Abstract. In the context of changing constructions of gender and family structure, this article addresses two related aims. First, it aims to develop a focused and comprehensive understanding of what is termed the "paternal function" as understood within object relations theory. Second, it offers a critique of existing theory, arguing that the literature reflects some conflation between function and functionary, or between maleness and/or masculinity and the performance of this function or set of functions. Although the term "paternal function" is frequently employed in the psychoanalytic literature, a common understanding of what it constitutes cannot be assumed. The construct appears to encompass several different dimensions, four of which are explored in the article. The authors contend that paternal function should be understood as distinct from the role of the father in the life of the infant. This opens a space to consider alternative sources of parental functioning and the related importance of the position of third persons or objects in infant development. It is argued that critical engagement with the construct of the paternal function not only has relevance for rethinking developmental theory and child-rearing practices, but that it may also prove potentially valuable to case formulations and understanding interactional dynamics within the therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: paternal function, father, masculinity, triangulation, thirdness, pre-Oedipal development

Introduction

Contemporary theories of gender suggest that human beings should be understood as psychologically bisexual (Fogel, 1998), with gender no longer considered to be biologically "hard-wired" but rather as "softly assembled" in the context of the individual's conscious, unconscious, and social interactional properties and experiences (Harris, 1995). Correspondingly, it becomes important to rethink aspects of psychoanalytic theory that draw upon assumptions about, and associations to, gender binaries and relations. One area that has been powerfully affected by
advances in the understanding and expression of gender is that of early parenting. Ideas about the sharp divisions between male and female parenting roles have been questioned, with ensuing debates as to what it is about parental gender that might or might not be important in influencing child development and personality formation. Such debate extends to interrogation of what is conventionally understood by the paternal or maternal functions within developmental and clinical theory. The paternal function is the focus of interest in this article.

Largely as a consequence of the rise in feminism over the last quarter century, a significant shift has taken place in stereotypical gender-role thinking. This shift, along with the decline of the traditional family structure (which has occurred for a host of reasons, including frequent divorce, single parenting, gay marriages, and household division due to migrant labor), has led to a loosening of gendered parental identities, with parents of both sexes compelled to take on more flexible and more encompassing roles. With something of a “paternal turn” in analytic thinking and writing over the last decade or so, an awareness of the importance of the role of the father in early child development is being elaborated, as the image of a more present, involved, and gentle male parent is recognized (see, e.g., Marks, 2002). This increasing acceptance, both within everyday families and within the psychoanalytic community (Davids, 2002), that “mothering” activities, such as feeding, bathing, soothing, and comforting, are no longer the sole province of women, suggests the reciprocal question: Are properties associated with fathering the exclusive domain of men? If men can mother, can women father, and can caretakers of either gender perform both maternal and paternal functions?

In modern society, where children can grow up in families that depart from the traditional nuclear setup, including “nontraditional” nuclear families (in which fathers stay at home and mothers are primary breadwinners), single-parent families of either gender, gay-parent families, and extended families of several generations, it becomes important to understand the intersection of gender and parenting in more nuanced ways. This is not to say that such formations are necessarily lacking or problematic to development. One way to approach psychoanalytic debates about sex, gender roles, and infants’ caretaking needs, is to take a step backwards and to consider parenting as initially consisting of a set of (at this point) ungendered functions to be performed in the service of the psychic and physical development of the infant, toddler, child, and adolescent. In order to conceptualize this set of overarching functions, one could imagine these functions as consisting primarily of the union of maternal func-
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...tions; those functions traditionally understood to be performed by the woman/mother, and paternal functions; those functions traditionally attributed to the father or male partner of the mother. The terms "maternal" and "paternal," as opposed to "mothering" and "fathering," appear to have arisen, in part, to suggest that such functions may be performed by a range of caretakers who are not necessarily the biological or adoptive parents of the child; however, they still retain strongly gendered associations and support some sense of a gender binary in the providers of such functions. This poses potential difficulties for nontraditional family setups in which it cannot be assumed that there are complementary caregivers—one male, one female—involved in child rearing, each playing his or her requisite role in terms of maternal and paternal function provision. One of the aims of this article, therefore, is to interrogate the way in which the paternal function is constructed within object relational literature so as to examine the extent this function may or may not be tied to the sex or gender of the individual. Writing about the maternal function is much more developed in the psychoanalytic literature than writing about the paternal function; therefore, the authors also hope to contribute to the burgeoning psychoanalytic literature on the place of fathers in early and later child development.

Freud made a major contribution to thinking around the involvement of the father in psychic development, most influentially in his theorization of the Oedipus complex. This aspect of classical theory has been extensively written about, and continues to be revisited, with some contemporary thinkers stressing the implications of more androgynous understandings of sex and gender identity, including engaging with the feminine in men and the masculine in women. Less widely acknowledged and understood is the significance of the paternal function in the infant's development during the pre-Oedipal period. Indeed, a recent (July 2011) broad search of the electronic Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP-Web, 2006) database yielded over 130 articles with the term "maternal," as opposed to fewer than 30 with the term "paternal" in the title. There were also close to 900 articles in which the phrase "maternal function," and fewer than half that number in which the term "paternal function" was employed. Moreover, theoretical elaboration of the paternal function in psychoanalytic literature is rather fragmented and lacking in clarity, despite the fact that in much of the writing there is an assumed common consensual understanding of what paternal function refers to. Different authors appear to define somewhat different dimensions. It is our argument that the paternal function consists of a set of related functions or dimensions rather than a single...
action or attribute. In distilling the fundamental components of the paternal function from this rather patchy literature, and identifying what appears to facilitate the performance of these functions (with a focus on maleness, masculinity, and/or thirdness), we hope that a more refined theoretical understanding of the concept can be achieved. Such an understanding would have implications for both alternative parenting arrangements and for psychoanalytic practice, including formulation of dynamics related to the paternal function in the room. Although Winnicott (1987) likened analysis to a mothering relationship, Ward (2004) suggests that more contemporary understandings of the analytic situation as triangular in nature have prompted a renewed interest in the place of fathers and fathering in analysis. By implication, the paternal function may also be understood to be increasingly important in thinking about the total therapeutic relationship. Despite this, Davids (2002) posits that practitioners may tend to focus on the (internal) mother or maternal object/s to the detriment of the internal father or paternal object/s.

