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Infant Observation: Opportunities, challenges, threats.

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Keywords.

Psychoanalytic epistemology, emotional experience, knowing, objectivity, application, research methods.

Abstract

This article reflects on the value of the infant observation tradition from the perspective of someone originally trained in scientific psychology and recently ending a four-year period as external examiner for the Masters and Diploma course in Psychoanalytic Observation at the Tavistock clinic. My aim is to convey, from the perspective of an outsider, how I came to appreciate the core insights that I learned from infant observation through my experience of them in a research context; to convey this in such a way as to refresh the experience of its value to those insiders for whom its value may have become commonplace. I explore this through three aspects of my own learning from experience: the value of a form of knowing imbued with emotional depth; of communicating in direct, vital and emotionally redolent language and of reflecting on emotional experience, where necessary with the containment of other minds and supporting external structures. I then discuss the status of infant observation as applied psychoanalysis, suggest a model of dialogue between traditions to modify the notion of (one-way) application of

psychoanalysis. I give some examples of how infant observation, occupying a liminal space between clinical psychoanalysis and various forms of practice that differ from it, provides a model for the use of psychoanalytic concepts in research. The transformed meaning of objectivity from a scientific paradigm to a psychoanalytic paradigm provides a brief example. The article concludes with a brief summary of some threats, opportunities and challenges to infant observation from the perspective of application.

Introduction

Last summer, after four years as external examiner on M7, the Masters and Diploma course in Psychoanalytic Observation, I was preparing myself to make the customary comments at the end of the annual exam board, this being the last time I would have that opportunity and that responsibility. Not for the first time – but this time with particular force – I was moved by the extraordinary character of this educational provision, by its uniqueness within British higher education. As I collected my thoughts and attempted to articulate the idea, the word ‘precious’ came to mind, my eyes filled with tears, my voice stumbled. It was an emotional experience, in the common sense meaning of that phrase and also as illuminated by Bion’s ideas.

Those at the Tavistock Clinic who have ensured the course’s survival and evolution over more than fifty years, those who have launched the course elsewhere in the UK and beyond – now partner institutions – demonstrate their recognition of its preciousness by the commitment they show; the extra hours put in on top of the many other demands on their time to accomplish,

for example, the careful, thorough marking of scripts and participation in the thoughtful governance of this complex course. For my part, through reading samples of student scripts at different stages on the course, from different modules and across the range of marks, I began to understand how students were changed by the course (and in what ways some were partially failing in this) in ways that made them better practitioners, as well (I believe) probably in the full range of life's relational encounters. This course provides more of a formation than a training.

I think my expression of the preciousness of infant observation struck a shared chord, at the end of a full day of meetings and another demanding year. The exam board members could perhaps pause to feel the resonances of that word precious, pause to reflect beyond the prosaic character of an exam board day complete with urgent re-readings of tricky scripts, revised spreadsheets pouring out of the printer, staying alert during the reading of long lists of names in two languages so that when a name they know arises, they can keep in mind the student behind the name. It was probably this event that occasioned the invitation to give this plenary talk. In preparation, I could think more about the preciousness of M7 and also of the wider infant observation tradition: what constitutes its particular unique contribution and value.

It is not typical for a Psychology professor with no clinical background or formal training in psychoanalysis to 'get' psychoanalytic observation, to come to know it well enough to be convinced by its value. As teachers of infant

observation know, 'getting the point' (of course there are many points) of psychoanalytic observation does not happen overnight and book learning is insufficient on its own, even though it is the dominant model of learning in academic psychology and in British higher education more generally. Margaret Rustin (1989: 3), characterising the kind of learning involved in infant observation, draws on Bion's 'distinction between "learning about", an intellectual activity, and "learning from experience" (1962). The latter leads to a kind of knowledge akin to the biblical sense of "knowing", being in touch with the core and essence of something or somebody'. She adds, 'this is a form of knowledge imbued with emotional depth'. Observing infants has an emotional impact on observers. As Esther Bick commented nearly fifty years ago, it helped students to 'conceive vividly the infantile experience' (1964 in A. Briggs 2002:37). So as well as learning about infant and child development in the context of family life, students begin to learn about how to learn from their own emotional responses. This is rare in British higher education: 'this form of learning is often displaced in current educational conditions by more impatient methods in which the replication of existing knowledge and the meeting of prescribed "learning objectives" is given priority' (Michael Rustin 2011: 186).

