this male/male connection.

This article expands the conversation on the how and why of male relational development that was initiated by Watson-Phillips' (2006, 2015, 2016) findings on fathers of sons. The focus zeros in on an intrapsychic dimension of co-identity that fosters development in fathers with sons, indicating that there is something unique about this male filial connection. The hypothesis is that the co-identity phenomenon of Myson/Myself in same-gendered father/son relationships stimulates relational development in men.

1.2 Importance

A look at the evolution of human developmental theory, with concomitant relational goals, as it relates to men and fathering contextualizes this hypothesis. During the 18th and 19th century Industrial Age, developmental theory supported the autonomous characterization of men as independent, self-sufficient, aggressive, separate individuals. Furthermore, fathers were seen as nonessential to their children's development. Men, as relational beings, were excluded from the family; breadwinner was their role, thus taking them away from the home and making them irrelevant to the intimacy of parenting. To be successful in the work world, men had to forsake their inner natures; as a

result they not only became disconnected from their families but also their inner relational beings or core-selves. Fathers were denied their full humanity as interconnected relational beings. The author does acknowledge that this exclusionary description more often reflects white, middle class experience.

During this time, fathering or men in families weren't seen as potential research subjects. Fathering and male relational development were not considered fields of study. Besides according to androcentric models of development, growth wasn't perceived as relational. How or why males might develop in relationship was beyond thought.

1.3 Relevant Scholarship

1.3.1 Androcentric Models

Even as late as the early twentieth century, Freud, with his focus on the dynamics of Oedipal Complex with mothers and sons, excluded fathers from a child's development except as an emancipator of his son from "enmeshment" with his mother. Today this "disconnecter" role can still be seen in the literature (Diamond, 2007). Even in mid-20th century, Ross (1979) designated fathers as the "forgotten parent" of psychoanalytic theory.

Correspondently, androcentric developmental theory described the goals of maturity as detachment, separation, autonomy, individuation and independence. Most notably, Erikson's stages of development *for males* (author's emphasis) chronicled a move to autonomy then back to intimacy after becoming a successfully developed separate, individuated person (Erikson, 1968). The result was a disconnected person -- disconnected from others and his own internal experience. Stephen Bergman (1991) contended that one of the sources of men's misery was the disconnections they must experience to be deemed psychologically healthy and fully developed. Kimmel (1994) recognized the forces of male gendering that demanded successful development of a masculine identity by necessitating a "flight from women and a repudiation of the feminine" (p. 126); in other words, denial of the full human response to being in the world.

Beyond Erikson and Freud, other modern psychological theorists of human psychological development (Kohlberg, 1981; Levinson, 1978; Mahler, Pine & Berman, 1975), reflected their male perspective of psychological development that emphasized separation and autonomy or an ethic of justice rather than relational-caring stance as the desired end. A problem inherent in these views is that they can minimize the human need for connection and the importance of participating in the growth of others.

1.3.2 Relational Feminist Models

When the ideal of separation and individuation is the basis of human development, the implication is that humans must disconnect from relationship in order to create a definitive, separate self (Surrey, 1991). However, this paradigm began to shift with the advent of an inclusive relational psychology. In 2004 Jordan wrote that "[t]he illusion of separation and the mistaken belief in autonomy contribute to the denial of the basic human need to participate in the growth of others and to being open to being moved by others" (Jordan, Walker & Hartling, p. 5). According to the old story line, then, men are both denied their own need of connection as well as the "generative" need to parent as relationship.

Gilligan (2004) believed that the change from separateness to connection indicated the end of "patriarchal psychology" as she termed androcentric developmental theory. Gilligan disquieted by relational independence and autonomy as developmental goals, saw the potential of trauma resulting from the goal of disconnection as maturity (Gilligan, Brown & Rogers, 1991). Gilligan (2004) believed that connectedness is central to the human condition, and that separation as part of a male's development forces a disconnection from his core-self, resulting in trauma. Gilligan defined trauma as a shattering of human connectedness, which is "hardwired neurologically and integral to navigating the human world" (p. 141). This type of thinking threads the loom for the tapestry of growth.

1.3.3 Evolution in Conceptual Framework

During the time when men were acknowledged as family breadwinners, the world of social scientists, and except for a notable few (Lamb, 1982; Parke, 1981; Pleck, 1981), ignored men and fatherhood as a research prospects. Only intimations of future possible research on men and the impact of fathering, with the suspicion that parenting might spur development, quietly reverberated in the field.