The aims of this article are thus twofold. First, we seek to provide greater theoretical clarity to the inherent understanding of the paternal function as used by writers in the object relational psychoanalytic tradition, and, via the integration of existing theory, to provide greater theoretical clarity to this concept. To do so, we must distill it from what might be described as a rather fragmented and opaque body of writing. Second, we seek to explore the gendered or sexed attributions associated with this construct in order to carefully interrogate these assumptions in the light of more critical contemporary understandings of gender identity, parenting, and family constellations. We will argue that this carries significance for both child developmental practices and therapeutic engagement.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a body of literature on the paternal function developed by Lacan and his followers, and that use of the paternal function construct is often assumed to refer to this body of theory (Carveth, 1993; Boczar et al., 2001). Because the Lacanian school is premised on Freudian drive theory (e.g., “It is the repression of desire and, hence, the unconscious, that determines human behaviour” [Quigley, 2009, p. 4]), in this framework the paternal function is linked to drive theory and to Oedipal conflicts. In addition, the idea of the nom-du-père, (name of the father), as an important impetus to psychic development in patriarchally structured societies, has a particular semiotic and symbolic set of connotations intrinsic to this theoretical tradition. In contrast, there is a completely separate tradition of writing in which the idea of a pater-
nal function or functions is viewed as being performed by significant "objects" in a child's world, during what is referred to as the "pre-Oedipal phase" of development. It is within this tradition of writing that this article is located.

Although the links between empirical research findings on developmental influences and the role/function of the father and/or the paternal object are necessarily largely hypothetical, research on the offspring of absent or unavailable fathers provides evidence for the likelihood that fathers perform some important, functional role in early development. Jones (2008), for example, cites empirical studies demonstrating the deleterious effects of father absence on child development, including cognitive, moral, and social development, peer relationships, self-concept, and self-esteem as well as on masculine identity (in the case of boys) and academic achievement. Jones also mentions research implicating the absence of fathers in early and later child development; in teenage delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, an increased sense of entitlement, and vulnerability to a range of psychiatric problems. Although such research links these harmful effects to the absence of the actual father, the proclivity in analytic writing to conflate function and functionary in relation to fathering, and provision of paternal functions in the child's life, has arguably served to confound the picture. With regard to Jones's and other related findings, it is worth posing the question as to whether it is the absence of the father per se that is problematic, or rather the absence of provision of the paternal function or set of functions. Without sharper distinction between the two, it becomes difficult to determine exactly what the causal mechanisms are in the development of mental health difficulties in fatherless children and youth.

In order to begin to do some of this necessary disentangling, we contend that the paternal function might be better conceptualized in terms of what is provided to the developing psyche by the functionary, rather than in terms of the sexed or gendered nature of the provider, i.e., the action needs to be separated from the actor. It is argued that in many, or even most, instances, it is the thirdness/not-motherness of the functionary that is important, rather than masculinity or possession of male genitalia, as will be elaborated below.¹

¹ Regarding terminology, "infancy" will refer to the period from birth until age 4. Second, the term "the third" is not the (analytic) third that emerges in the clinical dyad, but rather the third person/object that allows for triadic relating. In the literature, terms such as "the
Facets of the Paternal Function

A reading of pertinent psychoanalytic literature suggests that various facets of the paternal function may be identified. Careful examination of a range of journal articles and books making reference to the paternal function (although clearly not exhaustive) suggests at least four distinct, if interrelated, dimensions performed by the paternal functionary, each of which appears critical to the healthy development of the psyche. We identify these functions as follows: 1) separating third; 2) facilitator of mental structure and the capacity to think; 3) facilitator of affect management (particularly of aggression); and 4) provider of psychic safety.

A systematic examination of each of these facets is presented, together with some critical discussion of assumptions about the sexed or gendered nature of the functionary.

Function 1. "Separating Third"

Historically, one of the most widely accepted understandings of the paternal function was its place in facilitating separation of the infant from the early, fused relationship with the mother or primary caretaker. Winnicott's oft-quoted "there is no such thing as a baby.... A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship" (1987, p. 88), captures the essence of the symbiotic mother-infant relationship. In this statement, Winnicott suggests several important ideas about human development, one of which concerns the absence of an ego at birth and the reliance of the neonate on the mother as an auxiliary ego. This is a state of affairs that can be countenanced for a certain period of time but that must ultimately cease, for psychic arrest threatens the infant who cannot develop an existence independent of the mother.

The importance of independent ego creation and the concomitant emergence of a separate individual (or what some theorists would call a "self") is strongly emphasized by Seligman (1982), who documents her observations concerning clinical encounters with patients of both genders who experienced their fathers as emotionally unavailable, weak, and

father," "the second other," and "the secondary caregiver" might easily be replaced with "the third" in the sense we will use it in this article.

