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Jack – an observation of a baby with adolescent parents

Lyndsay Thomas*

This paper describes a baby born to adolescent parents. It underlines the importance for adolescent parents to have a supportive network and good internalised parents of their own in order for them to parent successfully whilst transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. It illustrates how initially the parents relied heavily on their extended families, specifically the mother's relationship with her own mother, to support them in order for them to contain their baby's anxieties. This enabled them to parent Jack, in turn allowing him to internalise them. Separateness from the extended families allowed the adolescents to develop as parents. Losses, including dad's departure for a period of time, fostered mother and baby's exclusive relationship. However, when the family was reunited and moved into their own home, two firmly became three.

Keywords: container-contained; projection; Oedipal feelings; loss; triangular space; adolescent parents

Introduction

This is an account about a baby whom I shall refer to as Jack, born to adolescent parents. I shall explore aspects of his development and consider how these were affected by his parents' youth and their struggle to make the transition to adulthood. I will illustrate how their family initially supported the parents and discuss how this containment allowed them to parent while they struggled to maintain their own relationship. Jack's mother, Sarah, was seventeen years old and was a secretary and his father, Michael, who was also seventeen, was a bricklayer. They had been in a relationship for four years and whilst Jack was not planned, mum said they were looking forward to parenthood and both their families had been very supportive. They were a white working class family living in the north of England at the mother's parents' house. This is where the observations took place. Also living at the house were mum's three sisters.

When I arrived for the initial observation I was met by grandmother, Carol, who welcomed me into the living room. She introduced me to very youthful

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looking mum and dad. Also present at the observation were three of mum's sisters. I was introduced to Jack who was securely wrapped up in a blanket and placed in the centre of a beanbag. He was a bonny baby with lashings of blonde hair. He appeared completely at ease even with all the commotion going on around him.

Jack at 5 weeks

Mum attentively picked him up and held him close. Carol justified this and said this was his favourite way to be held. Jack stopped crying immediately. Mum gently stroked Jack's face and he responded by gazing into her eyes and rocking gently. Dad handed her the bottle and she gently placed it in Jack's anticipating mouth and he eagerly began to drink. He only managed for a couple of minutes and then began to squirm and screw up his face. A look of guilt and anxiety enveloped mum's face. Carol said it might be wind. Mum sat Jack up, winded him and then gave him a huge cuddle. Dad put his arm around mum and she smiled. In turn, I felt comfortable. Mum tenderly rocked Jack in her arms and he began to calm down.

My first impressions of mum and dad were that they were very containing for Jack. Mum appeared to be able to contain Jack, and in times of mum's own anxiety she was able to use Carol as a container. Bion (1962/1984) described a model of containment as a mother being stirred up by her baby's sense of falling apart. As the baby does not yet have the mental space to contain his own anxieties the mother is able to digest what is happening to her baby and hold him together by containing him. Bion extended this idea by describing a dynamic model, which he called 'container-contained'. One of the elements of this model in order for containment of the baby to work successfully is that the mother herself needs to feel contained by external sources.

As soon as Jack began to whimper mum was able to pick Jack up and contain his anxieties. Carol thoughtfully commented on how mum held the baby and mother appeared to gain confidence.

When mum began to feed Jack he took the bottle eagerly. However, after a few moments he became agitated and upset. Mum looked guilty and worried and I thought this was related to anxiety projected into her. Upon reflection, I thought about the struggle to be an adolescent and a parent at the same time, and wondered if she felt she was not good enough. Carol reassured mum that it was wind and I felt this contained mum's anxieties. This in turn enabled mum to take in Jack's anxiety and cradle him closely. He then was able to take the bottle again. Additionally and intuitively dad put his arm around mum, looking after her at this potentially painful time.

I observed mum and dad having the capacity to enjoy their son, and mum and Jack's deeply connected states of mind as she provided for his needs. Carol's containing role to mum and dad was paramount during this time. But when Jack was two-and-a-half months old, Carol and her husband went on holiday for two weeks and the new family had some independence. This made me think of the separateness needed for the baby to develop. During this time mum and dad

utilised each other and appeared to be managing Jack successfully. When Carol got back from holiday she continued to act as a container, yet she allowed for separateness. On several occasions I observed mum politely refusing help of Carol. This mum was becoming more and more capable of exploring her own internal mother. Observations notably changed after this stint of independence, and mum and dad's parenting appeared to grow in confidence.

Loss and separation

When Jack was three months old I was observing a warm interaction when the phone rang for mum. She appeared annoyed by this interruption and handed Jack to Jemma, his aunt. He immediately began to sob and could not be consoled.