Reading

In the last 30 years, a growth of psychoanalytic publishing has fed this interest, a growth that applies also to infant observation publications. The classic *Closely Observed Infants*¹ appeared in 1989, before which, finding out about the method as an outsider required digging back to Esther Bick's 1964

¹ Lisa Miller, Margaret Rustin, Michael Rustin and Judith Shuttleworth (1989) *Closely Observed Infants*. London: Duckworth.

publication in *The International Journal of Psycho-analysis*. In 1993 the first Tavistock Conference on Infant Observation was organised, the outcome of a decision by child psychotherapists to 'give ourselves the opportunity to explore and review the developments that had taken place in infant observation, the theoretical developments that had arisen from it, and the changes to clinical practice that it had informed' (Reid 1997:x). The second edited volume on infant observation², from which I have just quoted Susan Reid's preface, followed in 1997. In the same year, the *International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications* (to give its full title) was launched, a journal that has thrived for 14 years now, providing a forum and showcase for the method worldwide. Its launch coincided with the second International Conference of Infant Observation. The articles contained in the journal are remarkable for their diversity, while having the method in common. The journal has enabled infant observation to extend beyond its training purpose and show itself as a research method. The method has become elaborated in the process of entering such a variety of settings. In 2002, a 'festschrift' volume (edited by Andrew Briggs)³ marked Esther Bick's centenary, with particular reference to 'skin' and how generative this concept has been. Now in 2011, we are about to see a fourth edited volume (edited by Cathy Urwin and Janine Sternberg)⁴ whose focus is on infant observation research in applied contexts, showing for the first time in one volume the range and potential of infant observation as a method. This brings me closer to my own terrain, for it is in the use of infant observation as a research method that I

² Susan Reid, ed. (1997) *Developments in Infant Observation*. London: Routledge.

³ Andrew Briggs, ed. (2002) *Surviving Space. Papers on Infant Observation*. London: Karnac.

⁴ Cathy Urwin and Janine Sternberg, eds (2011) *Infant Observation and Research: Emotional Processes in Everyday Lives*. London: Karnac.

have become one who shares a 'missionary zeal', as Susan Reid refers to it in her preface.

In my initial psychoanalytic reading it was ideas about 'subjectivity' or self that made sense to me: dynamic, conflictual unconscious processes and what is now popularly referred to as 'relationality', the fundamental role of object relations in furnishing the self. More than offering me an *ontology*, however, psychoanalysis offered me a different way of knowing, gave me glimpses of an alternative *epistemology* with methodological implications in qualitative research. Infant observation as a method is instructive here because infant observation too is psychoanalytically informed (rigorously so) without being psychoanalysis. It faces similar issues, therefore. To give two examples:

- how observers use their own emotional responses to encounters as they observe, note down and reflect upon them in the seminar (this informs what in qualitative research is called 'reflexivity'); and
- how the observer has ongoing effects on the situation being observed (for example, the possibility of containment, without active intervention), and the ethical dimension of these.

Three plain principles

What was it that inspired me in reading these publications? Put another way, what pulled me in, as an outsider steeped in traditions that were not only different but almost antithetical to my formation as a psychologist and methodologist? As an undergraduate studying psychology (in the late 1960s

and early 1970s), I was at odds with the artificial tidiness of scientific methods and so-called proofs for pinning down the unruliness of human experience. Not surprisingly, I disliked quantification of human behaviour and developed qualitative methods for asking about the sorts of questions that interested me; those to do with experience and meaning. I could not suppress what I would now comfortably call my 'intuition', even though it was outlawed in good scientific practice in the name of objectivity. Objectivity meant not just detachment, but condemnation of emotional experience. In contrast, inspired by Winnicott, I have learned to 'play' and through Bion, the value of reverie.

