UNDERSTANDING PRENATAL AND BIRTH MEMORIES. A THEORATICAL FRAMEWORK.

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For the last two hundred years, the belief most predominant among the medical and psychological professions was that prenates and newborns were not conscious beings because their brain are not fully developed, and that preverbal children are not capable of memory. At the same time, another prevalent belief was that adults could not remember their lives before three years of age—a phenomenon called infantile amnesia—and that any memory of that time is a fantasy or a false memory (Chamberlain, 1990; Siegel, 1999; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). The underlying assumption is that the mind is a function of the brain, and for this reason, until the brain is fully developed the mind does not exist. As a corollary, once the brain is dead, the mind stops existing too.

In the last decades, research into prenatal life, near death experiences and reincarnation has shown an overwhelming number of cases that indicate that consciousness is independent of the brain and precedes the development of the central nervous system (Atwater, 1999; Chamberlain, 1999a; Ring & Elsaesser Valarino, 2000; Shroder, 2001; Tendam, 1990). At the same time, research has shown that prenates and newborns are capable of intelligent communication and memory.

This latter perspective, part of an emerging paradigm (Chamberlain, 1999a; Dossey, 1999; McCarty, 2002, 2004; Wade, 1996), has clear and important implications for the way we meet and communicate with prenates and newborn babies, as well as for how we support people in their process of dying. This new paradigm considers prenates and newborns as conscious beings, capable of memory, mentation, intelligence, emotions, and the capacity to learn, and communication.

Different psychologists and psychotherapists in the last decades have been finding cases of adults who spontaneously remember their prenatal lives and births (Chamberlain, 1999b; Cheek, 1986; Janov, 1983). These memories have been frequently corroborated by hospital records or information provided by the clients' parents. This in itself has challenged the old belief about infantile amnesia and the supposed incapacity of prenates and newborns to learn and communicate. Later studies have found that toddlers are also capable of remembering specific events of their prenatal lives and births, and that they are able to communicate these explicit memories once they start to talk (Ikegawa, 2002; McCarty, 2004; Piontelli, 2004; Rhodes, 1991).

Investigating how a child or an adult is capable of remembering his or her life in the womb during the last months of gestation when the brain is already formed—although not fully developed—is in itself challenging. Explaining the existence of memories from conception or even earlier, challenges even more the old paradigm that considers memories to be stored in the brain. How can anyone remember something from a time when the brain did not even exist? Are memory, mind and consciousness, after all, functions of the brain or do they precede birth and continue after we die?

Expanding the Field of Memory Research

Lashley (1960), one of the premier investigators of memory, tried for thirty years to find the site and substance of memory. He experimented with animals by cutting out portions of their brains and predicting that they would lose what they had learned. To his surprise, although their performance worsened, they didn't lose their capacity to remember (Ferguson, 1978; Sheldrake, 1995). These experiments made him come to the conclusion that memory cannot be located in any particular area of the brain.

Karl Pribram (1971) was drawn to brain research out of his interest in memory. He participated in the writing of Lashley's research and wondered how memory was not stored in any particular part of the brain but throughout it. He was deeply troubled by the mystery of memory, and in the mid 60s was exposed to the concept of the hologram, a kind of three dimensional image produced by lensless photography (Ferguson, 1978). He thought the hologram was a good model for how we store memory, not in a localized part but dispersed throughout the brain (Wade, 1996). Pribram discovered a mechanism that would explain how the whole is stored in every part: the holographic model. He speaks of cellular memory based on the holographic model in which each brain cell carries the memory of the whole.

Non-physical or Transcendent Memory

At some point in his career, Pribram came to the realization that not only did the brain works as a hologram, but that the entire universe was a hologram. Soon after that, he read some of David Bohm's work about physics and was electrified to realize that Bohm was describing a holographic universe as well (Ferguson, 1978). "Our brains mathematically construct 'concrete' reality by interpreting frequencies from another dimension, a realm of meaningful patterns, a primary reality that transcends time and space. The brain is a hologram, interpreting a holographic universe" (Wilber, 1985, p. 5).