As time progressed, some researchers (Cowan & Bronstein, 1988; Morfei, Hooker, Fiese, & Cordeiro, 2001) found changes in a father's sense of self or self-definition as a result of parenting. Others like Hass (1994) found instances of emotional or psychosocial growth. For example, Hass found that a child tempers a man, making him more loving, giving, patient, more sensitive to others and his own feelings; Coltrane (1995) believed a man became more complete because fathering encouraged development of emotional expression and caring aspects of his personality; Lewis (1986) discerned that "contact with a baby exposed the intimate side of the man's character" (p. 150), allowing the father to be altruistic or expressive; and Palkovitz (1997) recognized that an increase in empathy corresponded to a decrease in egocentricism. Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, & Hill (1993) saw fathering as influencing psychosocial health of

fathers, but they focused on the transition into parenthood, then contrasted the fathers to non-fathers framing the growth from a generative perspective rather than a relational one.

Nevertheless, as the story continued, the theme of men as more than providers, prompted studies on the consequences of paternal involvement on children (Bozett, 1985; Coltrane, 1995; Kimmel, 1987; Marsiglio, 1995; Parke, 1996), but not on men. However, with father involvement, new terminology emerged. Using an Eriksonian perspective, Snarey (1993) coined the phrase “generative fathers.” For Palm (1993), the “involved father” was an active, nurturant father. Coincidentally but gradually the impact of fathering on the fathers raised notice. For example, Palm believed that fatherhood allowed men a chance to learn the skills that create emotional intimacy and to understand the value of relationship. He wrote, “The process of attachment between father and child is the context of reciprocal learning” (p. 140). As the child learned to trust, the father learned about caring, nurturing, listening, and expressing affection. Pruett (1987) found that fathers felt drawn into their child’s being since, according to his research, all the fathers in the study had formed deeply reciprocal, nurturing attachments to their babies. Reciprocity as a major ingredient for relational growth began to emerge. Although reciprocity is acknowledged, it is generalized to children regardless of gender.

On the time line, Griswold (1997) commented that by the end of the twentieth century the emphasis on fathering had shifted to one of involvement. However, even though Griswold saw the conceptual evolution of fathering as involved, he framed fathering as a role. As the conceptualization of an involved father gained credence, the field recognized the important and unique position of fathering on a child’s development (Liebman & Abell, 2000) by acknowledging the father’s direct, dyadic influence. The next step would be to apprehend dyadic reciprocity as a factor in the father’s development. An aid to this conception was proof from neuroscientists that people are hardwired for connection (Banks, 2015). Being neurologically receptive to others by definition implied bi-directionality or reciprocity necessary for development. Ironically, Biddulph (1995) noted the hardwiring, but felt for men the “software” hadn’t been installed because men have the love, but not the skills.

A few researchers with an understanding of connection and mutuality began using a semi-relational approach for describing fathering and male psychological, emotional, relational development. These terms laid the foundation for a theory of connection or relational theory of fathering. As noted above, Palm (1993) used “involved father” and Dermott (2003) “intimate father” to define paternal intention. Richardson (1994), who spoke of “fathercare” (sic) in his dissertation, most closely outlined a relational framework as a canvas for male relational development. He believed that self-in-relation theory, i.e. Relational Cultural Theory’s early language for connection, was the bridge to understanding psychological development in fathers. Richardson references Miller, Jordan, Kaplan, Surrey and Bergman, all Relational-Cultural Theory theorists.

Dermott (2003) aimed to bring clarity to the concept of the “involved father” by focusing on essential components of the father-child relationship. She contended “intimate fathering” embraced and expanded on emotional connection and prioritized the quality of relationship, which is intrinsic to current conceptualizations of “good fathering.” Dermott found that the fathers’ descriptions of “good fathering” included an “openness of emotions, the expression of affection, and the building of close relationship – a description that corresponded closely to definitions of intimacy” (2003, 8.1) as might be found in mutual relationships. Watson-Phillips (2015) added to the lexicon with the concept of the “relational father,” a father who is devoted to and invested in the development of his offspring. This father perceives fathering as a relationship to be lived and not a role to be performed. Relational fathering terminology embraced earlier concepts of the nurturing, intimate, good or involved father, and takes it further into relationship.

