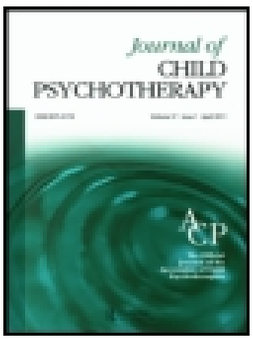

Journal of Child Psychotherapy

ISSN: 0075-417X (Print) 1469-9370 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjcp20

Keeping fathers in mind

Nupur Dhingra Paiva

To cite this article: Nupur Dhingra Paiva (2016): Keeping fathers in mind, Journal of Child Psychotherapy, DOI: 10.1080/0075417X.2016.1191199

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2016.1191199

Published online: 09 Jun 2016.

Journal of Child Psychotherapy, 2016
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2016.1191199

Keeping fathers in mind

Nupur Dhingra Paiva*

Centre of Psychotherapy and Clinical Research, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India

This paper focuses on keeping fathers in mind – in the mind of the mother and the mind of the therapist – as a symbol and as an actual person so that he can become a healthy presence in the mind of the child. Through its myths and laws, mainstream Indian culture constantly reinforces the idea that the child belongs first to the man who places ownership over a womb. This paper will focus on the importance of the father as a parent and not only as a sexual partner or keeper of the mother. It will illustrate that the actual presence of the father qualitatively enhances the child's capacities and that the father's absence or disengagement deeply and painfully affect a young boy. Through an account of some clinical work with young boys at a community-based psychotherapy clinic, the paper aims to illustrate the need of the boy for a good enough father, the reluctance of fathers to be involved in the parenting of their children, and the role of the mother in drawing in the father to be actively paternal.

Keywords: father; paternal; boys; community psychotherapy; psychotherapy in India; Oedipal dynamics

Introduction

Six-year-old Akshay's father thought of him as adorable and fun, but confessed that he did not spend any time with his son.

Seven-year-old Madhur's father resented the close relationship his wife had with their son and blamed her for his bad behaviour. He did not spend any time with his son, arguing that, on the one hand, his job demanded long hours and, on the other, his son was, anyway, a social embarrassment. Madhur had stopped attending school.

Nine-year-old Rahul, perhaps more neurotic than externalising, was preoccupied with death, terrified of bullying and regularly collapsed into episodes of inconsolable distress.

These boys had been referred to a community-based clinic because of difficulties at school: they struggled with classwork, flatly refused to work, distracted their classmates, seemed to be confused about how to organise themselves or worked hard to avoid written work. They were all referred for cognitive assessments with the hypothesis that their behavioural difficulties covered an underlying learning difficulty.

None of these children had been referred for in-depth therapy – indeed how could this have been the case when emotional work for children, especially in a school context, is not a concept available to most teachers and parents in India. Here the idea that marital relationships and family interactions impact a child's daily life is only vaguely acknowledged. Conceptualising an inner world remains the work of the

*Email: nupurdp@gmail.com

psychotherapist and in Delhi there are only a few who work with children. While psychoanalytic writing emphasises the link between emotions and learning, psychotherapy with children makes it clear that some children are not free to learn because of difficulties in separating both from a parent in the mind and a parent in the external world (Klauber, 2009). Fears about losing a parent or being left out of a significant relationship create powerful anxieties that can inhibit the possibility of taking in new experiences or of finding the new exciting – which can lead to many difficulties in school. Much has been written in psychoanalysis (Klein, 1952; Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1964) about the link between mothering, feeding, maternal reverie and taking in the world in small doses. Equally, there has been a focus on the Oedipal triangular space being of crucial importance for the development of the capacity to take in the new, the different and the life changing (Bion, 1962; Britton, 1992), but in my view not enough focus on the specific characteristics of the person at one of the corners of the triangle – the father.

Getting a child's father into the consulting room has always been an interesting exercise for me. As I have worked on my relationship with my own father, I have become able to keep in mind my patients' fathers and invite them into the room.[1] Most appointments are made by telephone by an anxious female voice at the other end. The father, it is often implied, is more a part of the problem – dead, separated, divorced, busy, absent, aggressive, violent, ill or emotionally distant from the mother and the child. More often than not, fathers have to be explicitly and repeatedly asked to come. His presence in the room spares everyone hours of potential agony. Yet for a psychotherapist it is very easy, almost seductive, to carry on apparently therapeutic work with a mother–child pair and exclude the mother's partner who helped to create this child's life and emotional situation. The therapist is thought of as the third helping the child to triangulate or providing the paternal function of boundary setting through the framework of the therapy. These are relevant and necessary tasks at times, but it is also crucial to consider the therapist's own parenting, proclivities, training, need to be needed, their fantasy of being a better mother for the patient and their own anxieties about managing a triad in the room, and how these may influence their endeavour to get the father to join the work.