Bohm's (1980) holographic paradigm includes an explicate order, composed of what is visible, audible and tangible to us but holds that this world is in reality an illusion, like the three dimensional picture made with the aid of a laser. There exists, he says, an implicate or enfolded order as well underlying and causative to the explicate order. (Ferguson, 1987) In other words, the world that we perceive (explicate order) is just a

projection of a higher dimensional reality beyond time, space and matter (implicate order) (Talbot, 1991). The implicate order, in turn, according to Bohm, arises from a series of deeper and deeper orders, merging into the holomovement, the infinite ground of all that is (Friedman, 1994). Within this holomovement all aspects of reality are interrelated and interconnected in an undivided whole. "Bohm's sense of the simultaneous interrelatedness and interpenetration of all phenomena is probably best summarized by calling his perspective the holonomic paradigm (from *holos* and *nomos*, the law of wholeness)" (Wade, 1996, p. 8). The explicate order can be conceived as a static holographic interpretation of the holomovement. "The hologram analogy shows us how the holomovement might be displayed. Bohm calls this display the explicate order" (Friedman, 1994, pp. 63, 64).

The holonomic paradigm presents a non-local and non-physical understanding of memory in which memory is associated with the physical structures of the brain but is not necessarily reducible to them. The holonomic model could help explain prenatal memories from a time when the central nervous system is not completely developed or even existent.

The holonomic paradigm is not the only approach to postulate the existence of a non-physical or transcendent aspect of memory and consciousness. Other researchers postulate that the mind is independent from the physical brain. For example, Penfield (1975, as cited by Wade, 1996) in his last years and Eccles (1987) speculate about the source of consciousness and memory being outside the material plane and assert that the brain is just the temporary instrument of reception. "A key component of the hypothesis is that the unity of conscious experience is provided by the self-conscious mind and not

by the neural machinery of the liaison areas of the cerebral hemisphere" (Eccles, 1987, p. 56).

For Benito Reyes (1949) memory is usually associated with the brain in human beings, although we cannot attribute memory exclusively to beings that have a brain. He gives the example of an amoeba that has no brain, and yet is able to remember and learn. As David Chamberlain has stated: "Proof of learning means proof of memory as well because learning requires memory" (1998, p. 35). Reyes clearly states that memory is not a function of the brain; rather, it is a function of consciousness. Without consciousness there can be no memory. He thinks consciousness is the seat of memory. "It is becoming more and more evident even to positivistic scientists themselves that the brain is only a secondary organ directed by a deeper, more subtle, non-physical source" (Reyes, 1949, p. 114).

One of the most controversial biologists of the twentieth century, Rupert Sheldrake (1995a, 1995b), presents a revolutionary approach to the understanding of memory. He has developed the compelling theory of morphogenetic fields where memory is stored outside of the physical body.

> The spatio-temporal patterns we remember may not be inscribed in the brain in the form of material traces but may depend instead on morphic fields. The morphic fields through which our experience, behavior, and mental activity were organized in the past can become present again by morphic resonance. We remember because of this resonance from ourselves in the past. (Sheldrake, 1995b, p. 197)

His pioneering approach has been questioned from different angles, like research being done in cases of brain damage, whereby people lose memory when parts of their brains are destroyed or removed. This instance would support the notion that memory is stored in the brain. Sheldrake, however, responds by saying "Brain damage leading to loss of memory does not prove that memories are stored inside the damaged brain. It simply shows that those bits of the brain play some role in the recovery or the tuning-in to the memories" (Sheldrake, 1995a, p. 73).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Annie Besant (1999), president of the Theosophical Society for more than twenty-five years, presented a revolutionary approach to memory that corresponds with what Sheldrake has been writing from a scientific perspective at the end of that century. Besant does not consider memory as information stored in the brain, but as a remembrance of experience that we have previously shared and that is within the consciousness of the universe.

> Memory is not a faculty, and is not preserved; it does not inhere in consciousness as a capacity, nor is any memory of events stored up in the individual consciousness. Every event is a present fact in the universe-consciousness. (Besant, 1999, p. 201)

The morphogenetic field theory presented by Sheldrake as well as other non-physical or transcendent explanations of memory and consciousness like those presented by Besant (1999), Reyes (1949) and Bohm (1980), leave much room for the existence of prenatal memories from a time when the brain is not developed because memories are not stored in the brain; the physical brain is just an instrument, like a TV set through which information is received and transmitted. (TO BE CONTINUED).

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Extracts from my dissertation titled:

PRENATAL AND PERINATAL MEMORIES IN PREVERBAL CHILDREN: CLINICAL OBSERVATIONS USING VIDEOTAPE EXAMINATION

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