



Infant Observation

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Final remarks on the psychoanalytic observation of children: origins and recent developments, training, and research, its significance for psychotherapy, and other fields of psychosocial work. Vienna April 19–21st, 2024

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines three principal aims of psychoanalytic infant observation as it has been developed according to the 'Tavistock model' since the 1940s. These are concerned with the personal and professional development of observers; with infant observation as a form of research; and with the therapeutic practice of infant observation. It considers how social differences which have hitherto been somewhat neglected in the psychoanalytic field can be taken into account in infant observation, without loss to its primary purpose which is concerned with understanding the interactions, both conscious and unconscious, of observers, infants and their families.

KEYWORDS

Psychoanalytic infant observation; personal and professional development; social differences

It has been very enjoyable and interesting to be here in Vienna, in rain and shine, and at this estimable university. Professor Wilfried Datler and his team are to be congratulated for organising such an excellent conference, maintaining the role of their department here in sustaining this important centre for Psychoanalytic Infant Observation and its associated training and research practices.

The first thing I would like to say in this closing session is that the most important thing about Infant Observation is Infant Observation itself, as a practice and an experience. I hope that as participants at this Conference you have also been able to hear interesting and moving presentations of Infant Observation sessions. It is one of the most admirable features of the Infant Observation and Work Discussion Conferences here in Vienna that participants have the opportunity on the Friday pre-Conference afternoon to attend actual Infant Observation presentations (or, at the earlier Conference, two Work Discussion presentations). The

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delegates are divided into groups who can listen to presentations of observation sessions by observers, then to reflections on them by experienced seminar leaders, and they too can participate in discussion of the material. I have been fortunate to have been able to listen to excellent presentations of this kind, both of Infant Observation and Young Child Observation sessions.

I would like to differentiate between the different uses to which Infant Observation has been put, as it has developed over the many years since the 'Tavistock' version of it was initiated by Esther Bick. I refer to three in particular.

1. Infant Observation as an experience of professional and personal development

It is important to recognise that Psychoanalytic Infant Observation began and has had as its main purpose, as an experience of professional formation for observers. The same is the case for Young Child Observation. (Infant Observation is of babies and toddlers from 0 to 2 years and Young Child Observation from 2 to 5 years.)

Infant Observation has been found to be an extremely good initial experience of a psychoanalytic way of thinking and feeling, not least for students who had had no previous experience of their own personal psychotherapy or psychoanalysis as is sometimes the case. Through Infant and Young Child Observation, learning about psychoanalysis takes place within and through thinking about relationships, between an infant and its mother and other family members, between the observer himself or herself and the adult family members, and between the observer and the baby or young child. Observers have found themselves making observations that they found could be given meaning through their connections with psychoanalytical concepts and even with theories through which concepts become causally connected. This is a form of learning which takes place 'in feeling' as well as in thought.

Of course, students also learned the 'disciplines' of remembering and writing-up what they have observed, for the weekly seminars which accompanied their observations. The focus on the particular phenomena, both 'internal' and 'external' which arise in Infant Observation, and the requirement to record them as fully and accurately as possible, has given rise to a distinctively 'empiricist' form of learning. Consistent with broader English scientific traditions, and following through into its psychoanalytic clinical method, is the belief that observed facts should come first, and theoretical interpretations about them, second. Infant Observation is one of the first psychoanalytic settings in which this approach to practice is learned by students.

Infant Observation gives rise to sometimes intense feelings and states of mind in the observers, and learning to be aware of these, and to develop some understanding of them, is an essential element of the observational experience and task. It is through such awareness of the observer's own

states of mind and feeling, and those of the infant and mother who are most often the main objects (or rather subjects) being observed, that understanding of unconscious mental processes begins. The observer is required to remain relatively passive in the observation setting. Her task is to observe and understand what is happening, in both 'external' and 'internal' dimensions of the setting. She is not to act or intervene in any purposeful way, other than to maintain the particular kind of relationship with the observed family on which Infant Observation depends.

Some recent discussions of the psychoanalytic work of Wilfred Bion has given emphasis to the later focus of his work on states of 'being' rather than only of 'knowing', even though Bion's contribution to the theory of thinking (2003) has been one of his principal contributions to psychoanalysis. The value of Infant Observation in the formation of psychoanalytic practitioners depends on it being a particular experience of 'being', and not only a means of acquiring certain kinds of knowledge.