In this paper, I hope to demonstrate that while the intervention with these children at a public funded low-fee community clinic in Delhi was pragmatic, the underlying thinking was very much psychoanalytic, making the work a *bricolage*, a piece of craft rather than art, where the fabric created has personal meaning as well as utility. While considered unorthodox in psychoanalytic circles in India, brief psychoanalytically oriented work with children and young people is the mainstay of some public funded mental health systems (see Bradley and Emanuel, 2008; Music and Hall, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2011; Paiva, 2011). At a time when the psychoanalytic community in India is noticing the painfully slow uptake of the richness of psychoanalytic ideas, it may be somewhat urgent to consider innovations of application and a widening of its scope. This paper is an attempt into that direction.

Various psychoanalytic thinkers have conceptualised the paternal as the fundamental second object (Mahler *et al.*, 1975; Gaddini, 1976), the restraint on uncontrolled desire and its gratification, and the symbol of impulse control and group living (Freud, 1913) and have argued that the internal presence of the paternal has many sources other than the actual father (Winnicott, 1964). This paper focuses on the father as an actual presence. I give examples from my work with children to illustrate the child's need for a relationship with the real living father (see Diamond, 1998) that

could be internalised and form a potentially useful function in the future. This paper hopes to substantiate Sudhir Kakar's idea of the child's need for an *Oedipal alliance* (Kakar, 1982, 1997):

> … the deeply buried and unfulfilled need of many male patients for the firm support, guidance and emotional availability of the father who was needed by the little boy at the Oedipal stage of his life, so that the boy could separate and free himself from an overwhelming, omnipresent and especially the sexually threatening pre-Oedipal mother.
>
> (Kakar, 1997: 40)

I hope to provide evidence from the here and now of young children's lives and not the recollections and disappointments of adult patients.

The culture and context

The paternal in psychoanalysis is at its very core in the structure of the sessions and in the aim of 'maintaining boundaries and accurately understanding the patient's predicament rather than gratifying his infantile wishes directly' (Davids, 2002: 89). The myth of Oedipus makes the father central to the family drama; yet, the father is often missing in the consulting room while the mother takes centre stage and all the available oxygen. In mainstream Indian culture, the paternal is inescapable in its myths and powerful in the social hierarchy; yet, it is often unseen as a tangible relationship in the lives of young people. We may have some awareness of what the paternal stands for in society today, but little sense of how the father actually stands beside a young person. In Indian culture and psychoanalysis the paternal can be viewed variously as a powerful, controlling, restrictive and hostile force; the upholder of rules and taboos; and the dispenser of punishment – but distant and intangible, nonetheless.

It has been suggested (Lansky, 1992) that the child's relationship to the mother and father is not symmetrical because of a biological imperative. The caretaking function connected to mothering has to do with the dependency of the human newborn, but *fathering may be more culture dependent*, more context and system-dependent, and mediated by the mother's relationship to the father in her own mind (Davids, 2002). Culture and context are important grounding forces because they remind us that the theory of the Oedipal complex emerged from the real socio-cultural milieu of the absent and authoritarian Victorian father. Reacting with mixed feelings of fear, loss, abandonment, anger and hostility towards the father have also to do with the actual patterns of interaction with the father. In the absence of an actual father, the father does exist in the mind but may become confused with a harsh, critical and punitive superego (Davids, 2002) or, in the Indian context, as Kakar (1997) points out, may leave the child to the mercies of maternal enthrallment.[2] The distant father – Victorian, urban Indian or current western – is a reality and so are the feelings and fantasies their children have towards them for being absent or distant. The contemporary Indian father who I struggle to see in the clinic is not too different – distant, uninvolved, occasionally violent – and makes the child's sense of having been abandoned and rejected a palpable and real experience. The feelings of the child (not the adult) Oedipus who was abandoned cannot be dismissed.

The role of the mother in *creating* the father or letting him in (Marks, 2002; Target and Fonagy, 2002) is widely acknowledged in psychoanalytic writing and, as I read it, in the Hindu myth of the Goddess Parvati drawing Shiv in from being the detached hermit to becoming the involved householder (Pattanaik, 2006: 178). What is

significant is that the Goddess does it not through physical desire, which had been the modus operandi of many *apsaras*/celestial nymphs, including Vishnu transformed into Mohini, but through determination and consistent devotion, i.e. by keeping him in mind. Thus, Shiv becomes Shankar and together they become Gauri-Shankar: the parental couple that is capable of nurturing the world. Without the Devi/Goddess, Shiv is distant and disconnected from the world. Only when the Devi keeps him in mind is he capable of being paternal.

Winnicott (1964: 113) wrote that, 'it depends on what mother does about it whether father does or does not get to know his baby'. So while there is no such thing as a baby without the mother, there may also be no such thing as a father without the mother. Both the father and the infant are at risk of being excluded or kept from a relationship with each other by the mother. The capacity of the mother to make space for the father in her mind and, therefore, in the life of the child is also a function of her experience of having had a father in her life or least in the mind of her own mother (Target and Fonagy, 2002). This skein of thread linking generations means that grandparents become significant figures psychically and physically, as it is the case in the clinical examples.

