

## Script for IPA Podcast<sup>1</sup>

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Emerging from my book that addresses the inherent tensions of the male psyche, this podcast focuses on the boy's early relationship with his father as well as the father's importance in the development of masculinity, particularly with regard to aspects of tenderness and sensory intimacy as well as to what is often considered "feminine." While the fundamental tensions in navigating gender will remain, radical and widespread changes in sociocultural practices are evident, and we can predict that these variations will enlarge our understanding in the years ahead.

### **The Father's Impact on The Sense of Masculinity**

I concentrate on three main ways that *the father* impacts a male's sense of masculinity: first, fathers as an *actual, flesh-and-blood presence*; second, as an *internal, intrapsychic representation* or *imago*; and finally, as *the third* in the mind's triadic, oedipal structure. I begin with the role played by the *actual, flesh-and-blood father*.

### **Boys and their fathers: homoerotic love and melancholic loss**

The little boy's preoedipal, dyadic, father-son *homoerotic love*—his "typically masculine ... special interest in his father" that, as Freud (1921, p. 105) noted, has nothing to do with "a passive or feminine attitude towards ... father (and ... males in general)." Still, comparable to the boy's heteroerotic desires for his mother, ... unconscious incestuous anxieties are generated, which ... accelerate the repudiation of his homoerotic, sensual, and tender love for the father. Hence, in combination with cultural mores, ... the boy's same-sex object desire often tends to be preemptively foreclosed.

In my revising disidentification theory, which had posited that healthy masculinity could only be won by repudiating the feminine, I propose that the preoedipal, dyadic father is crucial in regulating the severity of his son's traumatic separation from his mother and accordingly, his relationship with femininity. As I will discuss, however, even if fathers are physically or emotionally unavailable, they are *always* psychically present and thereby able to represent the *symbolic paternal function*.

The actual father's importance partly stems from the drive to individuate and the incest taboo, combined with culturally enforced aspects of separation from the maternal orbit. The young boy often experiences his need for and identification with his mother as shameful, while also likely disavowing or foreclosing his active albeit receptive, typically masculine desire for his father (and closeness with males in general). This is evident in adult males' defensive efforts against neediness to stave off shame states that are occasioned by penetration anxieties—often in receptive, passive, and/or sexualized countenance—that are equated with shameful femininity. Consequently, many men create *impenetrable citadels* (Elise 2001) erected to fend off their essential incompleteness, originally grounded in the infant's complex relationship to his mother. In preventing his being seen as vulnerable and lacking, shame often underlies melancholic states

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<sup>1</sup> Largely drawn from my book, *Masculinity And Its Discontents: The Male Psyche and the Inherent Tensions of Maturing Manhood* (Routledge, 2021).

of loss associated with highly conflictual, maternal longing and disavowed homoerotic love. For instance, when males join together in unacknowledged loving groups (typically, heterosexual ones), often sharing their internalized homophobia by repudiating the feminine.

### **Challenges to masculinity in becoming a father**

Turning to the challenges to masculinity in becoming an involved father, I note that fatherhood further establishes a man's sense of adult masculinity, replete with cultural and social expectations that tend to become salient. The process of fathering often triggers tremendous inner turmoil that, for some men, will interfere with truly becoming a father as more regressive, phallic-dominated defensive actions and retreats take hold.

For example, men who are dominated by narcissistically based forms of masculine striving, when initially called upon to father, may become depressed. Or more frequently, they may act out by having affairs, abandoning the family, losing themselves in work or substance abuse, and generally becoming unavailable as watchful protectors—in a sort of paternal version of postpartum depression. Tragically, such *failed* fathering is compounded by the male's deepening sense of shame and guilt surrounding his arrested sense of manhood when unable to embrace the fathering function.

An important challenge for the new father in coming to terms with his evolving more mature or so-called *genital*, less *phallic* form of masculinity, is to see his manhood as incorporating both the *ability to stand alone* and an increased *capacity to connect* by allowing the individuality of others to exist and thrive.

[[ This is evident in the statement of a former star athlete, who described his experience of watching his wife with their child:

I watched them playing with each other and I knew that I would destroy something they were sharing if I made my presence known. It was difficult to just watch; I wanted to get in there and do something ... maybe tickle or toss my kid up in the air. I resisted the temptation, though, and I am glad. That evening, I noticed I felt "older and heavier," not so "light and spry." But you know, I felt more like a man that night than I ever have, even before when I played football.]]

### **The instinctual basis of fathering**

The more instinctual basis of fathering is less recognized, perhaps because of the prevailing belief that fathers are further removed from parenting's instinctual roots than are mothers. In fact, there is an instinctually rooted character trait termed *genuine fatherliness*, which enables a father to act toward his children with immediate empathic responsiveness.

