

Thomas Raphael Verny (1936-)

During the twentieth century, Thomas Raphael Verny studied the way that environment affects a developing fetus's character and psychological development. Verny studied the concept of memory before birth and covered both the prenatal and perinatal periods, meaning the time the fetus is in the womb and the weeks immediately before or after birth, respectively. During those times, Verny claimed that patterns of maternal attitudes and experiences, such as affection and stress-related emotions, impact the development of the child. Published in 1981, Verny's book *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* presented novel ideas about how pregnant women's emotional health impacts the psychological, emotional, and physical development of their fetuses, sparking discussion about the importance of maternal emotional health during prenatal development.

Verny was born in Canada in 1936. He attended the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada where he earned his MD in Psychiatry in 1961. At age twenty-five, he published his first scientific article titled "The Present Status of Hypnosis" in which he discussed hypnotherapy, or the use of hypnosis for therapy. In 1965, he began his own private psychiatry practice in Stratford, Canada. In 1974 Verny published his first book, *Inside Groups*, in which he analyzes the social dynamics of different groups and group settings. In the book, Verny provides a guide to group therapy and encounter groups, or groups that meet to gain some sort of psychological benefit. Shortly after publishing that book, Verny began to investigate birth and how the prenatal and perinatal environments affect a fetus's psychology and character.

Research about the effect of a pregnant woman's emotions on her fetus was almost nonexistent before the 1930s but became more prevalent in the 1960s and early 1970s. In July of 1975, Verny published an article titled "Adults Relive the Moment of Birth." Around that time, scientists began reaching a consensus that fetuses could feel, perceive, and react to their environments in the womb, at least during the later stages of development. In his article, Verny outlined the possibility that perinatal experiences, or those experiences occurring within weeks immediately before or after birth, can impact a fetus's character and psychology. For example, Verny claimed that the act of birth may affect a fetus's future behavior. Verny also argued that individuals who had a difficult or complicated birth were more likely to become violent criminals.

In 1982, Verny expanded on the concept of prenatal memories and perinatal development when he published his book, coauthored with John Kelly, *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. John Kelly was a popular historian and science writer who helped write the narrative for their volume. Based on Verny's prior research into prenatal memory and postnatal development, Verny and Kelly wrote *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* as a guide for parents who want to aid their child's development while their child is a developing embryo, a stage called embryogenesis. The book discusses parental affection towards the fetus, the effects of allowing the fetus to hear voices and music, and communication between the fetus and mother. For example, Verny states that the fetus physiologically communicates with its mother by triggering the physical changes in the mother's body that the fetus needs to survive. Additionally, a fetus may communicate with its mother behaviorally by kicking when afraid or distressed. Verny connected such fetal behaviors during embryogenesis to the fetus's character development after birth. He argued that pregnant women's attitudes and experiences have a significant long-term impact on their fetus's psychological development. For example, Verny referenced studies that explored how psychotic illnesses during pregnancy affect offspring. Using those studies, Verny argued that embryos developing inside women with mental illnesses like schizophrenia are more likely to have emotional and physical problems due to the offspring's inability to bond with the mother while in her womb.

In *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, Verny states that stress-related emotions experienced by the pregnant woman throughout pregnancy are physiologically transmitted to the child via stress hormones that travel through the pregnant woman's bloodstream. Because the fetus shares the pregnant woman's blood supply, the fetus, according to Verny, experiences the same stressed state. The fetus may be affected by maternal behavior as well and may be made more aware of the pregnant woman's presence through some of her actions, such as her speaking or touching her stomach. However, Verny explains that not every stress or worry experienced by the pregnant woman will affect the child. Rather, he argues for the importance of patterns of emotions and behaviors throughout pregnancy. He claims that a single experience is not impactful, but a repeated series of emotions and behaviors makes a difference. Verny also contends that just as a stressful environment in the womb may affect the fetus, so may a calm and serene environment. Finally, Verny argues that a pregnant woman's happiness, gentleness, and calmness during pregnancy, birth, and the time shortly after birth may dispose the child to be happier and more balanced throughout life. *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* was sold in over twenty-seven countries.

In 1983, Verny founded the Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Association of North America, which is registered as a California public-benefit educational corporation as of 2018. Verny was president of the association for the first eight years. In 1986, he founded the *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health*. From 1987 to 1991, Verny published three additional books about parenting before birth where he expanded on his model of prenatal development. In 1994, he compiled a series of short stories about the relationships of individuals with their fathers and grandfathers and published it in an anthology titled *Gifts of our Fathers*. In 1998, Verny worked with his wife who is a music producer, Sandra Collier, to create *LOVE CHORDS*, a compilation of classical music aimed at aiding fetal development during pregnancy.

Verny also continued to research new areas in how pre- and perinatal environments affect children's development. In 1999, he published "The Effects of Domestic Abuse on the Unborn Child" in which he associates violence and abuse towards a pregnant woman with psychological, emotional, and physical developmental issues in that woman's child. In 2002, he published *Tomorrow's Baby: The Art and Science of Parenting from Conception through Infancy*, which explores similar ideas as the *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* and aims to serve as a hands-on guide to a healthy pregnancy for parents. *Tomorrow's Baby: The Art and Science of Parenting from Conception through Infancy* is also the second most cited of Verny's works as of 2018, following *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. In 2004, he published "The Nature of Stress due to terrorism on Pregnant Women and their Offspring" in which he analyzed how terrorism-related stressors faced by pregnant women affect the development of their children.

In addition to his research career, Verny also worked as a psychologist and university instructor, teaching subjects related to his field. In 2005, the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute presented Verny with a Doctor of Humane Letters as an honorary degree. In 2014, he published "What Cells Remember: Toward A Unified Field Theory Of Memory" in the *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health*. The article was Verny's first one focused explicitly on cellular memory rather than strictly pre- and peri-natal periods. In 2014, Verny also published a 110-page collection of poems, titled *Cordless*.

Verny's book *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* has been cited almost five hundred times as of 2018. His works have been cited outside of the developmental sciences, and while some authors have called his works paranormal, psychology researcher and professor at the University Institute in Science of Linguistic Mediation of Varese, Italy, Luisella Magani claims that Verny's work remains relevant when discussing prenatal and perinatal development.

Verny retired from clinical practice in 2015 but remains an active member of the Ontario Review Board, a legal tribunal headquartered in Ontario, Canada, that oversees individuals who have been deemed mentally ill by a criminal court. Since his retirement, he has remained the primary editor of the *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health*. As of 2018, Verny lives with his wife, Sandra Collier, in Ontario, Canada.

Sources

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