Some authors (Marks, 2002) suggest that the pattern for whether and how the father is a part of a child's life is determined by the manner in which the triangular relationship between the mother, new baby and father is negotiated in the first month of the baby's life. The father's inclusion has to first be tolerated by the mother and by the socio-cultural situation in which they are embedded. In the majority of cases in India, the father is, at the start and continues to remain, on the outside as amply depicted in the tradition of the mother and baby remaining in a confinement of sorts for 40 days after the birth (see Paiva, 2014). While many more children in urban India are now brought up in nuclear families, it does not necessarily translate into fathers taking on more caring roles. A grandmother, aunt or nanny continues to feature in a child's life more regularly than a father. An added dimension of the mother-son closeness is the impact that having borne a son has on the social standing of a woman. A son gives a woman a place in the social hierarchy that a daughter does not (Kakar, 1981). Giving up her son to the father or deliberately creating space between her and her son in order to permit closeness with the father is, therefore, an exercise in ambivalence.

In this situation, then, it is the father who is the potential intruder – as experienced by the new mother. In the Hindu myth of Ganesh's birth, Parvati created a child by herself to keep her company while Shiv was away for long periods of time. When Shiv returned and wanted to approach Parvati, interrupting her bath, the boy followed his mother's instructions and treated him as an intruder, preventing Shiv from entering. What was Parvati's experience of the event, I wonder? Shiv's entry did immense violence to the peaceful mother–child relationship that had been going on for years in his absence. Shiv realised that this child was important to Parvati when she insisted that Shiv repair the damage he had caused by chopping off the boy's head. Locating an alternative head and bringing the new form to life creates Ganesh and makes Shiv a father to Ganesh. It is no longer the same child Parvati had created by herself. When the father enters, everything changes and yet he has a part to play in the birth of Ganesh. It is a risk to let the father in and to bear the changes in the dynamics that will ensue. It is so much simpler to retreat into the warm familiarity of the maternal world that promises sameness and safety.

The function of the father

Winnicott (1964) wrote that an infant's early experience of a caring father is like that of a different kind of mother. At the most elementary level, mothering stands for the recognition of needs, being attended to and responded to, and non-verbal communication. Most babies in India receive this alternative mothering from a grandmother with the father kept quite at bay from the mess and anxiety of feeds, nappies, baths and sleepless nights. Helpful and reassuring as it is for the mother to have an older female family member for support, it can be dismissive and undermining of the care that the father can provide his wife and child at this time. In this view, there is little about the particularities of the father that set him apart from other members of the family. In the first year of life an involved, caring father is providing mothering.

However, the father *function* is something entirely different where what is valuable about the father is his contribution that is different from mothering.[3] His presence mitigates the anger and hatred towards the mother, both through his presence as the mother's partner and also as the child's father. The father *is* different. While what makes him different from everyone else in the family is his sexual relationship with the child's mother, the focus here is on how the father is the significant other who can also hold the child in mind with love and limits so that the mother can risk forgetting the baby for some time. He can, therefore, be the relief feature who can provide both the mother and the child an antidote to the adverse effects of too much mothering (Raphael-Leff, 1991). The father's role moves from providing the initial protective sphere around the mother–child couple to being the one responsible for otherness, newness and the boundary that stands for the 'no' (also see Frosh, 1997) – '*no you cannot have your mother all to yourself; no, I sleep beside her and not you; no, you cannot be the baby at the breast forever; you will grow up and go to school and leave her behind. And it is all made more palatable because I also love you, I show you how you are my child too; that we have things in common and I show my love for you*'. Empirical evidence for the father's distinct contribution is provided by Peter Fonagy's (Fonagy *et al.*, 1993) research on measuring the 'ghost in the nursery' (Fraiberg *et al.*, 1975), which concluded that children have quite separate internal representations of the two parents. Much of the parent–child literature focuses on the mother's ghosts and how they haunt the new relationship, but not on the ghosts, especially of losses, that the father may bring along (Barrows and Barrows, 2002).

Seeing the father as the person responsible for the separation from the good object and representing the idea that all good things come to an end stirs up anger in the child. If tolerated well enough, it gives the potential for the child to feel excited about new experiences; a sense of being effective in the world comes from the paternal function. The child's experience of his father and mother together is about the experience of the coming together of difference and seeing difference as life enhancing. In the Indian myths there are symbols that connect the paternal with the bones in the child's body, while the flesh and blood are the mother's contribution (Pattanaik, 2014). So the father's contribution is what gives the child the capacity to stand, walk, move forward, move away, have a spine (something that Akshay seemed to need a little more of, as we will see below), explore the world, consider alternatives beyond the mother's milk and blood. It is the capacity to think in the face of intense emotion: the role of the paternal in coming in to shore up or in breaking up (depending on how it is perceived by the three parties involved) the mother–infant dyad with a fresh energy and perspective when it has inevitably run into fatigued, persecutory heavy weather.