Jack at 3 months

Where was Mum I wondered? I felt anxious. Dad then walked through the door and over to Jack and gently stroked him on the head. 'Hey beautiful', he said. Jemma handed Jack to dad. Dad kissed his cheek. 'Why you crying baby? Daddy's here.' Dad smiled and they gazed into each other's eyes. Mum walked through the door, a dinner plate in each hand. She appeared puzzled as she looked at dad and Jack. 'Hi babe', she said to dad. Dad placed Jack on his beanbag. Mum stroked Jack's forehead and sat in between dad and me. Jack lay looking at his mother and father.

I began to realise I was observing a baby who could not tolerate being parted from mum. I deeply felt mum and Jack's projections of anxiety at this separation. As soon as dad entered Jack was absolutely thrilled and I felt this projecting into everyone. I sensed Jack was felt to be held together (Bick, 1968) by dad, or at least unconsciously by a good object. I thought about the sensitive qualities dad had and the great potential he seemed to have to be a good father. When mum walked in she looked puzzled as she noticed Jack's and dad's close relationship. At the same time I felt a surge of jealousy and left out of this beautiful and intimate dyad and thought about it in terms of Britton's (1989) thoughts about triangular space. Upon reflection I considered my own struggles of observing and being left out of this two-ness and wondered if these feelings were projected into me from mum. I thought about Waddell's (1998) description of how in late adolescence Oedipal feelings are re-examined and experienced and wondered if mum was re-experiencing jealous Oedipal feelings in relation to dad and Jack. As she placed herself between dad and me, I saw how hard it must be for mum to watch Jack with dad, and also how she felt about me as an observer.

When Jack was five-and-a-half months old a great separation occurred. Dad moved out to live back with his parents, however Sarah and Michael remained a couple. This might have occurred because of the stress of parenthood and their dyadic relationship becoming triadic. Raphael-Leff (2002) discusses the consequences of partners becoming parents often leading to a weakening of

the sexual and emotional relationship. Is this even more difficult for adolescent parents?

This is the first observation where dad was not present:

Jack at 5½ months

Mum unzipped his suit and smoothly pulled out his limbs. Jack frowned slightly. The unveiling revealed a little boy dressed in green combats and t-shirt. This made me feel slightly anxious. Mum lovingly picked Jack up. 'Are you hungry baby?' Jack giggled. She placed him in the bouncy chair and it began to vibrate gently and play ocean sounds. She asked if he was excited about his 'roast dinner'. She then picked up a kangaroo toy waving it in front of his face. He immediately grabbed it with both hands. He held it in front of his face cooing. Mum kissed Jack on the forehead and left the room. Jack's gaze followed as she disappeared. I suddenly felt vulnerable. He continued to look at the doorway with an anxious look on his face. He then looked at the kangaroo. Jack started to rock gently to the rhythm of the music of the chair. He began to put his tongue in and out of his mouth and became engrossed in this. He suddenly jumped as the door squeaked open and looked up. He flapped his arms excitedly.

I thought about why I experienced anxiety when mum unzipped Jack's suit. Jack frowned at this exposure. I wondered if this unzipping led to a feeling of loss for Jack, reviving his feelings of losing his dad, as if he was projecting this feeling into me. This unzipping additionally illustrated mum revealing Jack as a toddler. Was Jack no longer the phantasy baby she dreamed of? I wondered if his physical development had significant meaning for her since things had changed and dad had left.

When mum left the room Jack initially appeared anxious. Jack was observed to follow his mum with his eyes right until the last minute as she left the room. He appeared anxious at this separation until he looked at his kangaroo. Jack then appeared to use his kangaroo to help him get through this anxiety as a transitional object to help him cope with the loss of mum. Winnicott (1953) described a transitional object as a familiar external object an infant uses in times of his mother's absence to feel contained. This is dependent on the infant having already internalised his mother successfully. Additionally, Jack appeared to use muscular movements of his mouth and the vibration and music of his chair to try and hold himself together to cope with the separation. Bick (1968) described this as 'second skin formation' and his defences appeared to save him from falling apart. Jack seemed to have dad in mind as when mum returned Jack was excitedly flapping and I wondered if he thought it might be his dad coming in. I had not observed Jack to use defence mechanisms such as these before his father left.