Researchers began to allude to the possibility of relational development in men. Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine (1987) conceptualized involved fathering in terms of engagement, accessibility and responsibility, as did Hawkins et al (2002) and Palkovitz, Copes and Woolfolk (2001). Palkovitz, et al. believed that fathering cultivated adult development. They suggested that fatherhood was a rich context for personal growth and that men are better for having a relationship with their children. Their results were framed in life course terms, roles and identity changes. In 2001, Palkovitz et al. reflected that although parenting was now appreciated as a catalyst of adult development, the causal links between the two needed elaborations. By 2002, Palkovitz offered that fatherhood contributed significantly to development in the men in his study. While research on fathering became a focus of interest, and the reported outcomes illustrated changes in fathers, the data did not include how or why the changes transpired. Using a relational-cultural theory focus, Watson-Phillips (2006) posited that men grew in and through relational connection with their sons where fathering was seen as a reciprocal process stimulating development and growth in the father.

One of the missing truths of human development according to Relational-Cultural theory (R-CT) was the realization that people grew in and through interactions in relationships. Relationships were important for androcentric theorists only as they facilitated the goal of a separated self (Miller & Stiver, 1997), but not as a medium for growth nor as the goal of development. Androcentric theories did encourage reconnection with others in adult relationships but only after

establishing a separate selfhood. However, these selves can have strong ego boundaries, which can interfere with relational processes of mutuality. For R-CT theorists, relationships are central for growth throughout the life span, and growth-fostering relationships are the contexts for learning about relationships and being human. As healthy relationships grow, participants become more complex and differentiated persons. The question is, though, how does this happen?

1.4 Hypothesis

Positing that people grow in and through relational connection, fathering is seen as a bi-directional process stimulating development and growth in the father. Revisiting and re-identifying the core-self in connection with the son is the medium for growth. In the male filial relationship, the same-gender experience and the reciprocity of connection fertilize development. Embedded in the petri dish is the intrapsychic phenomenon of a co-identity for the father with his son. This process is framed as Myson/Myself.

1.4.1 Reciprocity in Dyadic Relationships

As early as 1963 Erikson stated and in 1979 Bronfenbrenner considered the parent/child relationship a two way street according to Eggebeen and Knoester (2001). Bronfenbrenner articulated that when one part of a dyad develops, the other develops as well (Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, & Hill, 1993). Bronfenbrenner explained that “the dyad, especially as it evolves into a primary relationship constitutes a developmental system; it becomes a vehicle with a momentum of its own that stimulates and sustains developmental processes” (p. 383). Green (1976) wondered if there were a critical attachment period for fathers that would stimulate father’s feelings for the child as she suggested “imprinting, if it works, works both ways” (p. 68). Pruett (1987) wrote about his research participants that the “fathers had actively incorporated their infants into their whole lives” (p. 77). By parenting Pruett felt the fathers’ fragmented lives were made whole through relationship with their children – a possible hint of relational development in men. Later Pruett (2000) explained that father care touched children deeply affecting their lives and the fathers’ lives, but he did not explore how or why the development occurred.

As noted above Palm (1993) believed that fatherhood provided the context for reciprocal learning, and Pruett (1987) found that fathers experienced deeply reciprocal attachments with their babies. Furthermore, Liebman & Abell, (2000) saw the father’s direct, dyadic influence in relationship with their children.

Many researchers (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 1998; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Hawkins & Belsky, 1989; Hawkins et al., 1993; Liebler, 1992; Osherson, 1995; Pruett, 1987, 2000; Snarey, 1993) appreciated that parenting was a bidirectional activity. Parke (1981) contributed to the idea that “the father-child relationship is a two-way process and children influence their fathers just as fathers alter their children’s development” (p. 9). Reciprocity in dyadic connection seemed then to suggest that co-identity with sons could further provide the mortar and pestle for a father’s development.

1.4.2 Dyadic Co-identity

What is the power of the dyad and especially the same-gender dyad? Co-identity describes the complex, complementariness of the bi-directional process in relational fathering. Co-identity enhances the dynamic of identification between father and son. A post-modern position is that humans, actually all phenomena, are interconnected. This relational approach was well illustrated by Ballou, Matsumoto and Wagner’s (2002) ecological model. Post-modern, feminist theorists conceived of an interactive, agentic, contextualized individual situated in relationship to others and the world. According to Suyemoto (2002), author of “Constructing Identities: A Feminist, Culturally Contextualized Alternative to ‘Personality,’” the self continually constructed itself both intrapersonally and interpersonally. Ballou and Brown posited the “interaction and interplay of biological and intrapsychic phenomena” (2002, p. xvii) transpired within the context of multiple systems of family, community, cultural, national and global contexts. The socio-historical context of these systems was “actively co-constructed within the relationships at and between these multiple levels” (Suyemoto, 2002, p.73). For the purpose of this article, the focus is on the intrapsychic phenomenon of father and son co-identifying within the familial context and how that stimulates development in the father.