Akshay: a quiet boy

Akshay was six and a half years old, attending class two in a school in Delhi, when he was referred to the community clinic in August 2013 due to a query about his cognitive capacities and specific difficulties with writing and social interaction. Akshay's mother taught at his school and felt an enormous pressure to get her son to perform better. There was a definite tension between mother and son on the subject of homework and written work – his mother threatened him with the message that 'Bhoot aa jayega' (a ghost will come) and with violence. Nothing was working; yet, it was the comments from the school that had propelled the parents to approach us.

The psychodynamic stance at Ambedkar University's Centre for Psychotherapy implied that the lens used gave a wider and longer perspective of Akshay than one that may have been used by a conscientious clinical psychology cognitive assessment. It was suggested that alongside a cognitive assessment, other aspects of Akshay's world, especially his relationships in the family and at school, would be explored.

Akshay, a small-framed, timid-looking child, who stood out because of his green spectacle frames, was an only child. He was conceived and carried to term after four previous unsuccessful pregnancies in the 10th year of his parent's marriage. Born by Caesarean section, he was breast fed for six months, weaned successfully onto solids but described as not very interested in feeding himself. His paternal grandmother, who lived with the family, was Akshay's primary carer until he was three years old when she was diagnosed with cancer and became bedridden. He used to sleep with his grandmother as well as be fed with food and stories by her. Because his mother now had to care for Akshay and work simultaneously, the family felt had they no other choice but to send Akshay to school. As a result, his introduction to school, a world away from home, was perhaps more intensely associated with loss and fear than it might have been for the average child. He was losing not only the predictability of home and his grandmother, but had to share his mother with a school full of other children. I wondered about Akshay's fears of loss and perhaps death. School was a huge emotional and structural disruption to him.

A cognitive assessment suggested that Akshay had a superior IQ, but struggled with motor and spatial tasks. A school observation suggested that he did not actively seek company. He worked hard to avoid written work and was struggling with organising and planning his work, such as which book to take out of the bag, which page to turn and even which direction to face in the classroom. Hindi was his strength as was art, if he was not required to comply and produce what his father called a 'school-type drawing'.

His mother appeared anxious when I asked questions and looked at her husband as if hesitant to disagree. However, it was soon obvious that the parents had different views on their child and different experiences of their parenting roles. I felt the mother was frustrated and tired, as she spoke of how she must have a long nap every afternoon after work. I felt the father was far away and busy. The family seemed to function by having tacked their child onto the parents' lifestyle, an arrangement that the grandmother's presence had buffered. The father admitted he had not changed his work commitments after Akshay's arrival. The family's meal pattern was telling: the mother ate dinner at 8pm, the father at 11pm and Akshay at 9.30 pm. There was little family time with all three members together. At times on a Sunday, they would eat all together. The father had disengaged and while he said his son was lovable and fun, he did not actually spend much time with him. I wondered if Akshay felt his father's love

or none at all, given the tension between him and his mother. While he lacked structure, organisation and a plan, his family could also be seen as lacking structure and plan.

A number of interventions had been put in place at school, but since many of the difficulties were at home with the routine tasks of sleeping, eating and working, coupled with his mother's experiences of frustration and isolation, it seemed that they needed a third. To me this pointed into the direction of Akshay's need for his father's intervention, especially to establish some structure and tolerate feelings of loss (Barrows and Barrows, 2002). His father, with his sense of humour, his clear affection and greater patience (perhaps greater due to under-utilisation) and his capacity to see strengths in his son where the school and Akshay's mother saw a lack, suggested that his entry could be an important antidote to Akshay's current difficulties. Both mother and son could use a fresh third-person to get them out of their stuck place. Losing his grandmother to an illness, his exhausted mother to fatigue and frustration, his father to work, experiencing the anxiety of his mother's illness and not gaining enough of the paternal had left Akshay in a no-parents land. A good relationship with his father had the potential to replace deprivation with richness.

Madhur: an angry boy

On the surface, Madhur's struggles appeared to be similar to Akshay's. He too struggled with the classroom, though he was more of a challenge for his school because he did not want to sit in one at all. He avoided going to class, was reluctant to travel to school by bus or with his mother, and refused to separate from her at the school gate. All reports agreed that he had been fine until he was in class one. At the age of seven he began to cry and scream in anger when it was time to board the bus for school. At first, his mother began to drop him at school. Soon, that was not enough to calm him either, so she began to stay in school with him. It was only once the school expressed grave concerns that the family was propelled to contact the psychotherapy clinic; however, it soon became clear that there were difficult relational dynamics in the family and specifically between parents and child that predated the difficulties at school. Madhur's parents reported that he had wild and violent tantrums if he did not get his way. His father said that Madhur was unlike any child he had ever encountered; that he was embarrassed to take his seven-year-old son to a social gathering because he was out of control.