Infant Observation has often been the only one of my subscription journals that I regularly look forward to reading! Whereas social science journal articles are too often deadened by abstract language and generalisation, a live scene is conveyed in the write-ups of infant observation, where the experience-near quality of observation extracts is put together into a narrative. In Lisa Miller's introduction to *Closely Observed Infants*, she emphasises that: 'The cases are the primary source. They are the text to be worked upon. They are intended to make an impact in their own right rather than to exemplify theoretical points.' (1989: 2). Starting from a critical standpoint on the discipline of psychology, I have developed a 'psycho-social' approach that is informed by principles borrowed from (and modified from) psychoanalysis. My own increasing preference for case studies, for more scenic than 'categorical' description, for fine-grained, experience-near data analysis; my emphasis on provisionality and greater capacity to fend off certainty and the rush for closure of meaning

(not yet satisfactorily achieved) have been informed by these principles. I see how they are put into practice in infant observation writing.

Respecting emotional experience is revolutionary in education: the ideas that 'here [in the infant observation] the truths which interest us are themselves emotional truths', that 'the observer cannot register or record them without being stirred' and that 'the reader must expect something of the same (...) it is not a distraction or a contaminant' (Miller 1989:3).

The unfamiliarity of the ideas is all the more marked for the clarity of plain language in which they are expressed. This kind of writing is part of Tavistock culture (on the Briggs volume flyleaf describing the Tavistock clinic series, I noticed the choice to mention 'written in a clear and accessible style'). I have discovered the value of plain, clear language reading M7 scripts, noticing when the use of theoretical and abstract terminology distances the observer from the emotional impact. In my own writing and in refereeing journal articles, I see how such terminology can mask the lack of clarity in the writer's thought.

Since the 1970s, there has been a critique of positivist psychology that led me, among others, to embrace post-structuralist theory and other brands of critical social theory that have transformed British social science in the last thirty or forty years. But these were accompanied by a strong preference for theoretically-driven readings of data, a tendency that also contrasts with the principles of the infant observation tradition. Lisa Miller makes this point; that 'background knowledge ... and varying degrees of acquaintance with theories

... are set aside during the acts of observation and recording in favour of allowing the experience to make its own impact' (op cit p2). This applies also to the seminar, where an observation is looked at closely by the group 'so that it can generate thoughts and ideas, not so that it can exemplify theories' (ibid). The infant observation course as a whole combines a training in observation with psychoanalytic theory, with the former enhancing the latter: 'students also learn how to give a conceptual form to their experience, albeit in experience-near terms, so that they can begin their understanding of a psychoanalytic way of thinking ... [infant observation] gives psychoanalysis a grounding in emotional experience in a way courses based only on texts do not' (Michael Rustin 2011: 186).

Let me summarise before moving on. I have mentioned two principles of infant observation:

- The value of a form of knowing imbued with emotional depth ('emotional truths'), through which learning from experience can take place, and the systematic (and rigorous) use of this form of knowing in infant observation as preparation for clinical and allied professional practices
- Communicating in direct, vivid (and therefore emotionally redolent) ways and making use of a text's impact, not subordinating it for theoretical ends, but using psychoanalytic concepts to help give meaning to phenomena

These principles will be deeply familiar to today's audience, but I have tried to convey their value from my perspective as an outsider and the extent to which they go against the grain, not only of psychology and social science method but of policy and government research language and its spread into the fields of education, health and welfare. As I absorbed these principles into my own research practice, taking them into seminars and group data analysis workshops, I was reminded time and again how foreign they were to my social science colleagues by reactions that could be tinged with hostility. However, opposition could also offer significant critiques of applied psychoanalysis and the epistemological scepticism on which critical methodological traditions in my academic area have been based (see for example Frosh 2010).