1.4.3 Theoretical Framework for Co-identification

Co-identity as a bi-directional process suggests that if a child introjects the same sexed parent’s gendering, that the father too will more closely see himself in his male child and identify with his son. Jordan (1991a), explained that for women the same-gendered nurturing figure “strengthens the young girl’s sense of relatedness and connection.” She speculated, “it is likely that the emphasis on relationship and interaction in this theory will be useful for understanding male development as well” (p. 87).

Sam Osherson (1986a) contended, “The infant holds the father as much as the father holds the infant.” From birth, fathers in this study experienced their sons with their inherent eagerness for connection, as instinctively inviting them

into relationship (Watson-Phillips, 2006). This paper hypothesizes that in these mutually resonant relationships, fathers co-identified with their sons.

Suyemoto (2002), stressed the co-creations of identity, where, in reorganized selves, even the core personality is reconstituted, “self-organization emphasizes that all constructs are co-constructs, including the continual reconstruction of the core personal identity” (p. 93). According to Ehrensaft (1990), when a father connects with his son and participates in the intrapsychic and interpersonal aspect of being in relationship, both father and son benefit; the father, however, learns to nurture himself and discover the child in himself.

In rediscovering the child within, a father reconnects with his core relational self – one that is freer from relational violations and normative gender role socialization. In touch with his core relational self, a father is liberated to redefine himself (Watson-Phillips, 2016).

1.4.4 Same-Gender Co-identity

Osherson (1986b) posited that as parents we identify with our children. Fathers, as the more assiduous definers of masculinity for their sons (Jordan, 1991b) than mothers, may be more attuned to their sons and therefore identify more easily with the same sexed child. Considering co-identity, fathers naturally have a more similar context of masculine experience with sons than with daughters. Additionally, same-gendered relationships encourage the mirroring of mutual identification that reinforces mutual reciprocity and connection because of similar feeling states (Surrey, 1991), biological sameness, and experience with cultural norms. Lastly, parents may experience their same-gendered children as extension of themselves, which would aid the co-identification process and facilitate paternal growth and development. The subtheme as outlined for this paper, reveals fathers actually extend their relational being into connection with their sons by seeing themselves in their sons.

2. Method

The co-identity hypothesis is based a theme that emerged from research conducted with 23 fathers between 2005 and 2015. The research question explored is “What effect does the fathering experience have on a father’s relational growth and development?” This has been a qualitative phenomenological study, engaging feminist and grounded theory methodologies.

2.1 Participants

The 23 men in this study were self-selecting. In finding the participants, convenience sampling, snowballing or chain sampling were used. Several friends who fit the sample profile, and who would be reflective and articulate in relating their fathering experience, were asked. Three agreed and two declined because of the time commitment. Although the three men were friends, there was enough distance in our relationships that the relationship would not be exploited nor would the relationship influence data analysis any more than any relationship established with other participants.

All men reported that they had positive relationships with their sons and, except for the one unmarried dad, with their partners. Only one father was a stay-at-home dad. Although, one dad lived independently of his son’s mother, he was a primary caretaker. The men represented the demographics of the Greater Boston area and as such are relatively diverse in ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and occupation with the majority however, middle income, educated, and white. Their ages ranged from 33 to 46, with average age 39.4, and their sons were between one and twelve years with an average of 5.3 years.

The men were dedicated, involved, intimate men who were committed to being part of their sons’ lives and development. They viewed their participation as a relationship rather than a role. From the mundane to the metaphysical they consciously engaged in fathering. They rearranged their work schedules and personal lives to be as physically available as constraints allowed; they actively built and worked to maintain connections – when necessary repairing disconnection through moderating their own behavior. They reflected on the quality of the relationship including their own internal experience. In mutuality, they recognized the power of their sons to move them, and they perceived their own power as either beneficial or hurtful. They acknowledged their responsibility in raising good men for the future.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

Data came from numerous sources: interviews with one on site visit in most cases, genograms, childhood inventories and histories, biographies, photos, process notes, memos, follow-up emails and phone calls. Each participant was interviewed from 3 to 6 hours. Most were interviewed on two separate occasions. These multiple sources created layered pictures of the fathers’ personalities and lived experience.