2 It is acknowledged that employment of the term "mother" to signify the primary caregiver also reflects some gender stereotyping. It was beyond the scope of this article to simultaneously address gendered constructions of mothering and maternal functions and fathering and paternal functions.
dominated by their mothers. She conceptualizes such patients as being "half alive." Without a person to support the child in negotiating the necessary attempts at separation from the mother, the child remains "in a state of permanent twilight, of non-differentiation, inexorably trapped" (p. 1), "neither in nor out of the womb, but wedged, so to speak, halfway, half alive, half born" (p. 10). In these rather evocative images, Seligman suggests the lack of vitality that may characterize patients who have not been encouraged or assisted to separate from their primary caretaking object. Burgner (1985) concurs with Seligman's observations, reporting on her own work with several patients who were deprived of a father before age 5. Her findings were that such individuals remain "adhesively and ambivalently tied to the remaining primary object and they seem to maintain a certain hopelessness about their adult capacities as partners and parents" (p. 319). This clinical evidence for the importance of a separation-assisting object reassuringly suggests there is such a thing as a baby, provided there is a paternal/separating object (or father in their accounts).

Much of the historical writing on the separating aspect of the paternal function might be characterized as incorporating symbolic anatomical connotations in a manner that portrays the father's phallic organ as the instrument piercing the bond between mother and infant, prying them apart (e.g., Buren, 2000). Intrusion into the early mother-infant space seems to be necessarily aligned with the active, penetrating qualities associated with maleness and masculinity. However, it is posited that there is little in the analytic writing that suggests the necessity of being male or masculine to perform this function, and it can be argued that associations between the presence of a father and the loosening of the early bond is premised on assumptions of a traditional family architecture.

Maiello (2007) appears cognizant of how conflation may obfuscate matters. In building on some of Winnicott's observations about the possible role of the father in both creating and disrupting the space within which mother-infant bonding and attachment can take place, she refers to the (Lacanian-derived) adage: There is no two without a three (p. 4). This captures her observation that the mother-infant dyad cannot be separated into a mother and a (separate) baby without the presence (real or intrapsychic) of a third object. In elucidating her thoughts on this adage, Maiello is careful in her word choice, referring to "otherness," "the third," and "paternal to the element" (p. 47), and careful to avoid conflating these concepts with that of "the father," a conflation we suggest others such as
Seligman (1982) and Burgner (1985) fall prey to in their writing. Maiello (2007) alludes to the “differentiating” paternal function as being about “finding the right emotional distance at every moment . . . to acknowledge boundaries . . . to differentiate between ‘me’ and ‘not-me’” (p. 42), rather than requiring that the separator is anatomically different from the mother. What Maiello posits is that it is something about the separateness of the third party (from the primary caretaker and from the infant), rather than the individual’s gender that is important. Two earlier authors, Glasser (1985) and Greenson (1968), emphasize that it is the quality of “alternativeness” (rather than the differently sexed nature of the object) that protects against a merging with the mother; they suggest that it is encouragement and enticement that aids separation, not forceful phallic intrusion.

Loewald (1951) was among the first to describe the specific role of the father in early child development (restricting his discussion to male infants). He emphasized the importance of the father in the growing organization, differentiation, and integration of the infantile ego. He suggested that the healthy development of the infant requires access to a representative of the outside world or reality. Writing at that time, he saw the father as the most obvious candidate to provide this necessary presence for the self-liberation of the infant from the “clutches” of the mother. Moreover, he suggested that the consistent presence of this third person over time was vital in protecting against the future threat of regressing back to a position of primary narcissism, symbiosis, and undifferentiation. Mahler and her followers, particularly Abelin (1971, 1975, 1980), wrote extensively about the father’s positive role as facilitator of separation and individuation. This group of theorists also held that the father was important not only in encouraging exploration, thus enhancing the developing child’s sense of agency and potency, but also in protecting the child against the regressive pull into a symbiotic orbit around the mother (Mahler & Gosliner, 1955). Thus, the father is viewed as playing both an encouraging and more preventive or prohibitive role. Although it is possible that the encouragement of exploration might be viewed as a more masculine attribute, and the authority of a male figure in a patriarchal society might carry more weight in prohibiting regression, it is certainly not essential for these functions to be performed by the father or even a male person. The question is whether it is a relationship “with a man” or a relationship “with a third” that enables the child to separate. Is it the sexed/gendered nature of the third party that is important in freeing the child from overinvestment in the primary attachment relationship, or is it
the existence and awareness of a third vertex (i.e., a nongendered third person) in the triadic structure, in and of itself, that is crucial? From a close reading of what the separating function is intended to achieve, it seems that what is required is an engaging third with whom the infant can positively identify—whether this be grandfather, aunt, mother's lover (of one or the other sex), older sibling, or the father.

Target and Fonagy (2002) comment that the development of a self-representation may be a function of access to (at least) two parents, each performing different roles, but "this does not assign a specific role to the father" (p. 51). This assertion is in line with a central argument of this article, namely, that the paternal function and the role of the father should not be understood to be synonymous. In thinking about the function of separator, Rottman (1980) also disagreed with those who suggested that the "royal route" out of mother-infant symbiosis was via the father. He introduced arguments focusing on the mother's capacity for adult partnership with a third, rather than focusing on the identity of the third. The mother's intimate partner is understood to "pull" the mother and "push" the baby out of the maternal-infant dyad. The intimacy of the adult pair or couple requires that the infant recognize that his or her relationship with the mother is not exclusive, thus further impelling some degree of separation.