Moreover, the process of becoming a father -- his actual attachment and relationship to his infant—namely, the precursors to a generative, nurturing fatherliness— begins long before conception and precedes labor and delivery as well. Just as the roots of a woman's motherhood are traceable to the distant past and the little girl's wishes to be like her mother, so, too, can the foundations of a father's attachment and relationship to his infant be discerned in the little boy's procreative and defensive instincts, wishes, and behaviors, which are linked to his own earliest relationships to both his mother and father.

### **Fathering as a maturational opportunity**

Fathering invariably provides an occasion to move toward new and more satisfying resolution of sex and gender conflicts. When engaging in actual fathering, a man is given the opportunity to develop a more mature gender identity by renouncing and mourning his phallic wish to be unlimited in order to recognize and accept certain real limits vis-à-vis sex and gender, as well as generational differences.

The emerging father must deal with and adequately master a number of emotional and psychological issues to achieve the paternal caregiving role. For instance, unconscious conflicts may be triggered for a man while his wife is pregnant -- there may be envy of the prospective mother, concerns regarding responsibility for impregnation, anxieties about adulthood and aging, issues with competition and wishes to reestablish connection with one's own father, wishes to revitalize one's own parents, and jealousy and guilt toward the fetus who is the object of the partner's rapt attention. Given sufficient spousal and social support (often through analytic treatment), however, most men are able to weather these difficulties sufficiently to preserve their fatherly instincts. Accordingly, the father's watchful holding of the mother-baby dyad can constructively serve to protect him from his destructive envy of motherhood and to compensate him for feeling unimportant and left out of that dyad. This adaptively provides him with a sense of narcissistic fulfillment along more neutralized phallic lines as "proof of ... his masculine life-giving potency" (Manninen 1993, p. 38).

### **Three Essential Fathering Functions**

The actual father (or surrogate) is called upon to fulfill *three* essential fathering functions, each of which impacts masculinity and will remain important throughout the lives of both the father and child: first, as I've noted, to serve as the (1) *watchfully protective father*, and then to become both the (2) *attracting* and (3) *separating father*.

Let's consider each, beginning with (1) *The watchfully protective father* .....

The archaic and universal wish to be tended to, protected, and provided for is experienced in both imaginary and actual relationships with others throughout the life span. The Christian paternal imagery of "Our Father which art in heaven" (Matthew 5:9-13) is the foremost Western depiction in which the preeminent representation of the protector and provider role is that of the father.

Freud (1930) stressed the gravity of such paternal protectiveness when he stated: "I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection" (p. 27). This early provision is quite pressing, and there is evidence that children of fathers less involved in these initial phases are more likely to incur the detrimental effects of absent or ineffective fathering, including *father hunger* (Herzog 1982a), as well as the more rigidly defensive organization of gender experience. This *protective fathering function* remains important throughout his child's development, though its forms will alter and its significance will recede as other fatherly provisions become more salient.

The aptitude for paternal watchfulness represents a more developed form of masculinity that synthesizes autonomy and connection. The selfless generosity, sacrifice, and servitude required by such early forms of fathering serve as an important life step (among other developmental

passages) that indicates the maturing male's mastery and integration of phallic urges into their more aim-inhibited forms.

Succeeding as a 'good enough,' watchfully protective father partly depends on the degree to which a man can deal appropriately with his envy of intense mother-infant mutuality. An initial jealousy of the mother-infant bond is natural, after all, but the *protectively holding* father must successfully integrate both the creative and destructive aspects of his envy, often through his identification with the blissful union experienced by mother and baby. Of course, the mother's sensitivity to the father's needs and feelings of loss can help ameliorate his sense of exclusion and rivalry.

Though mostly unconscious when called upon to watchfully protect his progeny, the male's unique developmental dilemma of how he is to become a man while maintaining a close connection with his own mother, is re-created. Like the growing boy who learns to join his needs for autonomy with his needs for connection, the father who becomes engrossed in his newborn while "holding" the mother-infant dyad is able to simultaneously experience a *loving union with the world* and to acknowledge the *fact of its otherness* (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1985).

As the original protective agent for the mother-infant dyad, the father also shields the mother from impingement while she carries, bears, and suckles their infant. Serving as an external beacon to his wife and child, he protects their intense mutuality by freeing the mother to devote herself to their baby in what Winnicott (1956) terms her *primary maternal preoccupation*.

Men who are able to watch over, hold, and protect the mother and the developing fetus, infant, and small child are more likely to become fathers who must again hold, bear, and support with interested restraint his adolescent child's identity experimentation and subsequent distancing from family dependencies. Through functioning in this way, typically in conjunction with a sufficiently attuned mother able to recognize her son's masculinity, the severity of what might be potentially traumatizing for the little boy who is engaged in the separation-individuation process is mitigated.