After dad left, separation from mum became more and more important for Jack and he seemed to rely on his defence mechanisms heavily. Jack is seven months old. Dad has called mum into another room:

Jack at 7 months

Jack's eyes followed her out of the room. He then stared at me with an intense look. He manoeuvred his hand around his kangaroo and picked it up looking at it. Jack flapped his arms and appeared to let go and the kangaroo fell behind his head out of sight. Anxiety shrouded his face. He looked at his empty hand and started screaming. Dad ran into the room shortly followed by mum. Dad held Jack high in the air above his head and blew on his tummy. This delighted Jack as he let out a bursting high-pitched sound of joy 'Da da da da'. He handed Jack to mum facing her. He touched her face with both hands exploring her cheeks. Dad then said he had to go, kissed mum and Jack on their cheeks and left. Jack remained gazing at his mum. Mum then turned to me and asked if I had heard Jack saying 'dada'? She went quiet for a minute looking past Jack. Jack continued to touch her face, trying to look in her eyes. He then stroked her gently in her face.

This observation revealed that Jack was finding separation from mum more difficult; even with his defences in place he additionally looked to the observer for containment. When this failed he turned to his transitional object. However, when Jack dropped his kangaroo he found it even more difficult to keep his mum in mind and fell apart. Luckily dad entered the room and picked Jack up and he was reunited with mum.

Mum appeared sad at dad's departure and I felt she was possibly a little jealous as she asked me if I had heard Jack saying 'dada'. She appeared preoccupied by these feelings of sadness and looked past Jack. I felt extremely sad at this moment. I wondered if mum held some resentment of Jack as the reason for dad leaving home? However, Jack appeared to pick up on her feelings of sadness and attempted to console her by touching her face and trying to engage her. I began to feel better and thought about how he had learnt these intimate gestures through interactions with mum.

Two become three

When Jack was eight months old, mum, dad and Jack moved into a house of their own. Though they had remained as a couple, over the past few months they had not felt like a couple. They now had made a transition from depending on their extended families to living independently as adults. Jack had experienced some painful separations and changes but now things seemed to settle. Jack had regained his dad, but he had lost the ever-busy extended family and the exclusive relationship with his mum. Two now had firmly become three for Jack.

The following observations illustrate how the family struggled as they again moved from a dyadic to a triadic relationship. Continuing observations illustrated that Jack's world could change suddenly for him and his contented state could rapidly change into an un-integrated one. The next extract is from when Jack was 11 months old. He and mum were sharing an intimate interaction of touching each other:

Jack at 11 months

I suddenly felt he was becoming over excited and he sneezed. Jack froze. His grin turned into confusion. His eyes then caught mine, adding to the confusion, as if he hadn't realised I was there. I felt upset that my presence had upset Jack. He scrunched up his eyes and began to cry deep, anxious cries of horribleness. His arms stiffened and clenched. Mum lovingly scooped up Jack and stood up with him. She held him close to her chest facing Jack away from me. I felt relief that I didn't have to look at him. She smiled at me and then comforted Jack, stroking his back. 'Did the big sneeze scare you Jack?' Jack's arms started to relax and his cries turned to sniffles.

This illustrated how wonderful experiences could suddenly change for Jack. This appeared to be a new development for the way Jack coped emotionally. In this observation Jack's over-excitement seemed to build up in him and then his sneeze appeared catastrophic, as if his whole world had collapsed. I thought perhaps this was how Jack had felt about his dad's departure. This, coupled with a sudden new change of being reunited with dad as well as living independently as a family away from extended family, must have been confusing for Jack. I felt confused as an observer, for I did not know what to expect from one week to the next.

The following observation is from when Jack was 13 1/2 months old. The family had settled down in their house and were enjoying being a family. However Jack appeared to be struggling sharing his relationship with mum. This observation was when dad had just entered the house after being out all day.

Jack at 13½ months

Jack stood on mum's knees facing dad. He touched dad's forehead with his left hand and stroked down his cheek. He explored his dad's nose with both hands, narrating his exploration with high-pitched 'ahs'. Mum and dad both laughed. Dad and mum began conversing. Jack continued to play with his dad's stubble whilst looking at his mum. Mum obligingly smiled at Jack and continued her conversation. Jack began to jig and talk louder 'abba ahh'. Dad acknowledged his son's input into the conversation, 'Have you had a nice time at Nanny's?' Jack giggled and touched his dad's ears. Dad continued to talk to mum and Jack suddenly hit his dad in the face. 'Oh, Jack, that's naughty', mum said and gently put him on the floor. Jack's face scrunched and he began to cry. As dad got up so did mum, saying she needed to get Jack's bottle. Jack, still whimpering, followed his mum and dad out of the room with his eyes. Mum closed the door.