Before moving on to look at the second paternal function we identified (i.e., facilitator of mental functioning), it is important to acknowledge that contemporary thinking entertains the possibility that infants have a greater capability to engage with the world than was historically assumed to be the case. Based on empirical observations, it has been demonstrated that infants have greater sophistication of perception and cognition than was previously thought (Horner, 1985; Stern, 1985). Such findings challenge Mahler's theory of symbiosis, in which the infant is posited to be unaware of the boundary between self and other (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), suggesting that the infant may self-differentiate from the mother in some respects, rather than being wholly reliant on external intervention to achieve this. These findings might be read as suggesting that the concept of the separating function of the third is anachronistic.

Gergley (2000) reconciles these contrasting views by suggesting that: "Insofar as symbiosis refers to an inability to differentiate perceptually between the body boundaries of self and other, or to a lack of sensitivity to external and distal stimuli, the answer must be 'yes.'" That is, the infant is able to self differentiate (p. 1206). He continues: "However, we come
to a very different verdict if we approach the question using the classical biological meaning of symbiosis, which refers to a close coexistence between two organisms in which some of the vital life functions of one of the participants is fulfilled or facilitated by the activities of the other" (p. 1206). In other words, with this understanding of symbiosis, self-differentiation by the infant is less likely.

Taking up this idea, we suggest that the ability of an infant to detect a slight time delay in either visual or auditory stimuli (the kind of experimental evidence used to establish the ability of neonates to "recognize" self and not self) does not substantially call into question the importance of the infant's *psychological* state of symbiosis with the mother. Miller (2002) contends that separation and individuation is not a matter of simply "being separate after birth, but of feeling separate" (p. 37). The importance of the paternal separating function lies not so much in activating the infant's conception that there is a bodily distinction between self and mother, but rather in initiating some awareness that it is possible to have a level of psychological independence from the maternal object, that there are other "systems" in which to participate, and that survival in the world is not exclusively dependent upon symbiotic contact. In contemporary language, the paternal function is not so much about physically and cognitively separating out the infant from the mother, but more about tempering the powerful and exclusive attachment between mother and infant, i.e., about diluting "the intense conversation or proto-conversation between mother and infant" (Samuels, 1996, p. 115).

Pine (1992), one of Mahler's coresearchers, suggests that although the conception of a permanent state of fusion may be contestable, there are certainly significant moments of fusion and lack of differentiation between mother and infant that, because of the highly positive affect associated with such moments, become an important substrate in the infant's unconscious. He thus argues that the theory around separation-individuation continues to be relevant, even within this kind of contemporary rejigging that takes the implications of observational research into account. Although his attempts to save the original formulation of fusion have been questioned (see, e.g., Silverman [2005]), to the extent to which Pine's rejigging is valid, one might imagine that these "moments" of fusion to which he refers, and that he describes as highly pleasurable, constitute what we discussed earlier in this section: the "regressive pull" back into symbiotic merger. Although such a theory has implications for the full spectrum of mother–infant dyads, the risks of such an undiluted pull are
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perhaps most starkly evident in thinking about more pathological situations. At its extremes, symbiosis may require dependence upon, and fusion with, depressed or highly narcissistic maternal objects, highlighting the considerable importance of the paternal function in promoting some separation.

On balance, even against the backdrop of contemporary research observations, it appears that the place of a (paternal) third to encourage and assist with psychological independence remains significant to optimal psychological development. However, the promotion of separation does not have to be a bloody affair characterized by “breaking up” (Samuels, 1996), but may rather be understood as a process of offering encouragement towards, and support of, the dyad’s inherent investment in its own ultimate dissolution.

It appears that the facilitation of separation from the mother should continue to be understood as an important dimension of the paternal function. What is also apparent is that although the father has been a likely candidate to perform this function within traditionally constellated families, the sexed or gendered nature of the separator appears largely immaterial and there is room for the performance of this function by a range of actors in the world of the mother and infant.

Rottman’s (1980) reference to the relationship between the mother and the third in aiding separation carries another significance, namely, the cultivation of “triangular space” in the infant’s mind and the capacity for representation. This related but different dimension of the paternal function is explored in the next section.

Function 2. Facilitator of Mental Structure and the Capacity to Think

In addition to facilitating separation from the primary caretaker, the paternal function is also understood to be vital in creating the conditions necessary for the development of thought and symbolization. Contemporary theorists suggest that the way in which the child comes to terms with the triangular relationship between him- or herself and the parents (or caretaker and other significant objects) is central to the structuring of mental space, thinking, and creativity (Target & Fonagy, 2002; Rowley, 2008).

Abelin (1975) commented on the traumatic experience of awareness of “early triangulation” when the child is first confronted with the reality of the existence of the parental couple. The trauma arises as a consequence
of the baby feeling "left out," with nobody to relate to, nobody to mirror [him]" (p. 292), the mother's attention being on someone other than him-or herself. Despite the trauma of the experience, the development of the infant's sense of self is facilitated through this awareness. Abelin writes: "... suspended, as he is, between two patterns of interacting he can do nothing but 'recognize' his own frustrated wish ..." (p. 292), as he [sic] experiences exclusion in the face of the mother's engagement with her partner or significant other. Abelin (1975) contends that it is the baby's recognition of having to tolerate his or her frustrated wish that assists in the organization of the psyche and the early formation of the ego. The baby can have no sense that the desire for the object is in fact his or her own until triangulation occurs and the child experiences the deprivation of desire. The infant's apprehension of him- or herself is a by-product of apprehension of a relationship from which the baby is excluded.