Let's turn to both (2) *the attracting father* and (3) *the separating father* functions.

The actual father (or surrogate) in his *attracting* and *separating functions* serves as the earliest representative of the *nonmother* world (Abelin 1975). As the *functional agent of separation*, fathers represent *difference* and invariably carry the paternal quality as *third* (Green 1986, 2004). This may occur even in circumstances when the second parent is neither the biological father nor even male. Regardless, these fundamental qualities of fathering—nurturing, protecting, and holding, as well as subsequently attracting and separating the son from the mother's world—reflect and require a more flexible sense of masculinity that facilitates consolidating the boy's integration of his maternal-feminine identifications.

This becomes clearer when turning to the father as an *internal representation* or *imago* – mostly as the so-called *symbolic father*. In short, fathers (or surrogates) establish triangular space through inhabiting the attracting and separating facets of the paternal function.

### **The father's role in establishing triangular space: inhabiting the attracting and separating paternal functions**

The ability to internalize a healthy *father* imago partly depends on the nature of the father's relationship with the mother, and hers with the father. This internalization typically requires a *real*, flesh-and-blood other through inhabiting the *attracting* fathering function that offers child and spouse a dyadic relationship with him that is both parallel to and competes with the mother-son unit. Coupled parents, regardless of gender, jointly regarding their child are more oriented toward the psyche's essential *thirdness* and are more likely to promote self-representations in triadic relationship that sets the course for a more favorable oedipal phase and healthy gender identity development.

Ideally, a father helps his son recognize the link joining his parents together and thereby establishes *triangular space* (Britton 1989). By being both a caring father to his son and an exciting lover to his partner, he offers each a dyadic relationship with him as a vital anchor that is parallel to and competes with the mother-son dyad. Accordingly, the boy is better able to represent himself with his mother, his father, and with mother and father together.

In contrast, when unable to couple with his wife to facilitate his son's internalization of triadic reality, the boy's identification with his mother becomes problematic and negatively affects his masculine gender identity. This is evident in some boys' more hysterical and perverse reactions to the prospect of separating from the mother; disavowing his own and the mother's sexuality, they unconsciously remain in the position of the little boy with his presexual mother.

Though my focus is primarily on traditional heterosexual coupling, triadic parenting issues also pertain to homosexual couples—in addition to single parents for whom the *third* is delegated to a surrogate or agent of the symbolic function—in which the *second other* is called upon to draw the primary nurturer back into their sexual liaison. Both partners' identifications with their own feminine and masculine caregivers play a significant role, as evident in the father's presence in the mother's mind and vice versa. Moreover, this *second other* is equally important to the development of both the gay and the straight boy's relationship to his masculine gender identity—namely, his sense of maleness in being gay, bisexual, or straight. I might note here the unique yet overlapping developmental trajectories of homosexual and heterosexual boys, although the pathways along which the homosexual, bisexual, as well as trans child begins to experience homoerotic attraction are more complicated, usually requiring the father's affirmation of his son's masculine identity as an “outsider” (Frommer 1994).

### **The involved father's impact on his son's gender identity**

Returning to the involved father's impact on his son's gender identity as the little boy turns away from his mother and experiences loss, as I've noted, an available preoedipal father tempers his son's defensive tendency to disengage forcefully from her (Diamond 2004b). The boy who is able to achieve a *reciprocal identification* with an available, loving, and attracting father who possesses a body and genitalia like his own—who is like the boy but who remains independent and outside the boy's control—is provided with a foundation for a more secure (and often more varied) gendered expression of the self. This affirming, mutual bond with the father (or his surrogate) facilitates the son's integration of maternal feminine identifications, as well as helping

him overcome the “fault lines” of being easily humiliated in relation to other males (Chodorow 2012).

Unfortunately, however, many fathers struggle to inhabit the *paternal function* even as his son turns toward the world of the father. This difficulty frequently arises around age three when the boy begins to experience his mother in a sexual manner, in addition to her accustomed role as maternal nurturer. Preoedipal splitting occurs and the boy feels he has two mothers (and two selves)—one that is *pregenital* and one that is *genital*. Conflict emerges as to which mother he desires, the *evocative sexual* one or the *comforting nurturer*, and temporary refuge from this conflict is sought by putting the conflict outside the mother-child relation, setting up the father as *the second other* who is to blame.