The above infant observation principles have been an inspiration for my research practice, but I have had to discover the subtlety of its application in various settings. As teachers of infant observation know, these principles can act as an excuse for indulgent exercise of one's own preferred view of the world and imposition of one's own belief system in the service of a wished-for certainty that does not reflect the complexities of what is observed. How to separate this dross from the central principle of using one's emotional response to access a certain kind of truth that lies deeper than the surface? I return later to this question of objectivity.

A third principle has been especially important in the research method field at a time when 'affect' or 'emotion' has been rediscovered in social science (the so-called 'affective turn'): that feeling, having an emotional response, is

insufficient, noticing it is just the start. Raw emotional experience must be reflected upon (digested, symbolised, processed; in Bion's terminology, transformed into alpha function) if it is to be used helpfully. This leads into professional ethics, whether in social care or research. Because the ethical thing to do necessarily depends on the specific situation, in all of its complexity, ethical practice cannot be predetermined. The most helpful course of action will only be worked out by retaining the capacity to think in circumstances that may lend themselves to just the opposite. It is a situation faced routinely by those working with children, for example. Here both a psychoanalytic principle and established practice give support. Bion's theory of thinking, elegantly summarised by Thomas Ogden has, as one of its central tenets that 'it requires two minds to think a person's most disturbing thoughts' (Ogden 2009: 91). In infant observation practice, the observer is helped to think by the seminar leader and the group.

I now have discussed three principles: in short, emotional truths; retaining their immediacy in communication; and reflection on emotional experience, supported where necessary.

Infant observation in qualitative psycho-social research

I draw on psychoanalytic epistemology because there is no other paradigm that provides access to this other form of knowing. My recent research

project⁵ is a case in point; through it I have discovered infant observation at a deeper level.

Our project was about the identity changes involved when women become mothers for the first time, a focus closely consistent with the ‘distinctive object of study’ (Michael Rustin 2011: 185) of infant observation, namely the mother-baby couple. The field setting was the East London borough of Tower Hamlets (with its ethnic, religious and class diversity). It used infant observation as a method alongside a method of interviewing designed to elicit narratives based more on free associations than answers to structured questions, the ‘Free Association Narrative Interview’ method (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). The apparent shift of focus from infant to mother was not large: theoretically it reflects an emphasis on the mother and baby as a unit, alongside their growing separateness; in practice ‘though we were interested in the mothers’ states of mind, it was crucial that the observers were in touch with the infants’ states of mind likely to affect them’ (Urwin 2007: 244).

In our proposal to the Economic and Social Research Council (who funded not only the original research but further time for me to continue with the analysis)⁶, the difference in the two methods was described as ‘accessing different levels of consciousness about identity, namely those aspects accessible through discourses and those residing in unthought modes –

⁵ See www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-148-25-0058/read for a selection of publications from the project.

⁶ I am grateful to the ESRC for funding, first ‘Identities in Process: Becoming Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and white mothers in Tower Hamlets’; part of the Identities and Social Action programme, project no: RES 148-25-0058; second ‘Maternal Identities, Care and Intersubjectivity: A psycho-social approach’ RES 063-27-0118.

unconscious, preconscious and embodied.’ The infant observation method could, we believed, access what could not be verbally expressed by research participants; it could go beyond the intentional account and beyond narrative coherence. Esther Bick’s understanding of the psychological experience of skin is a notable case in point.

