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The impact of observation on the evolution of a relationship between an at-risk mother and infant

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This study examines the effects of a year long at-home observation of an at-risk mother-infant dyad by looking at their experiences of each other. While traditionally observers refrain from participation and intervention, I discovered that adopting a more interventionist approach to this at-risk pair was needed to support their development. Daily vignettes demonstrate gradual growth in the mutual regulation and well-attuned development of this dyad. Close observation over many months led the mother to recognise her baby’s intentions accurately, points of view, and mental states that lay behind her behaviours. The baby’s experience of her mother as empathic and soothing was a major transformation from her experiences in the first weeks of life when the mother felt she did not like children and was unable to regulate and soothe her infant.

Keywords: infancy; observation; attunement; regulation

Introduction

As part of the Anni Bergman Parent-Infant Training Program in New York I observed a single 21-year-old mother, Laura, and her daughter, Claire, from six weeks to 12 months. Observing in their home one day a week for an hour, I focused on their mother-infant interactions, states of mind, and affect regulation. This paper explores the evolution of their experience of each other and the effects of observation in a naturalistic setting. I will tell the story of how their relationship shifted from one of confusion and poverty of connection to one of warmth and empathy.

In some ways Laura had raised herself. She spoke of many moves as a child, an absent father, and the departure from her mother’s home at 17 due to her mother’s ‘nervous breakdown’. Four years later, she married a young man when she discovered she was four months pregnant. The marriage was one of constant strife and turmoil. They lived in a small disorderly apartment and slept in separate rooms. Listening to Laura, they sounded like a vulnerable adolescent
boy and girl, not a mature man and woman expecting a baby. The upcoming birth was not only a surprise but a serious disruption to their already chaotic lives. They were overwhelmed and unprepared. By the time Claire was four-months-old, their marriage was annulled.

Traditionally observers of mothers and their infants refrain from action and intervention, and it is generally suggested that observation be a passive, non-participatory yet attentive process (Bolton, Griffiths, Stone, & Thomson, 2007, Miller, 1989, Rustin, 1989, Santarone, 2007, Urwin, 2007). However, as I experienced Laura and Claire in their home, I found myself in a quandary as I became significantly worried about their relationship. I tried to fathom the critical nature of my responsibility. Laura’s lack of attunement of Claire and her intense anxieties about being a mother were at the core of their interactions. This raised questions in my mind about my role.

I decided to take a much contemplated detour from the traditional view of the observation process and became a participant-observer at times. To have done otherwise would have been to ignore their overtures to me and their relationship that was forming. I acknowledged their gestures, Claire’s vocalisations, and Laura’s comments and gave occasional timely reflections to Laura on the meaning of Claire’s behaviour. This was a distinct change from the traditional observation process. However, by finding the right distance from Laura, I called her into contact with me which led her to make further contact with Claire. There was also unconscious participation. When I thought I was simply observing, I was registering Laura and Claire’s emotions and moods through their vocalisations, facial expressions, movements, and interactions.

This paper illustrates how observation of this pair over an extended period had far-reaching effects on their relationship; how interactions of mother-infant and mother-infant-observer relationships were intertwined; and how these early emotional exchanges fostered connections among Laura, Claire, and me. This paper explores how I shifted between passive, attentive observation, and periodic intervention. I saw that stretching beyond the role of passive observer with well-timed interventions that did not disturb the observation process helped this mother stretch beyond her apparent capabilities. I used strategic interactions that resulted in enlivening Laura who gradually got in touch with her maternal self. While I strove not to be too intrusive, I became convinced that being too unresponsive could lead Laura to feel rejected confirming her earlier experiences and could also inadvertently reinforce Laura’s misattributions of Claire’s behaviour, which would have a deep impact on their relationship. This is the situation I found myself in at rare moments when Laura’s understanding of her baby required me to intervene gently to strengthen the mother-infant pair. Further, I began to believe that my discoveries about this particular case had potentially far-reaching implications about observation of at-risk mother-infant dyads.
Laura and Claire influenced each other. Their world consisted of repeated psychic exposure through daily interactions of eating, sleeping, feeding, and playing. Observation revealed the ‘generalised or prototypic’ happenings that formed their experiences of each other (Stern, 1995, p. 81). Daily vignettes discussed below demonstrate gradual growth in the mutual regulation and development of Laura and Claire.

