

Babies in Groups: Expanding Imaginations



Ben S. Bradley, Jane Selby, and Matthew Stapleton

Book abstract:

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Babies in Groups examines the consequences for science, for childcare policy, and for adult psychotherapy, of findings that young babies capably enjoy participating in groups. The authors' research on preverbal infants' capacities for group-communication in all-baby trios and quartets opens up new ways of imagining human development as fundamentally group-based. *Babies in Groups* highlights the changes a group-based vision of infancy brings to early child education and care by documenting the transformative consequences of introducing group-based practices into a high-quality childcare service in rural Australia. The book also examines the ways in which the belief that one-to-one infant-adult 'attachments' grounds human development unnecessarily narrows understanding of human potential, and slants scientific research. This examination culminates by showing how ignoring group contexts in many clinical traditions can distort descriptions of what happens in therapy, producing such unintended consequences as 'mother-blaming' for the future problems an infant may experience as she or he grows up.

Keywords: attachment theory; childcare; childcare policy; cultural criticism; dyadic vision; early education; group psychology; human evolution; intersubjectivity; psychotherapy.

Chapter Abstracts

Chapter One: **Changing Stories**

Changing Stories assembles a variety of evidence for a group-based picture of human beginnings. Cross-cultural comparisons remind us that most babies around the world, and through history, have grown up within groups of kith and kin, not home-alone with a mother. Primate research aligns human beings with 'cooperative breeders,' suggesting our brains grew big to deal with the dynamics in complex groups. And anthropologists suggest the first humans lived in tribal bands. Hence, what human babies will most have needed to thrive during human evolution is the capacity effectively to integrate into a group of companions. The chapter suggests three reasons why this conclusion has so far escaped scientific scrutiny: a supposition that babies need to develop certain concepts before they can act socially; an assumption that babies only require a single 'attachment' to get them through their early life; and the idea that infant sociability results from moulding by adults.

Keywords: attachment theory; cooperative breeding; cultural differences; dyadic vision; groupness; human evolution; infant sociability; John Bowlby; social brains; the competent infant.

Chapter Two: **Babies in Threes**

Babies in Threes details findings produced by new methods for recording and describing interactions in all-infant trios. These demonstrate that six- to eight-month-olds have capacities for group membership. The chapter uses a detailed analysis of one trio to show that babies can create their own new meanings in the course of infant-only group-interactions. **Babies in Threes** shows how infants interact with more than one other person at once, combining a multiplicity of resources for multi-directional communication, including: both

peripheral and focal vision; sound-making; sharing rhythms; complex combinations of facial expression; touch; gestures; orienting; and imitation. The chapter analyses one twelve-minute group-interaction in detail, paying particular attention to a ‘rude sign’ flicked by one girl at another. This focal event prompts an examination of the potentials and limits of the interpretive processes whereby observers come to assign meanings to or understand behaviours of infants and adults. All such understandings have specific cultural roots.

Keywords: affiliative behaviour; hermeneutics; infant behavioural capacities; infant groupness; jealousy; meaning-making; means of communication; negotiated interpretation; thick description; two-step case-analysis.

Chapter Three: **This Is Not Happening**

This Is Not Happening shifts from describing infants in all-baby trios to the study of baby-only quartets. In so doing it takes up the challenge of moving beyond familiar cultural scripts which focus on individuals, couples, or ‘jealous’ threesomes. Extended vignettes show baby foursomes feature multi-member conversations, overlapping interpersonal routines, dynamics of linking and attacks on linking, moments of individuation, and cooperative ‘work’ to maintain cohesion, while implicating individual histories. These analyses highlight the inherent difficulties of interpreting the complexity of human agency in groups and the value of ethnographic methods and theory. **This Is Not Happening** also presents statistical evidence of group-level interaction in infant quartets – showing that, for example, how one group-member acts at time Q is significantly influenced by what two or more other group-members were previously doing at time P. The chapter concludes by examining the kinds of theoretical, cultural and emotional challenge infants’ participation in groups presents to the psy-professions.

Keywords: attacks on linking; binocular view; group dynamics; individuation; infant quartets; information overload; proof of groupness; shared behavioural routines; statistical analysis; vignettes.

Chapter Four: **Making Visible Ordinary Groupness**

Making Visible Ordinary Groupness documents what happens when a high quality childcare service adopts a group-based approach to early education. The chapter emphasises how familiar it seems – if given the opportunity – that infants enjoy themselves together, play together, have emotional responses to each other and show awareness of the social complexity which they are a part of. The chapter focuses first on how mealtimes are transformed by educators swapping stressful adult-infant spoon-feeding routines to a relaxed and naturally enjoyed time when infant highchairs are placed in circles of four or five, allowing for social time, for learning from and teaching each other, for curiosity about each other and for exploiting and subverting the routines established at the centre. The chapter describes vignettes illustrating group complexity, how infants can creatively *work* together, as well as illustrating group-facilitative roles for educators and alternative ways of managing infant distress. Conclusions focus on implications for policy.