The ‘we’ here is important: as well as academic colleagues (Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott and Yasmin Gunaratnam), I was working with Dr Cathy Urwin, by then at the Tavistock Clinic but having recently moved from Child and Adult Mental Health Services in Tower Hamlets where she worked as a child psychotherapist. She has long experience of teaching infant observation and also of research with babies. Her leadership of the observation side of the study ensured that the principles of psychoanalytic observation were preserved, while being flexibly adapted to the research setting (Urwin 2007). For the core research team who participated in the year-long weekly observation seminars, it was an opportunity to learn from the inside about the infant observation method. The six observers were recruited by Cathy, all already trained in the method, and we owe them a great deal for their committed participation in what was the first systematic use of the infant observation method for the purposes of funded Social Science Research⁷. The six case studies form the core of a special issue of *Infant Observation*⁸, edited by Cathy Urwin, who wrote an introduction exploring the use of infant

⁷ But note Stephen Briggs’ (1997) research based on the observation of several babies. *Growth and Risk in Infancy*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

⁸ ‘Becoming a mother: Changing Identities. Infant Observation in a Research Project’. Special issue edited by Cathy Urwin. *Infant Observation* 10(3), December 2007. The observers were Sandy Layton, Sarina Woograsingh, Ferelyth Watt, Monika Flakowicz, Elspeth Pluckrose and Judith Thorp.

observation in this particular research setting. She regards infant observation as 'particularly useful for revealing how the emotional and physical demands of the baby catalyse the mother's infantile experience and her own associations to being cared for' (Urwin 2007: 243). This is central in understanding the processes involved in becoming a mother. Moreover, methodologically it is possible to carry into other topic domains what is involved when researchers use the emotional impact of the data in their research analysis. In Oslo, Cathy Urwin and I have recently developed such principles of data analysis in an international research programme⁹.

Infant observation as applied psychoanalysis?

Infant observation, as application, occupies a liminal space, between psychoanalysis and various forms of practice that differ in small and large degrees from adult psychoanalysis (child psychoanalytic psychotherapy, nursery education, cared-for children, researching organisational processes). Stephen Frosh, in his wide-ranging discussion of psychoanalysis outside the clinic (2010), advocates that the idea of 'application' be substituted by 'implication'; that is where two disciplines or fields – psychoanalysis being one – have implications for each other by being involved in encounter and dialogue which mutually changes each, rather than one colonising the other (as Frosh suggests was the historical tendency of psychoanalysis).

It seems to me that this is what Cathy Urwin and Janine Sternberg are doing as editors of the new volume on infant observation and its research

⁹ Urwin (forthcoming) in *Infant Observation*: 'Infant observation meets social science'.

applications. In the introduction they comment that 'infant observation will develop a field of knowledge in its own right' [p6]. They distinguish two central questions. The first is about what the psychoanalytic community thinks about infant observation's potential in relation to its theories and clinical practice. The second is closer to my territory: 'how can the observation method be used in research and what standards should be applied in evaluating its adequacy from a scientific point of view?' [p1-2 intro].

Specifically, for example, what, in a research setting, ensures that researchers' use of their emotional responses is based in evidence about the participant and thus can be validly used as the basis for making sense of the data. The clinical claim is (unanimously, I think) that countertransference proper can only be used within the clinical setting where the effect of interpretation can be worked through over time and its effects tested in the changes that occur. Urwin and Sternberg agree that infant observation, 'lacks the means for validating claims to truth available to psychoanalysis', because 'knowledge belongs to the processes of co-construction and evaluation that takes place with the analytic relationship'. They go on to suggest, however, ways in which infant observation may contribute to psychoanalysis, for example 'arguably ... through the increased emphasis on working with countertransference experience' (Urwin and Sternberg: [p6]). Through my thorough familiarity with our data, I agree with Michael Rustin that 'observers do nevertheless inhabit, in the observation setting, a field in which transferences exist and may be recognised' (2011: 182).