Britton (1989) suggests that the internalization of the Oedipal triangle creates a space, both mental and physical, within which the child is able to have differentiated relationships with both not-me objects, as a couple and as two individuals. The child is alerted to a place for mother in father's mind, a place for father in mother's mind, and a place for him- or herself in the minds of both parents, as well as—simultaneously—a place for both parents, as separate and connected entities, in his or her own mind. Self-reflective space is achieved through the "creation" of a vertex (i.e., a nongendered other in the triad) that promotes the linking of disparate parts of the psyche as well as the opening up of psychic space to allow for a third dimension (Britton, 1989). This third dimension is conceptualized as the dimension containing the dyadic relationship that exists apart from the infant. It is a dimension observable to the infant, but one that he or she is unable to enter into. Observing a relationship in which one is not a participant alerts the developing psyche to the fact that both the maternal object and the significant third object (i.e., the paternal functionary) can also observe the relationship that the other has with the infant. The infant becomes aware that his or her relationships are observable, as are those of others. All of these aspects of relating, initiated by the presence of a significant other with whom the primary caretaker has a relationship, act to trigger the baby's early thinking about object relationships, allowing the baby to develop a rudimentary experience of entertaining the other's perspective while retaining his or her own and, as Britton (1989) says, for reflecting on self while being self, a critical prerequisite for the capacity to mentalize. Fonagy and Target (1995) suggest that ego development is critically dependent on the existence of a
third person who can reflect on the infant’s relational experiences. Ideally, the infant imagines, identifies with, and internalizes such reflections, creating psychic structure. In light of this observation and other recent literature highlighting the significance of mentalizing capabilities for optimal psychic health (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004), the paternal function appears to be particularly salient with regard to theorizing about the generation of sound thinking capacities and internal mental models of self and others.

In writing about this linking dimension of the paternal function, Birksted-Breen (1996) refers to a creative or “repairing” function in helping to bring disparate parts of the infant’s psyche together. Drawing on Kleinian imagery, she suggests that the “penis-as-link” can be conceptualized as providing an internal structure that allows for the recognition of different parts of oneself and one’s internal objects, and also for the experience of them as both ordered and separate, yet connected. She further argues that the “penis-as-link” encourages a linking or combining of the mother and father in the infant’s mind, facilitating a less polarized experience of masculine and feminine.

Although Birksted-Breen’s reference to the “penis-as-link” is perhaps best understood primarily as a metaphor, her reference to a male anatomical organ as performing the linking function suggests the fact that, for some theorists, this kind of function is understood to be performed necessarily by the father or his male substitute. However we would argue that what is important is not the mind bearing the penis, but rather the paternal functionary bearing the mind. It is the relationship between the mind of the mother and mind of the paternal functionary, rather than the relationship between their differing anatomical parts, that is necessary for the development of a space in which to think and to allow for separation and coming together. However, other authors have echoed Birksted-Breen’s analogy, employing the imagery of male genitalia in modeling the psychic development of the infant. Resnick (1989), for example, suggests that the importance of the father lies in his facilitation of the internalization of the phallus as a psychological “spine” that provides a basis for structuring thinking and symbol formation. Although the equation of the shape and structure of the phallus with that of the spine, and then in turn with mental discipline, may be appealing, the employment of this kind of language seems to contribute tacitly to some conflation between the role of the father, performance of the paternal function, and—by implication—between maleness and provision of this function.

Bion (1962) refers to a priori knowledge of the breast and the penis in
the human infant (symbolically representing different kinds of relationships). The breast is thought to refer to knowledge of the link between self and other, whereas the penis is understood to refer to the link between the parents, thus introducing notions of triangularity and exclusion. For some theorists (perhaps Kleinians in particular), it may be the case that the paternal functionary or "not mother" needs to be differently sexed and gendered from the mother in order for difference to be observed and appreciated. This may be especially true with regard to thinking space, as with separating: it seems that it is the presence of a third, someone who is not as tied into the primary bond, that precipitates this kind of mental development. The idea that possession of a penis is a prerequisite for being able to assist in the structuring of the internal thinking space of the infant seems somewhat fallacious. Although images of penises and phallics may aid description and seem compelling (drawing together the main threads of the argument about the paternal function and the facilitation of thinking capacity), it appears that the deep emotional relationship between mother and third (irrespective of sex or gender) from which the baby feels excluded is the necessary ingredient for the creation of the triangular space and gives impetus to and creates the parameters to develop thinking.

If one considers the arguments put forward thus far, together with the contentions of other psychoanalytic writers (e.g., Davids, 2002) that aspects of the maternal function may also not be sex invariant, it seems that a model of the heterosexed parental couple as providing the necessary basis for psychic structure, with the maternal functionary as container and the paternal functionary as constructor and organizer, is somewhat outdated. Indeed, Samuels (1996) also takes the view that although the maternal and paternal functions are different, they are not necessarily gendered and can even be carried out by the same person. What seems important is exposure to complementary sets of forces or functions, largely based on the template of the parental couple, regardless of who provides these (Etchegoyen, 2002).

