

Institute for
Pre- and Perinatal
Education

Karlton
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Umbilical Affect

UMBILICAL AFFECT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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PLACENTAL IMAGERY

The relationship between the placenta, umbilical cord and fetus makes its initial appearance in psychoanalytic literature with the focus being on the placenta. Dutch analyst **Lietaert Peerbolte**, in a paper published in the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* (1951), was possibly the first psychoanalyst to suggest the existence of placental symbolism in myths and dreams. The moon is one such image he relates to the placenta. Here it becomes a symbol of light, representing nourishment and survival, in the darkness of the womb (pp.598-599). In 1988 **T.W. Dowling** wrote an article entitled '*The Use of Placental Symbols in Assessing Prenatal Experience*', published in the compilation *Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine* (Eds. P.G. Fedor-Freybergh & M.L. Vanessa Vogel). In this he focussed on the tree as a placental image.

There are a number of other analysts who have contributed to possible sources of placental imagery. Another source of reflection on the psychological significance of the placenta was the sense many patients reported of sharing the uterus with a companion. This companion was presumed to be the placenta, which was felt to have an identity of its own, separate from the uterus or foetus. Recent research however indicates that this may more likely be due to the loss of a twin during the prenatal period.

1/ THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF UMBILICAL AFFECT



Illustration based on photo of Lennart Nilsson

I learned about umbilical affect for the first time during a period of concentrated personal research in various workshops with William Emerson. As with much of my personal process, I tended to explore my implicit (non-declarative) prenatal memories in layers. Like an archeologist excavating the relics of an ancient village that had been built atop the remains of an older village, itself resting on top of an even older site, I went digging farther back into my own history. Eventually I traced my umbilical history back to its origins, the final stages of implantation, during which the so-called “connective stalk” or “body stalk” forms. (see page 16)

During the developmental stage called post-implantation (14 to 21 days after conception) I discovered the events that preceded the formation of my umbilical cord. Even before there was a connective stalk, there was an inclination to live: my embodiment momentum. This yearning for life was like a song looking for an instrument to be played upon, and it found the fluids and membranes of nascent cells: stem cells ready to be called into specific form. Induced by primal hunger, sustained by biological mandate, the song and the cells together conjured my body and my cord. The early exchanges of nutrients and waste had already begun.

In its simplest psychological definition, expanded slightly from that of Francis Mott, umbilical affect means: how one has been affected by umbilical experiences, and the ways those experiences have resulted in psychological patterns, especially belief systems and behavior patterns. At the microcosmic level, umbilical affect is delivered via molecules coming from the mother into the child. The ‘molecular exchange’ aspect of fetal dependence starts during implantation and precedes the formation of the cord. These pre-umbilical cord exchanges are rich with emotional and psychological experiences that become encoded at the cellular level and are the seminal origins of umbilical affect.



Photo: Fotolia

2/ UMBILICAL AFFECT CONSTELLATES THROUGH THE CORD

For the purposes of emotional and psychological prenatal research we assume the following consequences from umbilical affect:

- 1/ Umbilical affect begins with the primary border pattern and manifests continuously through all of the subsequent prenatal stages.
- 2/ Umbilical affect persists through birth, after birth until the cord is cut, and can continue after the cord is cut as when there are complications such as umbilical blood monitoring, umbilical hernias, or infections at the umbilical site.
- 3/ Umbilical affect, as a somatic phenomenon, is present in all human beings and is the basis around which several somatic and psychological patterns are organized:
 - a/ Eating habits, including:
 - Food preferences
 - Food sensitivities
 - Eating pace: fast or slow or medium
 - Eating tension: relaxed and spacious, tight and narrow
 - b/ Hunger awareness ("I need to start thinking about eating soon." vs. "I am starving!")
 - c/ Satiation awareness (over-eating, under-eating, eating just right)
 - d/ Metabolic processes such as intestinal peristalsis and other autonomic smooth muscle rhythms, chronic constipation or chronic diarrhea, urine and feces over-retention
 - e/ Other metabolic rhythms (i.e.: individual cells have their own forms of digestion that are influenced by umbilical affect).
 - f/ Weight tendencies
 - g/ Water retention
 - h/ Intimate contact including "taking in" love, joy (setting boundaries)
 - i/ Relationship issues
 - j/ Contact issues
 - k/ Tactile defensivity