Laura began to gain from my interest. As observations progressed, Laura’s interest in Claire became deeper and stronger. She began finding a balance between her baby’s needs and her capacity to think and react to them. Both began to sustain, albeit for short periods, a positive experience of the other during times of frustration or distress. Later they began to develop the capacity for each to integrate ambivalent feelings in a unified representation of each other.

The evolution of the mother’s and baby’s experiences of each other

Six to eight weeks

During my first visit Laura told me she did not like children and took little interest in her baby. Laura treated Claire as if she only needed filling and cleaning, rather than experiencing her as someone she might enjoy. Laura seemed distant from her seemingly fussy infant whom she was unable to soothe easily. Her initial surprise at discovering she was pregnant seemed to continue once Claire was born. She was lost and uncertain how to handle her new situation.

Unprepared for her role, she found her baby difficult. Whether Claire was hungry or not, Laura used the bottle to soothe Claire. When Laura didn’t feel secure enough to give to Claire emotionally, she turned to the bottle, unable to see her fussiness as a call for attention and a communication. Her anxiety made her rush about and kept her from considering options for soothing (Newson, 1977). This led me to wonder how else the baby might be soothed. During my first visit when Laura twice left the room to get a bottle, I remained with Claire. I talked softly to Claire and her fussiness disappeared instantly. The baby’s ready response to my soothing sounds revealed she was actually easy to soothe. This reassured me that she was intact and responsive.

I learned that Laura’s mother was in and out of the hospital over the years due to severe manic-depression. During Laura’s childhood, her mother would lay in bed for hours. Laura herself was on medication for a milder version of the illness. Due to these experiences with her mother, Laura had received little in the way of being soothed by her mother herself. This may explain why it was so difficult for Laura to soothe her baby and why her initial experience of her baby was that she was fussy and difficult to regulate.
I began understanding the world of Laura and Claire from observing ordinary events. For example, it struck me that Laura didn’t look at her baby when feeding. Claire gazed periodically at her mother, but Laura looked around, preoccupied with herself. Mutual gaze fosters early attachment. In these early weeks, Laura missed the opportunity to meet her infant’s eyes in a reciprocal activity that would strengthen their beginning relationship.

Laura felt anxiety about bringing Claire to the child-minder. She feared her baby would no longer like her. Her anxiety echoed her fears about her mother’s feelings towards her. Once, when Laura’s mother was present during the observation, Laura expressed directly to her mother that she felt less favoured and loved than her baby; her mother ignored her comments. On the other hand, Laura was relieved that Claire was going to a child-minder because she hoped this caretaker would know how to regulate her infant’s eating and sleeping, something she felt she could not do.

Laura’s initial statement that she didn’t like children was a poor prognostic sign relative to the usual idealised representation of a baby (Stern, 1995). Her surprise at being pregnant and her feelings about not wanting a baby interfered with the earliest feelings of care giving that are stirred during pregnancy and the post natal period. She missed this opportunity to develop a sense of maternal identity. In the early months of Claire’s life, Laura was afraid of failing her baby and in turn being rejected by her.

Laura was strained by external events as well (an annulment, custody, a return to work, plans for school, relations with her own mother), and these concerns limited her ability to form an experience of a whole, differentiated infant whose needs had to be put alongside if not before her own interests and responsibilities. This made it difficult for Laura to be responsive to Claire’s needs. Her motherhood was complicated by these events and her own traumatic history which affected her sense of self.

I felt immediately drawn to the mother’s and baby’s anxieties, identified with both partners, and was very affected when they were out of synch. Laura often seemed out of touch with her baby’s vocal and facial communications. Nevertheless, my role as a container (Bion, 1962) was emerging as I gave close attention to both mother and baby, though it would take time to see this role clearly. I had yet to realise how my presence would lead mother and baby to become more attentive to each other.