A further question of interest is whether the third object has to be physically present in order for the child's relationship with the mother to assume the necessary significance in the experience and mind of the infant. Target and Fonagy (2002) note that "[t]he physical presence of the father may be neither sufficient nor necessary for triangulation to evolve" (p. 57). In terms of sufficiency, it appears that if a partner has a rather peripheral presence for mother and/or infant, it is likely to be more difficult for the developmental transitions discussed thus far to take place.
The necessity argument above is important at a time when single-parent, female-headed families are a rapidly growing phenomenon (Kamerman & Kahn, 1989; Ahuja & Stinson, 1993). With the absence of a physical paternal or alternative partner figure to the mother, what becomes of the paternal functions, particularly those of separating third and facilitator of mental capacity? In this kind of situation, it is possible to imagine that it may be the mother’s relationship, in fantasy, with a deceased or no longer physically present partner that becomes apparent to the infant as some sort of excluding bond, setting up sufficient conditions for the elaboration of mental space. Several authors (e.g., Fain, 1981; McDougall, 1989) support the idea that this particular aspect of the paternal function may be possible even in the absence of a real physical father; that is, the relationship the mother has in fantasy with the paternal functionary may be sufficient to excite the infant to the possibility of there being more to his or her world than just the mother/primary caregiver. The manner in which the mother talks about this person, the degree to which this person “takes her away from” her child, may enliven a third vertex within the child’s mind as a representation of the other with whom mother has or had a relationship, independent of him or her. This conceptualization emphasizes the importance of the mother’s internal world to her baby or child. The internal relationship the mother has with the absent father of her child(ren) is implicated in the strength of the paternal imago that becomes established in the mind of the child, and consequently in the firmness of the internal triangular structure (Target & Fonagy, 2002). Several authors have observed that a currently unpartnered mother can still encourage a vibrant and “alive” internal, paternal imago in the mind of the baby via her engaged relationship with the absent father in her own mind, and that this allows for emergence of the idea of a “parental couple” (Atkins, 1984; McDougall, 1989; Sinkkonen & Keinänen, 2008). Izzard and Barden (2001) have proposed that the relationship the mother has with her internalized father may also serve to alert the young child to the presence of a relationship in the mother’s life/mind from which he or she is excluded. Other authors concur that it may be the mother’s relationship with her internal father or masculine parts that contributes to the infant’s internalization of a paternal figure, particularly when a real paternal figure or third is lacking (Lansky, 1989; Davids, 2002). It is even possible to entertain the possibility that the mother’s intense engagement with a nonhuman “object,” such as her career or a particular recreational activity, might contribute similarly to some sort of observing or triadic relating capacity in the child. In such a case the
mother has a relationship that excludes the infant, but her relationship is with “some thing” rather than with “someone.”

It appears, therefore, that although the idea of the creation of mental structure or space was originally tied very strongly to the assumption of a parental couple and a particular kind of triadic relationship, contemporary thinking on this issue suggests both the possibility of a nonheterosexual matrix of relationship and the possibility of a relational matrix that may be set up in fantasy and or in relation to nonhuman objects. Although the implications of these kinds of alternative structuring contexts must be better understood, such alternative formulations about how triadic relating may be introduced into the mind of the child allow for the possibility that this can occur in nontraditional families.

Function 3. Facilitator of Affect Management

The maternal role in assisting the infant with affect management is well documented, with Bion’s (1962) container–contained model and the internalization of the mother’s alpha functioning at the forefront of these discussions. Several authors have suggested, however, that the father also plays a significant role in facilitating a capacity for affect management. Lemche and Stockler (2002) and Herzog (1982, 1988) directly link the development of the capacity to tolerate frustration and to manage strong affect to the influence of the father. This again prompts the question: What is it about the father that might be helpful in this instance—his maleness, his masculinity, and/or his thirdness?

One contention is that it is the qualitative difference between the father’s and mother’s play that is important. Herzog (1988) suggests that although mothers automatically strive to return babies to a level of reduced tension as quickly as possible, fathers, in contrast, may intentionally create increased levels of tension and heightened affect, being more demanding of the child even if playfully so. The roughness of the father’s style of play may lead to arousal of negative affects, such as increased anxiety, something unlikely to occur in relationship with the mother, who pays more attention to a “purely positive emotional reciprocity” (Lemche & Stockler, 2002, p. 127). Moreover, “rather than returning the child to a level of reduced tension directly, [the father] may instead introduce levels of heightened affectivity and tension and by so doing . . . teach methods for the organization, modulation, control and utilization of these intense affects” (Herzog, 1988, p. 490). Tabin (2004) notes that Herzog (2001) argues strongly for appreciation of the contrast between mothers’ homeo-
statically attuned and fathers' disruptively attuned relating. It is this differ­
ence in relating that requires the child to mentally shift gears and
encourages greater flexibility in relating to the world (Tabin, 2004).

The thesis that rougher play and the creation of a more demanding
environment are implicated in the development of the capacity for frustra-
tion tolerance seems plausible. However, the suggestion that it is neces-
sarily fathers who provide such experiences seems somewhat collusive
with gender stereotyping. Although the embodiment of masculinity might
be more closely associated with this element of the paternal function, the
provision of this more "stretching" environment is predicated to a large
extent on the assumption that the primary caretaker is responsible for the
complementary provision of soothing and anxiety reduction. Thus, again
it is the "not-mother" identity of the functionary that is as important as his
or her gender. Although the mother of the infant may be either unable or
unwilling to make certain demands on her child, it is the third, because
of his (or her) greater "distance" from the infant, who can both imagine
the infant's potential ability to tolerate frustration and can stimulate this.
The mother's identification with her child, her constant apprehension of
the baby's fragility, prematurity, and dependence, and her propensity for
"primary maternal preoccupation," direct her toward creating a safe, non-
impinging world in which her infant can "go on being." However, it could
be hypothesized that this also paralyzes her and keeps her from having a
more demanding "everyday type of interaction" with the baby. The not-
mother is not subject to the same paralysis because he or she does not
share the same level of closeness to the infant.

The thoughts of Samuels (1996) seem particularly germane here. In his
discussion of "the good-enough father of whatever sex," he seeks to un-
dermine the stereotypical thinking about the differences in the play of
mothers and fathers with their children. He refers to the work of Raphael-
Leff (1991), in which the play of fathers who have sole or primary care of
their children, is shown to closely "resemble that of mothers" (Samuels,
1996, p. 111). The suggestion seems to be that the parental style of play
with children might well be determined not by one's gender, but rather
by whether one views oneself as the primary or secondary caregiver.