In this interaction Jack appeared to be centre of attention and seemed to be enjoying this. Jack was sitting on mum's lap and intimately exploring dad's face. He appeared to be mirroring the way mum touched and interacted with him. I wondered if this made Jack think about his exclusive relationship with his mum?

However, as soon as Jack observed dad and mum having a relationship, Jack could not bear it and showed he wanted dad out of the way by hitting him in the

face. Perhaps Jack's previous separation from dad and exclusivity with mum added to the feeling that Jack wanted to possess mum all to himself.

Jack had already expressed his hatred and jealousy towards dad by hitting him. The manner in which they completely excluded him by walking out together, shutting the door and leaving him completely alone had now verified his anxieties about dad taking possession of mum. I wondered how Jack perceived a couple to be with him not in it? Britton (1989) described this as an infant recognising his parent's sexual relationship and struggling to understand it. I wondered if mum and dad felt Jack's jealous Oedipal feelings? I again thought about Waddell's (1998) description of how in late adolescence Oedipal feelings are re-examined and experienced. Jack's feelings seemed to trigger his parents' Oedipal feelings. Had they in this observation excluded Jack in order to keep their exclusive relationship with each other?

This final observation illustrates Jack seeming to try and work out his feelings of exclusion. This extract was after his mum and dad had left together again leaving him alone in the room with me:

Jack threw his beaker forcefully at the door. He looked at me and said 'Ahh abbab'. Unsatisfied with my response he jerkily waved at me 'Abbab abba'. Bored of my benign presence, his eyes began to search the room. He looked at his cup on the floor. He composed himself and pointed at it. He shuffled on his bottom, rocked gently and landed on his arms with his bum in the air. He then awkwardly started to move, slowly perfecting his technique as he crawled closer to the cup. He reached his destination and excitedly grabbed his cup and immediately stuck it in his mouth.

Jack was clearly frustrated at being excluded from mum and dad's relationship. I too felt excluded. I could not believe they had left me alone. I wondered if these were Jack's feelings. He physically expressed these feelings by throwing his cup at the door. He then desperately turned to me for containment. He then appeared to make a hugely significant effort to regain his cup. Jack had to make a tremendous effort to crawl to get his cup that he had just thrown. But through this symbolic play he appeared to have a notion that even if he was separated from an object, he could regain it. These frustrations clearly pushed him developmentally to the limit in his understanding of his mum and dad's relationship.

Mum, dad and Jack continued to live in their house. Jack blossomed emotionally and physically. Mum enjoyed motherhood and she started going back to work part-time. Pines (1988) found that young mothers whose infantile aspects towards their own mothers had not been resolved may act punitively and reject their children. However, for many young mothers who have had a good experience of being mothered themselves, the transition through adolescence, pregnancy, and parenthood can foster psychic growth. I thought about how close Jack's mum was to her own mum and thought that Pines's description was very apt.

Conclusion

As my role as an observer developed, I began to feel strong emotions that often made me feel anxious, and I wondered where these feelings came from. These feelings ranged from containment to intrusion. These emotions were so strong that I learnt to embrace these projections from mum and Jack in order to really try and understand what was happening internally for them.

The initial feeling I felt through the counter-transference was a feeling of containment from both Jack and mum. I considered that Carol acted as a container for mum thus allowing mum to feel contained. This then enabled mum to act as a container for Jack. This continued throughout the first eight months of observation when mum was living at home with her parents. This led me to conceive that this aspect of mum's parenting skills was possibly derived from her relationship with her own mother.

The second strong feeling I felt through counter-transference was intrusion. I often felt intruding when I initially began the observations and then quickly felt contained. Upon reflection I wondered if this was felt in relation to mum. I wondered if mum felt like an intruder as a mother. I wondered if she felt she was a good enough mother for Jack and whether she felt she was too young to be a mother. I felt this in relation to whether I would be a good enough observer, and whether the family liked me. As I felt quickly contained, I wondered if this was perhaps what happened to mum. Did she have fleeting feelings of intrusion, quickly contained by her own mother?

The last feeling I will discuss in terms of counter-transference was exclusion. I believed I felt this from Jack and his parents. I speculated that Jack felt excluded from his mum and dad's relationship, and I felt this deeply on many occasions – to the point where I sometimes dreaded going to the observations for fear of being excluded. However, as I came to grips with the counter-transference I wondered if these were Jack's feelings and felt I understood what he was going through. Similarly, due to his parents re-living Oedipal feelings as adolescents, I felt excluded from their relationship through feelings of actual exclusion that Jack projected into me.

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