The family lived as part of a joint family in the south of Delhi with the father's younger brother, his wife and their three-year-old son as well as the paternal grandparents. The father worked long hours six days a week and was only available on Sundays to spend time with his family, though he admitted he was then uncommunicative and wanted to rest. He said it would not be possible for him to attend the sessions with his wife or son as he was very busy, but that he needed help because he felt desperate.

The parents blamed each other: the mother blamed the father for being absent and too aggressive with Madhur; the father blamed the mother for her lack of discipline with their son. The mother talked incessantly about her difficult relationships and her isolation in the family as Madhur's parent because everyone disliked him. I felt she was terribly needy and lonely, something her son confirmed when he said he did not want to go to school because he was worried about what would happen to his mother. The father wanted Madhur to grow up, feed and dress himself, polish his shoes – based on his own childhood memories of those valuable things his father had given to

him. The mother overcompensated for the father's absence and his firmness by giving in or being un-boundaried and confusing. Both parents were physically aggressive with Madhur. The father was also occasionally violent with his wife.

Both parents reported that there were difficult dynamics in the family. They described the grandfather as having become depressed and silent after retiring and moving to Delhi to live with his sons. The drastic change in lifestyle, the restrictions and loss of freedom had been extremely difficult for him. The relationship between father and sons was described as one of little communication. The father admitted that he did not communicate much with his parents or his wife and child because he did not see the point.

The mother explained that when her sister-in-law had struggled with her new born, the other women in the family had pitched in to look after the baby. In the process, Madhur who was used to having his mother and grandmother as carers had suddenly lost them both. The mother noticed that it had been a very difficult time for Madhur and that she now made a conscious effort to give him time. This may help to explain why the mother overcompensated for her absence and father's and the pattern continued when Madhur started nursery school at the age of three.

When the parents arrived for their session one morning, Madhur was being dragged into the campus, screaming and hitting his mother. They explained that Madhur was very angry because his parents had refused to let him sit on the front seat of the electric rickshaw. By the time he reached the clinic, Madhur was in great distress and in a huge froth. Madhur was alternating between wanting to approach his mother for comfort and hitting her. After watching this for a while, his father intervened very calmly by picking up Madhur, physically removing him from his mother and slowly walking away towards the consulting room. The father held Madhur in his arms with his head resting on his shoulder, as if he was a much younger child and this helped to calm him down. Madhur stayed in his father's lap for the first part of the session in the room while we requested that his mother sit elsewhere.

When asked how he felt about this very public display of the family's difficulties, the father reported that he felt angry with his son. I pointed out that, in spite of this, he was able to hold Madhur and calm him down, which Madhur needed. We agreed that Madhur's anger was greater than him at such times and that perhaps Madhur needed to feel that his parents, particularly his father, were stronger than him in a safe and caring way. This did not happen often at all. It was helpful to have the father stand up and to ask Madhur who was bigger. He said he knew his father was bigger and he knew that he needed to listen to his parents, but that it was difficult to obey them if they did not speak to him calmly. Madhur seemed to be informing his parents that he would be more tractable if he was negotiated with rather than controlled or infantalised – a treatment he received from both parents. While at times it seemed that Madhur felt there was more to be gained by being a younger child, there were clearly parts of him that wanted to be helped to grow up. He was struggling between wanting to be the favoured little baby, with multiple mothers, especially the grandmother he had lost, and being treated as the older child in the home. This was extremely difficult to do without the support of his father. Madhur's actions such as hitting his mother, moving away and then coming back to her painfully illustrated his difficulty; his father's entry as the third who could break the cycle was quite poignant. I wondered if it illustrated his need for an Oedipal alliance.

This session proved to be a turning point in our work together. The father became more communicative and made an effort to attend late evening sessions after work. He

spoke of his own father and of his childhood: the distant, uncommunicative father whom he was scared of and from whom he received little affection but instead new shoes and books annually which he valued immensely; hence, his wish for Madhur to polish his own shoes and to value him. He spoke of his mother, who he felt continued to favour his younger brother; of having spent many years living away from his parents with his uncle in another part of the country; of being aware of his father's sadness for having had to leave their hometown and his own loss living away from his parents; and of his desire for his son to become more like the child he had been.