It is worth considering further, however, whether masculinity is impor-
tant to the provision of this function. The construct of "masculinity" has
come to be understood as relating to behaviors, opinions, and attributes
expected of males, but as distinct from biological sex in that it is largely
socially constructed (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). It is possible to conceive
that rougher play, more withholding, and more demanding behaviors, are more compatible with the embodiment or enactment of masculinity as opposed to femininity, and in this respect it may well be that a male or more masculine-identified person might more naturally perform this function. However, it is possible to conceive of a female other or even the mother as potentially performing this function too. Winnicott (1987), for example, contends that as the mother becomes aware of the infant's increasing ego integration and capacity for more independent survival, her empathic attunement is reduced and her interactions with the baby may become more robust and more frustrating at times. If the paternal function is conceptualized as the provision of a less protective, more stretching world of interaction, the mother herself may provide this as a complement to her more empathic, soothing way of relating. This might be envisioned in terms of drawing on both feminine and masculine attributes of the self and is compatible with contemporary gender theory that entertains androgyny in the expression of identity.

It is apparent that some theorists would take exception to the idea that the mother might be the paternal functionary in this matter of emotional regulation. In the case of a male infant, Herzog (1980) asserts that the father is indispensable in the early “modulation of libidinal and especially aggressive drives” (p. 230). The mother cannot perform this function because her involvement may confuse the infant in relation to libidinal and aggressive tendencies (Herzog, 1982). This argument might well be valid, but what it does not necessarily imply is that the paternal functionary could not be another woman—provided the little boy does not have the kind of Oedipal longing for both women that Herzog maintains gets in the way. In essence, Herzog's argument might be construed as asserting that the paternal functionary needs to be an object with whom the libidinal investment of the infant is different from that of the maternal object cathexis.

Several elements, therefore, appear to be important in the provision of this function, including a willingness to depart from complete attunement to the baby, engagement in more physically robust forms of play, and the stimulation of frustration in the baby by an object in whom the baby is not primarily libidinally invested. This creates some complexity in trying to think through the personhood of such a functionary.

In commenting on the relevance of the father, and his possible absence, to later affect regulation, Lemche and Stockler (2002) remark that “this would imply that children with no possibilities of compensatory tri-
Angulation experiences are at risk for potential weaker impulse control and less mature defensive organisation" (p. 116; emphasis added). Although not the main thrust of their argument, this point is central because it suggests that the process of triangulation is most important, not the anatomical sex of the third vertex. They write further that "the father, particularly in his role as a significant other who is not the mother, has central significance for the acquisition of competence in the regulation of emotions" (p. 144; emphasis added). Herzog (1982) suggests a second source of aggression in children whose fathers are absent, arguing that the problem lies in the dissolution of the "emotional shield," which the structure of a parental couple provides. "Such a field of two psyches contains and even neutralizes much of what is potentially deleterious in the adult-child interaction" (p. 172). The absence or breakdown of such a shield raises the possibility that the primary parent inappropriately discharges libidinal and aggressive drives within the adult–child relationship (as opposed to within an adult–adult relationship), contributing to unmodulated libidinal and aggressive tensions in the child. This view echoes Britton’s (1989) contention that it might be the joint mental presence of both parents that contributes to affect regulation, as part of the development of a more refined psychic apparatus.

In their research with violent patients, Fonagy and Target (1995) found a compromised capacity to mentalize, arising, they argue, from the lack of an internalized, benevolent paternal object to facilitate the development of a theory of mind. In keeping with Fonagy and Target, Sugarman (2003) suggests that it is the role of the father, in aiding the development of a capacity to mentalize, that “is important in helping the child move from action to symbolisation as a means of experiencing, modulating and expressing emotion” (p. 777). For these theorists, it is enablement of symbolization (the second function) that is significant, rather than the direct modulation of aggression, as suggested by Herzog (1980, 1982). In either case, it is the presence of a paternal or third (not necessarily gendered) object that is implicated.

**Function 4. Provision of Psychic Safety**

Several authors have referred to the paternal object as the one who is potentially helpful in keeping the infant’s world stable and safe by acting as a receptacle for the child’s negative affect dispositions towards the mother (Lebovici & Diatkine, 1954; Greenspan, 1982; Davids, 2002). This displacement protects the mother–infant relationship from the infant’s
hostility, allowing for maintenance and consolidation of the infant's relationship with a dependable, benign object.

Winnicott (1987) suggested that it is the mother, with whom the infant associates "softness, sweetness," who he or she comes to know initially. On the other hand, the "stern" qualities of the mother—often evidenced in breastfeeding punctuality—accumulate in the infant's mind as "not essentially part of her" (p. 114), only to be associated with the father when he makes his appearance in the infant's psyche. Thus, the father might be thought of as an ally who assists in protecting the mother from the infant's destructive phantasies, "which the father sometimes is able to carry instead of the mother" (Minsky, 1999, p. 138). Without the help of this projection figure, the infant is trapped in a dyad with a seemingly omnipotent, at times depriving, mother who risks becoming even more frightening in response to the child's hostile projections (Lebovici, 1982). A "fresh parent, with a fresh mind" (Davids, 2002, p. 77) can offer the infant sanctuary from the tumultuous mother-infant dyad, absorbing the most aggressive projective identifications that characterize early psychic life, facilitating the retention and rediscovery of a benign, need-meeting figure. Winnicott (1987) appeared to appreciate the importance of this function when he noted that with two parents "one parent can be left to remain loving while the other is being hated" and that this "has a stabilizing influence" (p. 114) for the infant.