When a concept is taken into a different field of practice, it is likely to require modification. To take just one example that has informed my methodology, objectivity. Objectivity in the positivistic sense of the researcher being outside the phenomena being researched and therefore being effortlessly neutral, has been vigorously criticised, when applied to the social and human sciences. However, it has been difficult to build a different practice that guards against the myriad dangers of misunderstanding that accompany qualitative social science research. Psychoanalytic epistemology works, from the start, with the idea of using emotional response, as I have explored above. Technically, the concepts of transference and countertransference are central to psychoanalytic knowing and interpreting. But what about outside the clinic? The idea of keeping an open mind, so central to training in infant observation, provides an alternative epistemological basis for the practice of objectivity. Judith Edwards (2008: 61) specifies the three opportunities that students have to experience the observation and make meaning from it: in the actual observation setting, during note writing and via the seminar. A great deal of learning can be achieved in the process of this layered, structured experience (Groarke 2008: 317). The processing of observers' emotional responses in the seminar group, the triangulation afforded by others with different feelings and thoughts about what seemed to be going on in the notes, to some extent precedes the ascription of meaning to the data.

Enid Balint (1993) applied similar psychoanalytic principles to the use of observation in practitioner groups with a method described as 'amassing facts and feelings about the facts at the same time' (p3). Writing in accessible non-

technical language, she describes what stance to take up: it requires 'tolerating the absence of a consistent story', 'using muddle', 'using imagination', but in the safety of structure and training (p4 and 5). She addresses the role of inference in observation and counsels that the analyst must not infer too much from initial observations. Rather 'they will stay in her mind latent, arousing curiosity and a kind of readiness to hear more, but must not obscure anything else' (Balint 1993:11). To achieve this, the observer or analyst 'must not guess'. This 'epistemological uncertainty', to use Michael Rustin's (2011: 185) phrase, describes well the balance that I strive to achieve in data analysis and case writing.

Social scientists are wont to dismiss the possibility of this open-minded kind of objectivity. They usually base their rejection on the constructionist principle that a partial perspective inevitably results from the socially situated construction of the researcher. The principle is well founded and it is now recognised that the data are never free from the observer's world view, which may reflect, for example, differences in cultural and class position. However, observers can use their emotional responses – for example confusion or surprise - to the situation (including in the seminar group) to reflect on just such matters¹⁰. So, observers are encouraged to notice and reflect on their emotional responses, so that they can set them aside in the service of a dispassionate record of what can be observed. It is akin to Winnicott's

¹⁰ For 'confusion' see Cathy Urwin, Mona-Iren Hauge, Hanne Haavind and Wendy Hollway. 'Culture as a process lived through the person'. Paper presented at the 4th annual conference of the Psychosocial Studies Network. Brighton June 11, 2011. For 'surprise', see Urwin's chapter 'Using surprise in observing cultural experience: changing identities in becoming a mother' in Urwin and Sternberg forthcoming.

view of objectivity as requiring that one takes up an 'external position', which he defines as 'outside the area of projection' (1971: 124).

The example of objectivity is just one of the ways that infant observation contributes to social science, where 'there is a need to develop research methods that incorporate in a systematic way the researcher's affective and subjective experience' (Urwin and Sternberg [introduction p1] forthcoming).

The example of supervision is another. In our research, the main fieldworker had access to a kind of 'non-clinical supervision' in which she was provided a containing space for thinking about the emotional impact of the field work (Elliott, Ryan and Hollway, 2011).

Concluding summary: Opportunities, challenges, threats

In conclusion, let me eventually address directly the themes contained in my title. The *opportunities* for infant observation are evident in what I have said: the chance to use the insights and methods connected with this emotionally imbued way of knowing to enhance a more extended range of fields and practitioners. The *challenges* include doing this in a way that does not attempt to colonise these other fields and does not get embattled, despite the potential for battles with the many who dislike psychoanalytically-informed knowing and are prone to caricature it. A second challenge is not to let the method get diluted and compromised because of its minority position. The dominant discourses that are based on 'knowing about' carry the risk of depleting vitality, depth and creativity. They *threaten* to cut off the resulting knowledge and practices from the emotional experience of practitioners, without which

reflection and appropriate, caring responses are endangered. This applies not just in child welfare but – in different ways - in higher education curricula, research, evaluation of therapy or regulation of social care. Wherever psychoanalytic observation meets practice, it can help people complement knowing about with knowing of; it can help them reflect on their emotional experience.

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