This last theme – his struggle to accept the differences between him and his son – was central in helping me understand the distance between them and I saw it as an expression of the father's envy. There was so much that his son currently had that he had not received as a child, especially the attentions of a dedicated mother (see Kakar, 1997). For Madhur's father that old wound was reopened when he not only saw his son with a loving mother, but also saw his son as having taken away his wife. He had not wanted a child to start with and was only reluctantly a father to Madhur. He seemed to be out in the cold as the third experiencing the isolation he had partly created. He was ambivalent at best. As Frosh (1997) puts it:

> … expecting to be looked after but fearful of dependency, men who become fathers must struggle with the gap between their own fathers' emotional absence and their own needy response. As their children make increasingly urgent demands, so these men often find themselves – ourselves, of course – fluctuating wildly between caricatures of the prohibitive patriarch (do as I say) and the overinvolved mother. What is hardest of all to do is to find a way of meeting the child's actual demand for presence, calm, and thoughtful love.
>
> (Frosh, 1997: 51)

I would add *especially when you have not had your fill of it*.

Madhur's mother said that as a couple she and her husband never had any difficulty in their sexual life, but had always had very little interaction outside of that. It was as if the sexual relationship was the only one that was sustained, in a bubble, separate from the reality of daytime interactions that involved sharing each other in other relationships – with in-laws, children and siblings. The father's fantasies were of sending the mother away to her parents so that the child would not be so mollycoddled. He was dismissive of her by saying that being with her would only teach Madhur to be a housemaid. It was much easier for the father to acknowledge anger than envy. He would rather dismiss the mother–son relationship completely, and with it, his own needs for intimacy, than go beyond the dyad and imagine them all sharing in a triangle. Perhaps it was because the father was not sure he had anything useful to offer his son. He could fantasise about getting Madhur away from his mother, but not about what to do with the empty space. It was as if he was afraid to offer whatever he had. In order to reach out to his son in a loving way, he required, 'a shift of masculine consciousness, involving not just some more gentleness but a whole gamut of alterations in relations of dependency, intimacy, vulnerability and trust' (Frosh, 1997: 50). Even in the current family arrangement, where everyone lived within six feet of each other, but were emotionally miles away, he could not see what fathers were for. He could certainly not see what he was useful for. Having had little of his own father, he was poverty-stricken.

After 14 sessions with the family, Madhur's father was much more involved with him. He had made a visit to the school; something he had not done since Madhur entered nursery two years previously. He had started taking Madhur to school and

Madhur started staying in school without his mother, though still not in the classroom as much as his teacher would like. His tantrums reduced. Madhur's father took him roller-skating in the evening, which he enjoyed. The child was very clear that he liked to spend time with his father which was helpful for the father to hear; in their last session together it was the father who brought him in. The family left the town for the summer break and did not return to the centre. Six months later, the school reported that Madhur was stable; yet, when the time came for another transition – a move to the following class a year later; the loss of another maternal figure – he began refusing to go to school again. There was clearly more work to be done.[3] We met for two further sessions during which I experienced Madhur to be more confident in his play and communication with me. A year later, he is doing well at school and his relationship with his father continues to improve, slowly edging towards optimal.

The marital relationship between the parents was an important but relatively unaddressed aspect of the work. The mother's experience of the father was that of a closed man who needed the concreteness of physical intimacy, but was otherwise unable to return affection, uncommunicative and resentful of the closeness she shared with her son. In this emotional context, my coming in as a female who was willing to start a conversation with the father about what was valuable in him as opposed to what he lacked may have been useful for the small changes in the relationship between father and son. However, I felt that the father would have benefitted from individual psychotherapy in order to acknowledge his ambivalence and envy – something unlikely to actually happen given the social context. Working with this family was extremely difficult for me because there were times when the father was clearly very harsh with his young son, either physically aggressive or emotionally rejecting and it became difficult for the mother (and me) to encourage his engagement given his punitive parenting style.

I wondered how things might have worked out had I been a man.

Rahul: the baby

Rahul had come with altogether different concerns. His very thoughtful and concerned parents reported that he was unduly concerned with death: his own and that of his loved ones. He was afraid of going to bed and being alone in his room at night. He often complained of being bullied at school, but was a terrible bully to his younger brother and, according to his mother, had extreme emotional reactions to disappointments. These were beyond tantrums; she called them 'meltdowns' because he seemed distraught and inconsolable and nothing seemed like it would ever be fixed. In the first session, I found myself facing an anxious mother and a silent father. I wondered out loud about the distance between Rahul and his parents and, as it turned out, the mother experienced herself as alone in her parenting as the father was away at work a lot.