Diamond (2009) makes specific reference to this phenomenon in the context of the little boy's gender identity discovery. He suggests that a father who can bear the little boy's projections around sexual desire for the mother and can metabolize his son's consequent hatred for him, allows for a nondefensive, nonhostile disengagement from the mother. This, Diamond (2009) suggests, leads to a healthy, fluid masculine gender identity, which may allow for greater incorporation of relationally oriented and nurturing qualities.

Although Diamond (2009) suggests the paternal figure needs to be male in the context of Oedipality, the phrasing used by both Winnicott (1987) and Davids (2002) bears comment. Neither of these theorists refers to the sexed or gendered nature of the recipient of the infant's destructive impulses as being essential in protecting the psychic safety of the mother-infant dyad (although they may refer to the function being performed by "the father"). It is a fresh parent—an "other" who is of significance to the child—who is needed to enable such (paternal) functioning, not necessarily the father nor a male person. The apparent difference in emphasis
may arise from the fact that Winnicott and Davids appear to be referring to an earlier period of development than Diamond, and also from the fact that Diamond is specifically theorizing the development of the male child. An interesting question then arises as to whether, in the *Zeitgeist* of gender as “soft assembly” (Harris, 1995), the paternal figure posited by Diamond (2009) has necessarily to be male. If one draws on Ogden’s (1989) idea of the father-in-the-mother, and extends this somewhat into entertaining the idea of the masculine in the female, it seems that it is some expression of masculinity rather than maleness per se that is required. Diamond (2009) himself appears willing to entertain this view in his statement that, although he has framed these Oedipal issue in terms of heterosexual couples, “these triadic parenting issues also pertain to homosexual couples” (p. 35).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the authors contend that what is often referred to in the psychoanalytic literature as the paternal function may be best understood as a set of functions consisting of at least four identifiable, interrelated dimensions: a separating function in relation to the early symbiotic relationship between mother and infant; a thinking capacity stimulating function via the introduction of experiences of triangulation and linking; a facilitation of affect regulating and frustration tolerance function; and a safety-promoting function with regard to becoming the recipient of the infant’s hostile feelings in place of the mother or “good object.” All of these functions are arguably necessary to the formation of a healthy and mature psyche. It seems vital that understanding the constitutive nature of the paternal function, and how it may be operationalized in child development and in clinical practice, continues to be refined.

From the elaborated discussion of the four identified facets, it is apparent that different authors emphasize different properties of the paternal function/functionary to promote the kind of development we have elaborated. It is apparent that in almost every instance, it is the infant’s apperception of a third party or not-mother that is most significant to psychic development. In addition, in relation to several of the functions, it is also important that the baby appreciates that there is some kind of bond or attachment relationship between the mother and this other, exclusive of the infant. These aspects of the paternal functionary do not appear to be necessarily gendered. However, there may well be nuanced, but nones-
sential differences in the performance of these functions by differently gendered persons.

The conflation of social and biological aspects of identity in much of the psychoanalytic literature has led to a situation in which roles and functions become conventionally assigned to persons of a particular sex and/or gender. Within the literature, the pronoun “he” is invariably used in referring to the paternal functionary, who is also most often viewed as synonymous with the father. In examining the paternal function through a more gender-critical lens, it is evident that the functions associated with this construct can be thought of more broadly than as those functions assumed to be performed by a father. If one entertains the possibility that in large measure the paternal function/s can be performed by a nongendered third, then the problem of terminology becomes evident and it could be argued that reference to “the triadic function” or the “function of the not-mother” might be more apt. However, given that the term “paternal function” has a currency in psychoanalytic theory and is usefully distinguishable from “maternal function” (recognized as encompassing a different set of attributes or tasks), it seems necessary to become reconciled to the employment of the adjective “paternal,” even if with some caution. A further implication of the discussion is that the relationship between the literature on the paternal function, and the literature on what is known as the “third” or “thirdness,” needs more careful elaboration as there appears to be considerable overlap in theorization of these two sets of constructs. Further interrogation of this link is beyond the scope of this article, however.

Although the discussion has focused upon the pre-Oedipal period of development, it is acknowledged that the provision of both paternal and maternal functions plays an important role in subsequent development across the lifespan, as do patterns of both fathering and mothering. It is possible that the gender of those performing paternal-type functions becomes more germane in later development when gender and sexual identity become more firmly consolidated. In part, however, we consider it important that it is precisely the likelihood that the gendered and sexed identity of early caretaking figures is less significant to development than was previously assumed. The credibility of this thesis, along with a growing body of psychoanalytic literature, suggests that the redefinition of gender, and the emergence of alternative family structures, opens up increasing possibilities for (re)theorizing aspects of development and identity.

It is hoped that the critical discussion of the paternal function in this
article will promote further debate and theoretical and clinical exploration. For example, it will be helpful to conduct more empirical studies into contexts of child development in which the paternal function may be provided by someone other than a father. Equally, it will be important to think carefully about what a more refined awareness of the paternal function might contribute to clinical practice and to document case material that illustrates the potential benefits of a more sophisticated understanding. We intend to write a subsequent article that brings alive, in the therapy space, the theoretical discussion touched on here, and its implications for formulating case material and observing transference/countertransference dynamics. There has been some initial exploration of the importance of foregrounding paternal functions as part of therapeutic technique (Seinfeld, 1993); however, it is evident that there is room for further study to emerge in this regard.

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