One of my connections with Infant Observation, Young Child Observation, and the derived reflective-participative practice of Work Discussion, has been the master's course in Psychoanalytic Studies which has been offered and on which I have taught at the Tavistock for more than 30 years. This two-year part-time course has had three main 'strands' (curriculum units) extending over two years and followed by a term for writing a dissertation. One strand is Psychoanalytical Theory, tracing its development from Freud onwards, broadly within the British Object Relations tradition, through lectures and reading based on its literature. A second strand consists of different fields of application of Psychoanalytic ideas, to fields of culture (such as literature, drama, and fine art) and to psychoanalytic aspects of society. The third (perhaps one should say the first) strand is an experience of weekly Infant or Young Child Observation, conducted on lines closely modelled on the Tavistock's Observation course. I regard this as the most important component of this master's programme. This is because it provides an experience of learning to think psychoanalytically through an experience that engages the whole person of the learner and is not merely cognitive or intellectual. This is an experience of learning in feeling. I should mention that this MA course has no professional or clinical component, although it has been substantially taught by child psychotherapists. Its students come from many fields of work unrelated to the professional mental health. Although it has no professional training component, some students do go on from it to pursue trainings in psychoanalytic psychotherapy with children or with adults.

2. Infant Observation as a method of research

It was mainly when Infant Observation had become established as a valuable form of personal and professional development that it came to be recognised

that its practice was giving rise to new psychoanalytic knowledge and could itself be a method of research. Once papers reporting Infant Observations began to be gathered together in books, and published in the *International Journal of Infant Observation* after its launch in the early 1990s, it became clear that this was a potential field of psychoanalytic research. One can read in *Infant Observation*, articles and reviews of what has been discovered through naturalistic observation concerning the varieties of infants' and their parents' experience, and those of their observers.

Elements of discovery were present from the beginning of Infant Observation. Esther Bick's paper on the formation of a Psychic Second Skin became a classic research paper as soon as it was published. One of the principal ideas on which Infant Observations have drawn for their understanding has been Bion's idea of containment and its vicissitudes. Infant Observation has been a source of development of this crucial idea. It's been noted by Margaret Rustin that Bion's initial formulation of this idea came close in time to Bick's initiation of the method of Infant Observation, and it seems possible that these developments were related. Bion developed his theory of the relations of container and contained through reflecting on the earliest of mothers and infants, and this was a focus of Infant Observation from its beginning, as well as being central to Melanie Klein's interest as a psychoanalyst of children. Bion had considerable contact with psychoanalysts such as Martha Harris and Donald Meltzer who were strongly committed to Infant Observation as a practice.

Although valuable research and discovery has taken place in the context of Infant Observation, I think it should be recognised that clinical practice has been a more productive location for psychoanalytic research than Infant Observation. The interactive character of clinical practice provides more scope than relatively passive observation for the formulation and testing of new theoretical insights. A second reason is that most Infant Observations are undertaken by individuals with little psychoanalytical experience, whereas new psychoanalytic discoveries are most often made by experienced clinicians. While there is every reason to develop the knowledge-generating potential of Infant Observation, it is as well to recognise that it has some limitations as a method of research.

3. Therapeutic Infant Observation

As Infant Observational practice developed, on what has become a large scale, it became recognised that the presence of an observer had meaning and consequences for the families being observed. These were found mostly to be benign. Mothers often enjoyed an observer's regular weekly visits, and her usually appreciative interest in her baby and its development. At the Tavistock, the normal practice was to conduct observations of infants about whose well-being there were no known reasons for concern. There was almost an

element of self-selection among families who agreed to accept an observer for a weekly observation over a period of two years. These families were after all being asked to provide an experience of learning for a student – what one can think of as a gift to them – and this suggests that many such families felt secure enough in themselves to be generous in this way.

Where difficulties do arise in families, it is the responsibility of experienced seminar leaders to take account of such situations and consider an appropriate form of response. This might mean recognising that a particular observation should not continue, or perhaps that there should be a different kind of link made with the family. In any case, inexperienced observers are not intended to be left to cope as best they can with an unsustainable or harmful setting.

Although difficulties of this kind have inevitably occurred from time to time in the Tavistock's observational practice, it seems to me striking that there have been so few reported instances of severe difficulties or harm, given the very large number of Infant Observations that have place over so many decades. One paper given at this Conference suggests that Infant Observations might be a source of harm, and this is a possibility to be concerned about (see Ludwig-Körner, this issue). It was said at the Conference that at the Tavistock considerable care over these matters was taken. How issues of vulnerability and risk are in practice monitored is something to reflect upon (see Klauber, this issue).

An important means by which difficulties of this kind have been responded to at the Tavistock is the development of a practice of the 'therapeutic observation'. This was introduced in France, and is undertaken by already experienced infant observers who receive individual specialist supervision. Margaret Rustin has described this practice and the Watch Me Play intervention developed by Jennifer Wakelyn from it, in her Final Remarks, and therefore, I will say no more about it here.

4. Three different approaches to Infant Observation

I think it is desirable, however, to recognise the differences between these three functions of Infant Observation, those of supporting Professional Formation and Personal Development; of Psychoanalytic Research making use of Observation; and of Observation undertaken for a therapeutic purpose. These three activities and functions should not become confused or muddled up with one another. It is important that the purposes of Infant Observation undertaken 'for its own sake' as a form of learning is not compromised by prematurely imposing a research agenda upon it, or by allowing an inexperienced infant observer to be drawn into remedial interventions which they are not ready to undertake. It is necessary to recognise and respect these differences and boundaries.