The father in his symbolic countenance, is blamed for breaking the bliss of ignorance and turning it into the sin of sexual knowledge. The father is consequently called on to accept this potentially adaptive projection and to bear his child’s hatred toward the outside-the-mother world that he represents. This entails metabolizing the projection through assuming a sufficient paternal function in which his containing and involved, attracting/separating genital presence helps the boy keeps his mind linked both to mother and to father. Lacking this containment, an opposition can form in the son’s mind between love and sexuality that is often the precursor to the *Madonna/whore* complex.

In contrast, a father (or surrogate) whom the boy admires and who interacts with and mentors him in a caring (rather than shaming) way through bearing such projections, facilitates internalizing a paternal imago in which the *active and penetrating* aspects and the *receptive and caregiving* qualities of paternal parenting become a foundation for healthy and fluid masculine gender identity. This fathering imago reflects both the attracting and separating facets of healthy paternal functioning—namely, *genital fathering* in which adaptive phallic strivings are integrated with more relationally oriented, connected, and nurturing masculine qualities. This helps set the stage for a healthy sense of maleness in which masculinity no longer requires rigid defending by warding off either the fearfully feminine or the terrifying shame of being humiliated by other boys (and later, men).

The nurturing and protective qualities of this earliest father contradict the more universal, *phallic gender* stereotype of men as primarily active, penetrating, and potent (Diamond 1997). These fundamental fathering qualities reflect a more flexible sense of masculinity and thus can facilitate the integration of the boy’s maternal-feminine identifications through the internalization of a relationship with an admired man who interacts in ways other than a phallic manner. Because the more receptive and serene paternal functions involving holding, containing, waiting, and empathy have long been ignored, presupposed as maternal or feminine traits, or simply treated as insignificant and peripheral, yielding to these faculties can provide an opportunity to challenge the need to repudiate putative femininity, especially for men more organized around phallic masculinity.

### **The symbolic “third,” the paternal function, and French psychoanalysis: anchoring the separating role**

To reiterate, the *symbolic father function* that the symbiotic, regressive tie to the archaic mother,

and thereby encourages separateness by promoting a shifting from an *imaginary* relationship with the mother (Freud 1913, 1921, 1923, 1939; see also Loewald 1951; McDougall 1989). This symbolic father is understood to be quite distinct from the father as a “real,” embodied person, and as Lacan theorizes, the Symbolic order becomes primary through the Name of the Father or *Nom-du-Père* (Lacan 1949, 1953, 2005). Standing in the way of primal fusion through language that aids in differentiating from the mother’s body, the *symbolic father* blocks the child from an imaginary world of omnipotent fantasy.

Nonetheless, the symbolic order is rendered primary through the *actual father’s* exercise of his *separating* function, evident in the father’s “no” (*Non-du-Père* – cf. Lacan 1949, 2005). Represented as the *third* element that breaks apart the collusion between mother and child, the symbolic father separates mother and child by laying down the incest taboo—serving as a sort of symbolic castration that opens up three-dimensional space wherein thought replaces action, which requires inhibition, loss, limits, lack, and mourning.

Post-Lacanian Francophones, particularly Green (1986, 2004, 2009), McDougall (1989), and Laplanche (1989, 1997, 2007), advance this understanding by focusing on the father’s essential presence as the *third in the mother’s mind* that precludes entrapment in a dual relationship. Maturing masculinity emerges from this third element that includes the subject, object, and other object in the mother’s mind, particularly when augmented by the actual father’s role as an agent of separation—decreeing prohibitions and offering himself as an object for identification, furthering healthy superego development.

In sum, the paternal function remains a centerpiece of classical and contemporary theory and is understood to reflect a complex interaction between the father’s *actual presence*, *symbolic functioning*, and *internal representation* in both the child’s mind and the mother’s mind.

[[Consequently, *the father* serves as (1) a real, external object; (2) a fundamental internal object (or intrapsychic representation); and (3) a structuralizing third figure in the mind’s basic triadic and oedipal structure.]]

### **Brief concluding thoughts -- Inhabiting the paternal function**

In conclusion, fathers inhabit numerous positions, from castrators and separators to protectors, seducers, attractors, and affirmers. As noted, the boy’s turning toward his father as an alternative libidinal object to be internalized serves as a differentiating factor—a “fortress that keeps the mother out” (Glasser 1985, p. 409), to which I would add an *opening that lets the world in*. The presence of the father as a symbolic and an actual attracting, devoted, and attentive third, helps the boy optimally attach, differentiate, and separate in a manner that facilitates internalizing key aspects of the relationship with his mother. The boy’s early *identifications with* as well as *by* his mother and father forever remain psychically significant while playing a vital role in his sense of maleness. Finally, as he matures, these internalizations typically become more accessible and thus subject to mutative influences, often through the analytic process itself.

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