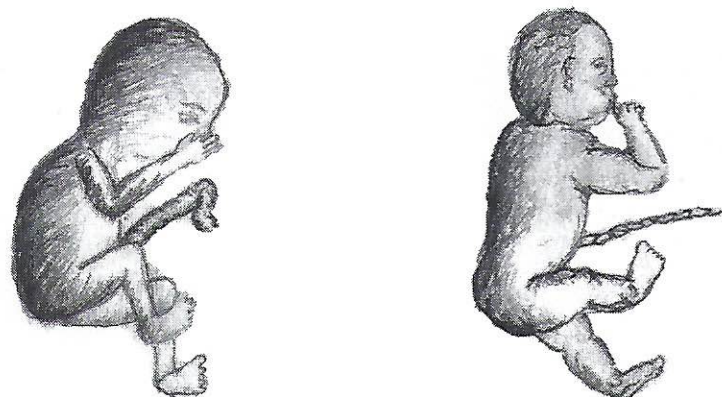
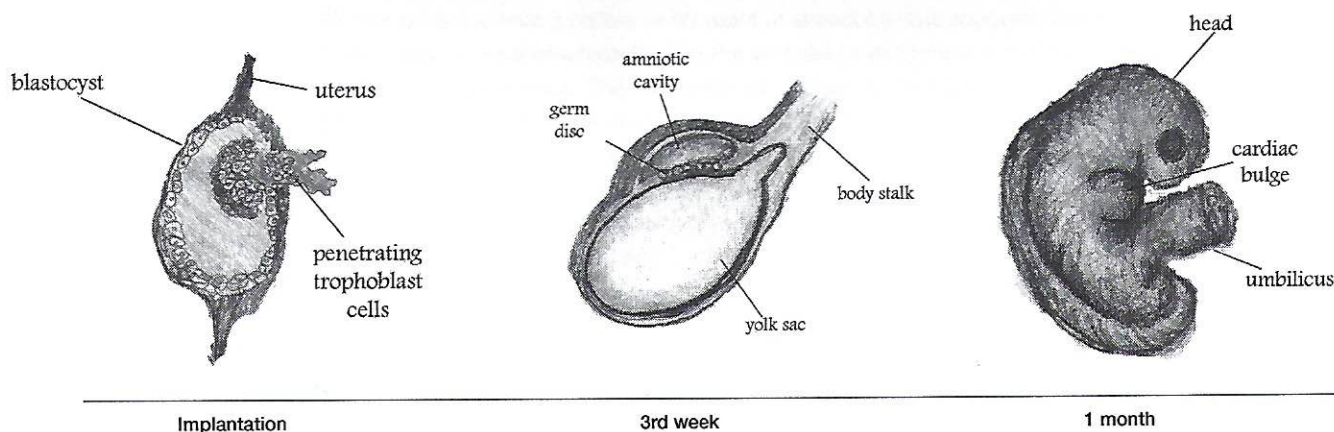
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FIRST TRIMESTER UMBILICAL AFFECT

The younger the prenatate the more vulnerable it is to trauma from umbilical affect. Once the umbilical cord has developed and the heart is pumping, the prenatate is a wide-open window to what ever happens to flow into it from the placenta.

The figure below illustrates (through this scale reference of body size compare to umbilicus size) how much more vulnerable a younger prenatate is to umbilical affect.

Growing at an alarming rate, the early first trimester prenatate vigorously recruits nutrients, and what ever accompanies the nutrients to support the life of millions of cells. Unlike the cells in an adult body, these fetal cells are multiplying exponentially in overall number. Furthermore, and more importantly to the prenatal psychology of the individual, these early cells are differentiating and organizing into body parts, vital organs, and connected interactive systems such as: the brain and nervous system; the heart and circulation system; the digestive system. Among themselves these systems too are connected and interactive.



SIZE OF
UMBILICUS
RELATIVE TO
BODY

4 months

birth