Keywords: analogical thinking; childcare policy; early education; educator roles; imitation; infants as teachers; infants do work; managing distress; reducing educator workloads; reorganizing meal-times.

Chapter Five: **Prisms and Multiplicities**

Prisms and Multiplicities shows how ignoring group contexts in many traditions of psychotherapy can distort descriptions of what happens in therapy, with serious unintended consequences. For example, identifying mothers alone as the effective ‘environment’ for their babies, makes mothers the fulcrum of mental health and wellbeing, thus ignoring how such culturally-bound childcare arrangements lead to ‘mother-blaming’ for the problems an infant may experience when growing up. The chapter shows how this narrowed vision ignores the workings of effective group-based therapies, sidelines the family dynamics which enfold infants, and denies infants’ subjective complexity. Such blindnesses suggest that the ‘attachment paradigm’ constitutes a self-validating ‘scientific’ community whose group dynamics render it oblivious to its own inadequacies. The strong resonance of attachment narratives in some professional circles invites analysis in terms of rhetoric, not science – as the chapter illustrates. It concludes by advocating approaches to assessment and therapy which honour the complexity of babies’ worlds.

Keywords: attachment-based psychotherapy; family therapy; gate-keeping; groupthink; infants’ subjective complexity; mother-blaming; paradigm hegemony; psychoanalysis; rhetorical power; scientific evidence.

Chapter Six: **Concluding Remarks**

Concluding Remarks reminds readers of the creativity and the power of humans as group members, whether young or old. *Babies in Groups* has undertaken to build hitherto-lacking pathways to connect new-borns with the group-immersed grownup, based on research which shows that the groupness of humans is evident in the first months of life. In this way, the book constructs an account of human beginnings which contrasts with better-known paradigms that assume human social development has an infant-adult couple as its foundation-stone and template. **Concluding Remarks** provides further intellectual and political context for the clash of visions *Babies in Groups* describes by reflecting on debates about childcare which pivoted around the Second World War.

Keywords: 1944 Education Act; deep history; elephant herds; groupness everywhere; John Bowlby; nursery teachers; Sigmund Freud; teams.

Appendix: **Intersubjectivity and Attachment: Theory and Science**

The Appendix provides evidence-rich evaluations of two well-known theories of infant sociability which blinker appreciation of groupness in infants. It first evaluates evidence for claims that babies are born with a capacity for one-to-one mind-reading or ‘innate intersubjectivity’: through pre-speech ‘conversational’ behaviour; a capacity to distinguish people from things; the mirror-role of adults in infant-adult ‘conversations’; and

‘perturbation’ experiments. The available evidence accords better with babies’ orientation towards their worlds being governed by a form of narcissism or ‘primary process’ than by an inborn capacity for mind-reading. Part Two of the appendix deals with the attachment perspective, summarising the evidence which refutes the claim that babies spend their first two years of life constructing an ‘attachment behavioural system’ – with a mother-figure as set-goal – which serves as the foundation for later socio-emotional development. Attachment research is shown to reflect a culture-specific theory of adult caregiving, not a biological theory of infant sociability.

Keywords: affective mirroring; attachment behavioural system; infant conversations; innate intersubjectivity; John Bowlby; mind-reading; narcissism; perturbation experiments; primary processes; theories of caregiving.

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Interest: **First 1000 Days.** We are concerned about basing 0-3 education and care on the inadequate, pseudo-scientific one-to-one infant-adult pedagogy currently enshrined in the EYLF and NQS. A group-based model should be employed.

Summary:

Please find attached the abstracts of the book, *Babies in Groups: Extending Imaginations* – currently ‘in press’ at Oxford University Press (due out 2023). The book is consistent with research showing that the best ECEC experiences for 0-3 year-olds, and their educators, is group-based. Currently the EYLF and the NQS assume one-to-one infant-caregiver ‘attachments’/ relationships should be prioritised in child care and education centres, especially for babies and toddlers. Based on research in regional Australia, this book emphasises how babies thrive together in groups and shows the disadvantages that may flow from an emphasis on ‘attachment theory’, especially given that its scientific grounds are generally over-stated, to the point of falsehood (as we document).

Attachment accompanying: Put *Babies in Groups* (Abstracts) Bradley Selby and Stapleton

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Interest: decades of research knowledge, clinical expertise and practical running of child care centres

Focus: a child's first 1000 days

Summary of concerns:

We attach the abstracts of the book, *Babies in Groups: Extending Imaginations* – currently 'in press' at Oxford University Press (due out 2023). This book is consistent with research showing that the best ECEC experiences for 0-3 year-olds, *and their educators*, are **group-based**. Currently the EYLF and the NQS assume one-to-one infant-caregiver 'attachments' / relationships should be prioritised in child care and education centres, especially for babies and toddlers. This book emphasises how babies thrive together in groups and shows the disadvantages that may flow from an emphasis on 'attachment theory', especially given that its scientific grounds are generally over-stated, to the point of falsehood (as we document).

Attachment accompanying: *Babies in Groups* (Abstracts) Bradley Selby Stapleton