2.3 Data Analysis

All data were transcribed and read many times. On first reading open coding was used. Then in rereading preliminary categories were established along with some tallying of numerical evidence of repetition. Initial categories were emic

concepts or fathers' actual words. The following reading included color-coding for the most salient categories, collapsing the initial 42 categories to 14. Data chunks were then copied for 10 category files, which were later reduced to 5 and finally 4. Creating a conditional matrix and model, a conditional hypothesis was established. After decontextualizing the themes, a story line model was created that included the context of growth, casual factor, fathers' responses and consequences. Finally, selective coding helped recognize core components of the dimensions of growth. Here the subtheme of co-identity emerged.

3. Results

3.1 Identity with Sons

Fathers identified with their sons through relational movement. Fathers acknowledged this enterprise in two ways. One was in re-visiting their own childhood and re-identifying with their childhood selves. The other was seeing themselves in their sons or their sons in them, which is referred to as the "Myson/Myself" dimension. These dynamics intertwined, occurred simultaneously and overlapped. Therefore, a brief discussion follows of the context, revisiting and re-identifying, is presented before the Myson/Myself dimension and its transformative power.

3.1.1 Revisiting Childhood and Re-identify with Childhood Self

Fathers' vignettes revealed that by engaging with their sons and in their sons' childhoods, they revisited, re-connected and/or re-identified with own their childhoods. In re-experiencing their childhood, they reunited with their younger selves – their core-selves. Some fathers spoke outright of reliving their childhoods. Some fathers engaged in what they called "rastle," "tackle-dad" or kicking back and roughhousing, but with these fathers' interviews information was not elicited that implied reconnection with childhood or childhood selves. Although, Jim, who became physically handicapped at 19 and had trouble with mobility, reconnecting with his childhood was not part of our conversations. Two fathers, who were parentified as children because of trauma, did not have childhoods they'd liked to revisit. Also, because of the research questions, fathers were not directly asked for evidence of identifying with their sons. Therefore, not all the conversations elicited co-identification information.

Fathers who did revisit their childhoods said things similar to what Dean recounted, "It's sort of a reflective activity where you get to walk through your own childhood and the fun things that you did that brought you a lot of pleasure, it's like walking through your own childhood." High school English teacher, Dan, reported not just revisiting but also re-experiencing his own past:

What I find a lot is that I'm actually reliving my own past through him. As we play together outside, I remembering those moments of play that I went through, and it allows me to feel like a child again. It's not just empathizing with him but it's actually re-experiencing my own childhood. That's what I feel when we're playing together. I'm reliving what it was like for me when I was a kid.

After a day sledding with his son, John recollected, "I always used to do [that] when I was a kid. I used to go outside. With Ellis, I feel like I can be a kid again...very natural and easy. The day just flowed." Tom says that to "just play with Thomas... [I] find that little kid in me."

For ex-athlete, Brad, being a kid with his kid reminded him of his childhood memories and his childhood self including losing ice hockey games and crying just like his son did after the season's big loss. Witnessing his eight-year-old son, sitting center ice, head down bawling, Brad recalled, "I just vividly remember sobbing after losing a game...an important game. Just sobbing uncontrollably when we lost and he was the same way." For a more complete description of the data on revisiting and re-identifying with one's childhood self, see Watson-Phillips (2006).

3.1.2 Myson /Myself Dimension

Fathers spoke of ways in which they were similar to their sons or saw themselves in their sons. The fathers' words often held a sense of awe for the mutuality of identity the experience. Fathers defined the core components of the Myson/Myself phenomenon in terms of legacy, genetics, gender, personal similarities or characteristics, bi-directional identification, and reverence.

When Dean, a college development officer, first held his son, he expressed the idea of legacy and knowing he would live on through his son. "I know I have a legacy. My traits and the same genetic makeup is [sic] in my arms!"

In terms of gender, some fathers, like relationally aware John, spoke of the bond that occurred at birth "so out pops this really beautiful boy. I was also very glad that it was a boy –just that sort of bond about the father and son." College professor, Bob loved the male replication in his son, "...this guy thing. I love the fact that he's a little boy." Dan saw his male self in Jacob and re-experienced his own childhood frustrations with his male physical energy: "It's hard not to see yourself in him, the qualities that I had as a kid. I see a lot of myself in him. I'm reliving the physical energy that boys have – a part of my maleness, this fire, this energy, [this need] to do things to expend the energy."