We have found at the Tavistock that good research outputs have come from both Observational and Clinical work, when these have been undertaken not

as 'normal' infant observational and clinical practices; in order to protect the essence of both kinds of work what we have done is to separate the initial observational or clinical practice from a later phase in which their findings become the materials for research, for investigation of data which has been recorded in observational or detailed clinical session records during the original work. This means that the full attention of observers or therapists is given to the primary experience of their subjects and is not invaded by premature anxieties about what their research findings may be. One excellent doctoral research dissertation by a child psychotherapist (Wendy Shallcross) was the pre-clinical Infant Observation which she had conducted 15 years previously! It was remarkable how her full written record came to life for her again so many years later. Her line-by-line analysis of the observations and her recall of her original experience gave rise to new discoveries. Her chapter 'A single case of infant observation and what it reveals about loss and recover in infancy' in M.E. and M.J. Rustin (eds) *New Discoveries in Child Psychotherapy*, Routledge 2019, pp 31–56, describes her research.

5. The question of differences

In the early days of Infant Observation in London, the population of observers and families being observed was both few in number and fairly alike in its social composition. Infants to observe were then frequently found from circles close to the psychoanalytic community.

But now, with the great increase in the number of observation courses and the changed demographics of large cities in Britain and Europe, the social context is different. Families who present for psychotherapy in State-funded or voluntary sector clinics, and students who apply to study on psychoanalytic courses, are now ethnically and in other ways more diverse than they used to be. In the London boroughs surrounding the Tavistock, a majority or large minority of the population is of ethnic minority origin. (The composition of populations differs in districts away from the inner city.)

A question is, what difference should these changes in the composition of populations, of patients, families observed, and professional trainees make to Infant Observational practice, and to psychoanalytic education more generally? Matthew Chuard, who now has a leading role in the Tavistock's portfolio of pre-clinical Observation Course and clinical programmes, has recommended that these programmes should be informed by a knowledge and understanding of social differences. He proposes especially that staff and student members of these courses should reflect on their own specific social and cultural identities, in relation to their race, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, sexuality generation, and other such variables. He has devised a diagrammatical Social Matrix on which different aspects of individuals' identity can be mapped. The Black Lives Matter social movement, which emerged in the USA and the UK following

the murder by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, has influenced these concerns.

It is true that most psychoanalytic trainings have hitherto given little attention to phenomena of social difference, and there has been little in psychoanalytic educational programmes to inform and guide understanding of these. I believe that psychoanalytic education has been unduly narrow in its scope (although some analysts seem to have transcended these limitations) and should be broadened to equip students with a more structured understanding of these dimensions of experience. Work Discussion especially requires a sensitivity to the social as well as the psychological and personal dimensions of the practitioner's experience.

I also believe there to be risks in psychoanalytic training programmes to assigning too much emphasis to the phenomena of social differences, and to questions of 'identity' posed in sociological or gendered terms. I remarked informally to Matthew Chuard in this regard, 'Be careful what you wish for'. Assigned differences, for example race, ethnicity, or religion, have on occasion been grounds for imposing inequalities, rather than for redressing them.

Freud had to consider issues of this kind in the early day of psychoanalysis. He saw his new science as part of a universal human enlightenment; he even compared its discoveries with those of Copernicus and Darwin. He evoked the literature of Shakespeare and Goethe as more than equal to psychoanalysis in their understanding of human experience. There was in his view, one and not several human species. He and his colleagues thought processes of 'identification' were fundamental to the development of personalities, but they scarcely made use in their writing of the idea of 'identity', which has become so omnipresent today. This was in part no doubt a strategic choice on Freud's part – he wished psychoanalysis to be seen as a universal science of humanity, not a 'Jewish science', although many of his original circle were Jewish. But this choice also reflected his own universalist humanism. I think there is much to be said for the idea that human beings share much of their essential nature. Perhaps this is especially so in regard to the needs of infants in their early years, even though different societies will have different arrangements and allocations of roles for meeting these.

The issue is how to make space in psychoanalytic educational programmes for issues of social and cultural difference, without detracting from the need to give primary attention to the core ideas and practices of psychoanalysis.¹

Note

1. Questions concerning the relations between the primary psychoanalytic focus of Infant Observation, and the dimension of social and cultural differences both among observed families and their observers might lend themselves to comparative study of observations undertaken in different national settings. This might be a feasible

undertaking, since infant observations based on the 'Tavistock model' are currently taking place in many countries – France (Larmor Plage); Italy; Austria; China; Taiwan; Iran; Russia; Ukraine, and no doubt many other locations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Michael Rustin is a Professor of Sociology at the University of East London. He has written extensively about psychoanalysis and its social, political, and cultural applications. He is a Visiting Professor at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and an Academic Associate of the British Psychoanalytical Society.

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