Bion’s model of ‘container’ (p. 90) applies to Laura’s deep anxieties that aroused feelings in me that I could receive and tolerate, albeit unconsciously. Experiencing and holding these feelings inside made me the container, an example of my unconscious participation. The mother-infant couple could then experience me as someone who had this capacity to take in feelings and think about them. This gave Laura the opportunity to observe a mature adult who could bear and modify distress by thinking, understanding and bringing meaning to these emotions (Shuttleworth, 1989; Houzel, 1998–1999). Then Laura would be able to help Claire learn to do the same.
Two months to six months

My weekly visit was welcomed. By two months, self and interactive regulations were shifting. The routine of a new job and child-minding reduced Laura’s anxiety giving the baby a calm attentive presence during the day.

Laura would often make commands to Claire as if she were an older, verbal child who could understand her. When changing Claire, Laura admonished, ‘Don’t pee’, as if Claire were a trouble-maker. This was the beginning of maternal attributions of intentionality and mind states not as yet developed (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004).

By 10 weeks, Laura began regulating her baby using an external device, a mechanical musical swing. The almost constantly used swing held Claire, so she could sleep as well as feel soothed when awake. Claire was soothed by the movement of the swing rather than the ministrations of her mother. Laura understood that her baby required a physical and emotional holding environment even if she couldn’t provide it herself. Laura’s own dependency needs made her anxious, so she couldn’t allow herself to be closer to Claire whose dependence on her raised those anxieties. She saw her baby’s need to be calmed down but couldn’t find it within herself to give what was needed.

At the same time, Laura was becoming capable of reflection. She complained that Claire cried at night, and I suggested that her baby might miss her; she agreed. Some mentalisation, ‘the capacity to represent intentional mental states’ (Fonagy et al., 2004, p. 237) was emerging, albeit weakly.

Laura’s anxiety was manifested in constant busyness and restlessness as she tried to organise their chaotic living environment. In time I discovered that this constant motion disturbed me and asked myself if this was also true for Claire. I wondered if Laura’s constant motion prevented Claire from having a solid experience of her mother and realised that it kept Laura from her feelings about Claire and impeded their connection. Was it Laura’s memory of a mother who was recurrently absent and present, harried and restless, that was becoming generalised? If so, then this was the dyadic interaction that was becoming remembered and experienced (Beebe & Lachman, 2002).

My close attention to, enjoyment of and communication with Laura and Claire seemed to be having an effect. I cooed at Claire and laughed with Laura at her baby’s new facial and vocal expressions. Laura slowed down and began talking to Claire while changing her and giving her kisses that brought smiles. The baby’s responses encouraged the mother. Claire was beginning to ‘perceive well and quickly locate communicative acts of an attentive partner’ (Trevarthen, 1977, p. 234).

Laura confided in me the child-minder’s criticism that she wasn’t sufficiently patient when feeding the baby. When feeding Claire attentively, I observed Laura jostling the bottle a bit to help Claire drink more. I noticed that it was during the pause after the jostling that the baby sucked. Laura was able to give her another two ounces. I said that maybe that’s what the child-minder meant by
being patient. She beamed in response. My acknowledgment helped Laura see herself as effective.

By three to four months Claire shifted from the mechanical cradle to the crib at night and was sleeping 8–11 hours using her thumb to soothe herself. The dyadic system became more regulated. Being fed, changed, cooed at, and cradled (even if mechanically) were becoming interactions that Claire could anticipate and rely on. Laura’s smiles, her bedtime routine, and her playfulness while changing Claire became interactions Claire could experience inside herself. A more regular routine was being established which helped them to experience each other in a calmer way.

The consistency of child-minding, Claire’s smiling reciprocity, and my regular presence began to bring about changes. Laura became more attentive, talking to Claire, mimicking her sounds. Because Laura was developing a more consistent experience of her daughter, she had moved away from being the young mother who anxiously reported she didn’t like children. She was positive towards her baby and felt related and attached to her.