Fathers spoke of the similarities between themselves and their sons, comparing their looks or characteristics. Shawn, father of Jake 4 and Luke 2 ½, said that, “Jake’s a very kind of emotional kid. He’s a lot like me. He’s very sensitive with a real soft spot in his heart. I do understand that because I think it’s very similar to mine.” Tom saw how he and his son physically played like he and his dad did, but they also resembled each other:

My dad would play with us on Sundays. That was like one of my favorite things. We found a picture a few weeks ago of me on my father’s back. He’s running around the living room floor like a horse. But the look on my face is just like my son’s smile... (he laughs)...when he’s really having a good time.

Dan continued his vignette from above about reliving his own past through Jacob. He not only re-experienced his childhood, but also felt like he was being with himself:

It seems more like myself when I’m actually going back in time to this earlier part of myself that’s certainly fresh and new in some ways. It allows me to be myself as he is this reflection of myself. Seeing myself in his image reflected back to me, the way I imagine myself as a child is the way I see him, and I think how I was as a child. So it’s like being with myself.

Dan’s story suggested that seeing himself reflected back in his son’s image was a powerful bi-directional connection between father and son. Dan reported that he was given the opportunity to begin again, and as he said to “envision myself as the father I always imagined being.”

Dan also explained the shared qualities between his son and himself that allowed for self-affirmation and the introjection of his son into his own self-construction. “In some way he is part of you. He’s come from you – pretty affirming in that you ascribe those qualities to yourself. So, it’s like you’re seeing the best parts of you in him.” (At tender or poignant moments, fathers would sometimes change to second person pronouns, as if the emotion of the moment were too intense.)

Social worker, Howard, simply said that he and Isaac “are connected. It’s not like he’s in a different world and I’m not there. I’m part of his world and he’s part of mine.” Stay-at-home, Cam, father of Ben, 11 and Matthew 5, related that he absolutely saw himself in his sons:

I am constantly seeing them say or do something that I remember saying or doing. Even something I remember saying to my father what Ben just said to me, “Dad you just don’t understand, I know more about this than you do!” I bit my tongue on my rebuttal (even though I knew I was right and he was wrong), because I remember the feeling of thinking I knew more about something and not having the benefit of age and wisdom, thinking it didn’t matter.

Fathers are quite clear about the Myson/Myself dimension of the relationship. P.Y., a somewhat restrained Chinese/American, stated he saw “echoes of myself with my children.” Other fathers said: “We are one. I am one with him,” “He’s my flesh and blood,” and simply “That’s me!”

Shawn and Bob reflected that they learned about themselves by identifying with their sons. Shawn said he not only learned about himself, but also saw things about himself that he never saw before. On the other hand, college professor, Bob reflects:

I think that being around Matthew is a big part of that may be unlearning and awakening of a different model and different idea. Through the real joy of loving and just accepting this little guy, this other human being, in a certain sense you’re loving and accepting yourself.

A most perceptive father, Jeremy, exemplified fathers’ sensitivity to not living through their sons. Jeremy, felt the unique nature of his relationship with Ari, age five, made it easy to find similarities with him and recalled his own childhood. Jeremy could identify himself with and in Ari, but being in mutuality did not blur his ego boundaries:

I find that remembering my own childhood helps to remind me of the head space that children exist in, which brings patience and understanding for me as I watch him grow and learn. I am reminded all the time, by witnessing Ari, of the innocence I used to see the world with. I’m hesitant to take it much further, simply because I am afraid of projecting the idea that he will be like me or is like me. I want him to find his own way and be his own person, and then simply observe the areas in which our characteristics overlap.

Some fathers spoke reverentially about the connections with their sons. In response to the question was there anything about being in relationship with his son that allowed him to be more himself, John replied: “I’m not sure what it is. It’s just a spiritual connection. I feel more at ease. I feel more myself.”

Dan related a profound moment at his son’s birth, “I had this moment where I saw myself being born at the moment of Jacob’s birth. I could connect with myself at that moment in time – that powerful moment, when he was born, of seeing myself in his image reflected back to me.”

Dan believed he was reborn in his son's existence – a fluid moment indicative of the bi-directionality of identification that most of the fathers experienced in the Myson/Myself dimension. Dan and his son also shared an interest in nature where his spirit expanded beyond the moment. Dan recounted a winter's day's experience with the interconnectedness of all things including God:

Being outside building tunnels and snowmen, I loved those things as a kid... experiencing nature and the inter-connectiveness [sic] of things – whether it's to other human beings, whether it's to history, whether it's to knowledge, whether it's to nature – that inter-connection is where I find God so to speak.