After about 15 sessions, which I had insisted Rahul attend with his father, during which we explored Rahul's anger towards various family members and his other difficulties at school, the family went on holiday and I did not see Rahul for several weeks. Upon their return the parents described a very different child: better adjusted at school, going to bed with ease, no longer scared and no longer bullied. When I asked what they thought had changed, the father, who had always liked to see himself as the *bystander* parent, took over the conversation. He had clearly reflected upon this substantially because he was able to point out the links between having made changes in his lifestyle and its impact on his son through their relationship. We noticed together that nine-year-old Rahul, who had been struggling with his angry feelings towards his

mother and sibling for years, had been encouraged to look at what potentially wonderful things might lay in store for him if he was to move closer to his father and give up his devoted yearnings to be a little child again – including being his mother's exclusive child. While on holiday, Rahul had the company of older boys who related differently, more gently, with their younger siblings. In our sessions, Rahul liked to sit on his father's lap, fitting his body into the curve of his father's torso, uninterrupted except by his own anxiety. Often in this posture father and son talked about similarities and differences in their childhoods; their feelings towards their respective siblings; the common links between grandfather, the father and Rahul; bullies of all ages at school and in the workplace; and, perhaps most significantly, Rahul noticed that perhaps his mother did not have all the answers because "she is not a boy". On this family holiday, the father had encouraged Rahul to join him in his favourite hobby, buying him his own kit. Just as Madhur was a small child in his father's arms, Rahul too had time in his father's lap though he also developed through spending time observing older boys and perhaps finding in that something of value. Again, being taken seriously by his father seemed to have helped the boy to want to grow up.

Conclusion

Akshay and Madhur were eventually diagnosed with specific learning difficulties. Their cognitive assessments indicated high intelligence, but a struggle to put things together – spatially and in language. In Britton's (1992) terms this may be considered as a struggle to re-work the triangle in this new life stage characterised by separating from the mother and engaging with school and/or simultaneously adapting to the birth of a sibling. These boys were, in some ways, struggling against their developmental capacities 'to perceive, to recognize, to remember, to locate and to anticipate experience' (Britton, 1992: 37). Britton links the child's capacity to bear the emotional disruption that new knowledge (of his parents' sexual relationship and the child's exclusion from it) creates and the distressing loss (of his exclusive relationship with his mother) that follows, with his capacity for curiosity, symbolisation and rational thought. Has curiosity paid off or led to a traumatic discovery? Therefore, the coming together of the parents as a couple in the child's mind is central to his capacity to learn and his desire to include that learning as part of his mind and personality (Klein 1948; Klauber, 2009).

Because of the short-term nature of the work with these boys, it was hard to say whether this difficulty in putting things together was also the work of a harsh, berating superego. It is possible that by shutting their eyes (with a parallel to Oedipus blinding himself) to knowing, these boys failed at school and unwittingly fed into a self-fulfilling prophesy – 'I am not good enough to be loved by my father/mother'. With each of the young boys described, the distance between the parents and between father and son was too great and, as a corollary, the distance between mother and son not enough. For the boys it was an intense and often uncomfortable experience; almost as if in the Oedipal drama they had succeeded in wrestling their mothers away from their fathers and were tormented by the results of their actions. They were fighting this in creative ways, a combination of aggression towards the mother and thinly veiled, though elaborate, self-sabotage.

Akshay, Madhur and Rahul displayed their anger and disappointment over the loss of their exclusive caring relationships in very different ways; yet, the way out, for the time being, seemed to have been facilitated with the help of their fathers. In all these families, the burden of care was on the mothers, who were doing their best (feeding,

responding, caring, cajoling, threatening and even placing boundaries) and yet felt inadequate. As a female therapist, it was a risk for me to come and ask them to do less and to create space for the fathers to do more – for this would make the mothers responsible yet again. Fortunately, I noticed that the mothers were keen to include their partners and the fathers were not averse to being involved; they were only waiting in the wings to be invited or assisted in this task. They seemed to want to be there for their sons and, despite their ambivalence, could not remain bystanders for long. However, sustaining such structural changes in the family dynamics will take the support of much more than individual psychotherapy. It will require the North Indian society as a whole and, therefore, the entire extended family to become more thoughtful about how fathers need to be more actively involved with their sons.

Making the move from home to school is a loss; yet, there is huge potential for growth if the losses can be borne. These boys were struggling with additional losses at the time they made the transition to a space that needed them to deal with structure, something that lies firmly in the father's domain as does dealing with losses. During this first foray into the outside world, the little child needs his father and mother and may need help to draw in their actual presence.

> Given the intensity and ambivalence of the mother–son connection in the Indian setting, the need for the father's physical touch and his guiding voice becomes even more pressing, the necessity of the Oedipal alliance often outweighing the hostility of the Oedipus Complex.
>
> (Kakar, 1981: 131)

The guiding voice can be effective and the son's identification with his father can take place only if the father allows his son emotional access to him (Kakar, 1981); for this to take place, the father has to be present as a person.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends, Dr. Rachana Patni, Ashis Roy and Neetu Sarin for their time and minds, without which the paper would not have come together. I would also like to thank Professor Ashok Nagpal at Ambedkar University, Delhi, for his clinical supervision and Professor Neil Altman for his support.