Tokanoma enthusiast Shawn, like Dan, spoke to the mutuality in identity as a spiritual matter. Shawn conveyed that the identification “touches a whole different part of your being. It's spiritual – the spirit of, it's your son and it's you, your blood.” His son is part of himself, in a bi-directional flow.

At his son's birth, Bob too experienced being one with his son. He related that as Matthew's head was coming out, he got, “so drawn into it – my own flesh and blood. Instinctive that we are one. I am one with him. It isn't a choice. This is who am.”

3.2 Growth and Development

The transformative power of co-identity is clearly illustrated by Dean and Bob's representative vignettes below. Dean, whose divorced father was absent and whose stepfather was emotionally unavailable, now sees himself as a good dad who has triumphed over his emptiness because of his inter-connection with his son. The unit of co-identity is suggested by Dean's attention to both his son and to himself. Dean described his culminating metamorphosis:

I'm a good dad. I've overcome the emptiness and lack of role models. I've really come into my own through my own relationship with my child – being attentive to him and myself, being in touch with who I am and where I'm going and what I want... I'm blessed. I'm very blessed. I feel like I've emerged fairly decently, triumphed in being a father. And that is extraordinarily important to who I am today and tomorrow and forever. As an adult I can feel comfortable with the kind of dad I am and certainly the kind of man I am.

Dean's self-image had transformed, he had “come into his own.” He was both self and other-aware. He has re-constructed his sense of self and his manhood as a result of the reciprocity in relationship with his son.

Asked what he thought the mechanics of growth were, Bob provided an extraordinary vignette of co-identity when he is “one with his son.” Bob and son lay bare-chested on Matthew's bed. Bob reflected on his metaphysical awakening, a holistic cognitive, physical, heartfelt transformation:

There's something about lying with Mathew in his bed with two bodies connected to each other, warmth felt both sides, going both ways with a book, in our case, and yeah, you feel it in that moment. You feel a little, a little twist on the inside, a little pop. The little pop, that's the awakening.

But what are the mechanics? I can tell you the logistics. Physically being up against him. Being up against him, reading a book, talking, adding commentaries back and forth. Then I start imagining...I start imagining myself in a new and different way. Yeah, I do, I feel it internally. I don't know exactly where it is – chest area maybe, there's a little ‘phwet.’ That phwet is the imagining yourself in a different way. Seeing yourself.

I sometimes wish there be a view from the ceiling looking down. Because maybe it's there in that seeing myself is confirmation that I'm becoming something – my own growth as a dad... It's this awakening of a new definition, a new imagining, a new sense of self. It is in those intimate, quiet moments of physical, emotional contact where we're literally touching each other, and we're literally connected up here somewhere (Bob indicates his heart area) when our hearts and minds are synchronized and our breathing is actually at the same pace that it happens right there. That's the ‘ping,’ the internal ping of like ‘Hey, I'm a different guy.’

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary

The study of relational growth and development in men, uncovered a hidden dimension of co-identification. The finding of this intrapsychic phenomenon, Myson/Myself, suggested that same-gendered father/son co-identification is a possible stimulant for a father's personal evolution.

4.1.2 Myson /Myself Dimension

When fathers revisited their childhoods and re-identified with their childhood selves, they reconnected with and revitalized their inner relational being, their core-selves where relational growth and development ensued (Watson-Phillips, 2015). Fearless core-selves were open to co-identification with sons. Dan exemplifies the reconnection and identification when he says, “Seeing myself in Jacob’s image reflected back to me.... [is] like being with myself.... hard not to see yourself in him, the qualities that I had as a kid. I see a lot of myself in him.”

Once open to being in relationship with their sons and themselves, fathers spoke of ways in which they were similar to their sons or saw themselves in their sons. Sons were their legacy or even part of them, as Dan recounted, “It’s like you’re seeing the best parts of you in him.” Dan felt his son was part of him and he was part of his son. In co-identifying, fathers introjected qualities of their sons, as Bob exemplified when he reflected, “ [in] just accepting this little guy... in a certain sense you’re loving and accepting yourself.” In introjecting his son’s love and acceptance, Bob starts loving and accepting himself. This intrapsychic dynamic, of Myson/Myself, inaugurated Bob to a different way of being.

The introjection of their sons’ innocence and the fathers’ openness to their sons’ unconditional acceptance and love, softened fathers’ ego boundaries, preparing fathers for relational growth (Watson-Phillips, 2006). In co-identification, fathers expressed the link that flowed from the father to the son and back to the father. Fathers appeared to flow into their sons but did not subsume them, and although ego boundaries were permeable, boundaries did not appear blurred. Jeremy attested, “I am afraid of projecting the idea that he will be like me or is like me.” Fathers could identify themselves with or in their sons, but were sensitive not living through them.