Notes

1. Through psychoanalytic psychotherapy as I was able to acknowledge my father's contribution to my capacity to interact with the outside world and go beyond experiencing him in terms of absence and betrayal, I became able to appreciate this 'second object'.
2. The two need not be mutually exclusive, as I discover. The emotional absence of the father, the over-presence of the mother, and themes of aggression turned inward through a punitive superego as well as outward onto the mother are evident in my clinical work with adolescent boys. It deserves elaboration, although it is beyond the scope of this paper.
3. Many of the families coming to the clinic are seeing a mental health professional for the first time and are perhaps the first generation to do so in their respective families. Therefore, to have a revolving door relationship with them where they feel they can return for short bursts of intervention as the need arises is perhaps a more realistic arrangement than a one-off, longer intervention.

References

Barrows, P. and Barrows, K. (2002) 'Fathers and the transgenerational impact of loss'. In Trowell, J. and Etchegoyen, A. (eds) *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.

Bion, W.R. (1962) *A Theory of Thinking*. London: Routledge.
Bradley, E. and Emanuel, L. (2008) *What Can the Matter Be? Therapeutic Interventions with Parents, Infants and Young Children*. London: Karnac.
Britton, R. (1992) 'The Oedipus situation and the depressive position'. In Anderson, R. (ed.) *Clinical Lectures on Klein and Bion*. London: Routledge.
Davids, M.F. (2002) 'Fathers in the internal world: from boy to man to father'. In Trowell, J. and Etchegoyen, A. (eds) *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
Diamond, M.J. (1998) 'Fathers with sons: psychoanalytic perspectives on "good enough" fathering throughout the life cycle'. *Gender and Psychoanalysis*, 3: 243–300.
Fonagy, P., Steele, M., Moran, G., Steele, H. and Higgitt, A. (1993) 'Measuring the ghost in the nursery: an empirical study of the relationship between parents' mental representations of childhood experiences and their infants' security of attachment'. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 41 (4): 957–89.
Fraiberg, S., Adelson, E. and Shapiro, V. (1975) 'Ghosts in the nursery: a psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant–mother relationships'. In *Clinical Studies in Infant Mental Health*. London: Tavistock.
Freud, S. (1913) 'Totem and taboo'. SE 13: 1–162.
Frosh, S. (1997) 'Fathers' ambivalence (too)'. In Hollway, W. and Featherstone, B. (eds) *Mothering and Ambivalence*. London: Routledge.
Gaddini, E. (1976) 'On father formation in child development'. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 57: 397–401.
Harris, R., Rendall, S. and Nashat, S. (2011) *Engaging with Complexity: Child & Adolescent Mental Health and Education*. London: Karnac.
Kakar, S. (1981) *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Kakar, S. (1982) 'Fathers and sons: the Indian experience'. In Cath, S., Gurwit, A. and Ross, J. (eds) *Father and Child: Development and Clinical Perspectives*. Boston, MA: Atlantic Little Brown.
Kakar, S. (1997) *Culture and Psyche: Selected Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Klauber, T. (2009) 'Early experience, developmental tasks and the blossoming of the capacity to learn'. *International Journal of Infant Observation*, 12 (3): 305–18.
Klein, M. (1948) 'On the theory of anxiety and guilt'. In *The Writings of Melanie Klein, Vol. 4*. London: Hogarth Press.
Klein, M. (1952) 'Some theoretical conclusions regarding the emotional life of the infant'. In *The Writings of Melanie Klein, Vol. 3*. London: Hogarth Press.
Lansky, M. (1992) 'Symptoms, system, and personality in fathers who fail'. In Lansky, M. (ed.) *Fathers Who Fail: Shame and Psychopathology in the Family System*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
Mahler, M., Pine, F. and Bergman, A. (1975) *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*. London: Hutchinson.
Marks, M. (2002) 'Letting fathers in'. In Trowell, J. and Etchegoyen, A. (eds) *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
Music, G. and Hall, B. (2008) 'From scapegoating to thinking and finding a home: delivering therapeutic work in schools'. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 34 (1): 43–61.
Paiva, N.D. (2011) 'The school as a secure base'. In Harris, R., Rendall, S., and Nashat, S. (eds) *Engaging with Complexity: Child & Adolescent Mental Health and Education*. London: Karnac.
Paiva, N.D. (2014) 'Who observes whom? Infant observation observed: an experience of setting up an infant observation skills training in India'. *Infant Observation*, 17 (1): 5–19.
Pattanaik, D.D. (2006) *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*. London: Penguin.
Pattanaik, D.D. (2014) *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*. New Delhi: Penguin.
Raphael-Leff, J. (1991) *Psychological Processes of Childbearing*. London: Chapman and Hall.
Target, M. and Fonagy, P. (2002) 'Fathers in modern psychoanalysis and in society: the role of the father and child development'. In Trowell, J. and Etchegoyen, A. (eds) *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
Winnicott, D.W. (1964) 'What about father?' In *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*. London: Penguin.