An often-experienced spiritual component indicated the power and depth of the fathers’ connection with their sons. Ego boundaries were irrelevant when the spiritual domain embraced understanding. Dan recounted the interconnectedness of all things when he played in nature with his son. “Being outside building tunnels and snowmen, I ... experience[ed] nature and the inter-connectiveness [sic]... to nature ... [or even] where I find God.” Shawn, in another interview, related how he felt his sons’ spirits enter the room as they were born. Dan also recounted that he felt reborn in his son’s birth. Shawn recognized his sons are of his spirit, “It’s your son and it’s you, your blood.” This spiritual connection illustrated the power of reciprocity and intimated the transcendental nature of co-identity.

Spiritual or psychic phenomenon like introjection or co-identification can be unconscious dynamics, and, as a result, they may simply be felt or feel instinctive. Bob offered, “[I]t’s in that “... **‘ping,’** the internal ping of like ‘Hey, I’m a different guy.’” Also, Bob at Matthew’s birth experienced being one with his son; it was “instinctive that we are one. I am one with him. It isn’t a choice. This is who am.” Although Bob framed experience as instinctive, he was expressing the unconscious intrapsychic dynamic of co-identity with his son. What could be more spiritual than Dan’s altered experience at Jacob’s birth when he saw himself in Jacob’s image reflected back to him?

4.1.3 Limitations

The hypothesis that the intrapsychic phenomenon of co-identification propels transformative development in fathers is rudimentary and without further exploration is not robust. As a theme in a qualitative study, it lacks quantitative corroboration and in-depth focus of its own.

The size of the sample group limited interpretation and conclusion. Even though the sample was representative of the greater Boston area, it was predominately middle class white educated men. Although no significant variation in the limited sample of mixed ethnicities appeared, the sample was much too small to assume there was none. Also, the fathers were self-selecting men who had positive relationships with their sons. Positive relationships may be a key factor in allowing for co-identification.

The possibility of a change in lifestyle as precursors to co-identity’s occurring was not examined. Also, the possibility that viewing fathering as relationship and not a role may have affected the mechanics of co-identify. Another limitation was the age of sons. An infant son’s beguiling invitation into connection may be critical for fathers to relax their boundaries. Although innocent, nonthreatening, unconditionally loving relationships offered fathers psychological safety and emotional resonance (Watson-Phillips, 2006), it is not apparent if this phenomenon is dependent only on a relationship starting from birth.

All sons in this study were pre-adolescent. The dynamics of adolescence on the relational connection was not explored.

As always, self-reports from self-selecting participants need to be acknowledged as possibly self-serving and self-affirming of one’s goodness. Also, no attempt was made to generalize the findings to fathers and daughter or mothers and sons, as the focus was on adult male relational development in same-gendered relationships.

4.1.4 Recommendations

Another replicate study mining the mechanics of growth would be elucidating and help in substantiating the tentative hypothesis of co-identity as an intrapsychic phenomenon that engenders development. The question, “Can you tell me if there is something uniquely different about your son or being in relationship with your son that allows you to be more yourself than you have been with anyone else?” seemed to be the best generator of Myson/Myself data. Other questions, not used in this study, but my hunch is that they would offer substantive results are: “Can you tell me about a time when your son reminded you of yourself? How did you feel seeing yourself in your son?” “Do you think your affinity with your son has nourished your growth? How so?”

4.2 Significance

In an emotionally resonant holding environment of connection and mutuality, free from the fear of vulnerability, fathers luxuriated in the psychological safety of unconditional love and acceptance proffered by their sons (Watson-Phillips, 2016). In connection with their sons, fathers were liberated from prior self-constructions by revisiting their childhood selves, and by re-engaging and revitalizing their inner core-selves, thereby manifesting the intrapsychic transformative power of co-identity with their sons.

People grow in and through relational connection. When fathers co-identified with their sons in a bi-directional developmental process, growth was facilitated in the father. Development was stimulated because of the same-gender, male/male, experience and reciprocity embedded in the intrapsychic phenomenon of Myson/Myself. This work supplies evidence and builds on Relational-Cultural Theory, demonstrating that development in relationship applies to men as well as women. Significance also lies in probing the why or how of development in same-gendered relationships.

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