Variable feeding experiences shaped mother and baby’s experiences of each other. On one occasion, there was sensitive attunement as the mother opened her mouth in identification with her daughter. On another occasion, however, Laura ignored Claire’s congestion that made eating difficult; she shovelled food as if Claire was just a vessel to be filled. She wasn’t in touch with the tempo at which Claire wanted to be fed. This misattunement left Claire distressed yet compliant. I silently noted what Claire could be internalising: don’t cry, squelch emotion, shut down a sense of agency, life is hard, get used to it. I wondered if these messages countered the anxieties that were stirred up in the mother by her baby’s cries.

During the first six months, I felt I had two babies, Laura and Claire, to observe. This was illustrated at one particular meeting after a well-attuned feeding. In contrast to her ‘be tough’ attitude, Laura took time to read to her baby. Claire enjoyed being held. Laura spoke about her reluctance to follow the child-minder’s recommendation to do ‘tummy-time’ because Claire cried. She was afraid she wouldn’t be able to soothe her, and found this destabilising. I pointed out that Claire’s cry was her way of speaking up. With this brief comment, Laura felt able to try tummy-time. However, she laid the baby on a blanket on the bed facing me, not herself. When I talked to Claire, she smiled and held her head up without complaint. I said to Claire, ‘Would you like to face your mummy?’ In her anxiety and wish to identify with me, Laura swung her child around to face her so quickly that it disturbed her equilibrium. She treated Claire more like a doll than a baby. Laura, however, did what I had done and talked to her baby who held up her head. This moment exemplified how the observation had become more of an intervention. But Laura did not continue to talk to Claire, and the baby laid her head down, put her thumb in her mouth to re-regulate herself, and fell asleep. Claire also rested her head on the bed then
fell asleep. I was the holding environment (Winnicott, 1965) and container (Bion, 1962) of the sleeping pair.

During the sixth month I discovered that Laura had a distinct misrepresentation of Claire’s sound making. Several of Laura’s girlfriends gathered. Claire was gleeful with their attention until she suddenly came forth with an explosive outburst. This was an affective moment that Laura misinterpreted as a ‘temper tantrum’, again as if she were an older child. In fact, Claire had been ignoring her hunger because of all the fun with the visitors. Claire made a ‘full-throated cry’ (Stern, 1990, p. 34), a loud assertion rather than her usual compliance and shutting down of emotions. The outburst organised her need to be fed, giving powerful relief from the hunger pain that had been building. This hunger cry demonstrated Claire’s capacity to reach out at the same time as she was able to cope with the pressure from the inside (Stern, 1990). I understood Laura’s misreading of Claire’s outburst as a temper tantrum because it fit in with her belief that Claire was a wilful bad girl. I maintained my more passive observation role at this point, so I could take time to consider and absorb the situation. I silently considered that Laura’s description of Claire’s vocalisation as a ‘temper tantrum’ may have been a projection of her own hidden affect, attributing wilful motives to the baby, a misrepresentation of the infant’s affect.

During my observations I held Laura’s experiences in mind, and her capacity to hold her baby in mind increased. I did this by voicing some observations (‘I see how Claire is enjoying your smiling at her’) and by my unwavering attention to their interactions. At the same time, my close observation of Claire seemed to lead her to feel ‘seen’ by me. When she felt my attention, she held her gaze on me. As our eyes met, it seemed she had a self. Indeed, both mother and baby’s sense of self seemed to be developing. As I continued to observe, Laura began to develop a more sound experience of herself as a mother (‘I am getting to know what her cries mean’).

In response to Laura’s shared confidences, my reflective observations about the baby’s behaviours (the baby awakened because she missed the mother; crying is a way of speaking up; what the child-minder meant by being patient with the feeding) were slowly absorbed. These comments not only helped Laura clarify and broaden her own understandings but also encouraged her to find out what was in the mind of her baby. Her ability to engage Claire and attribute meaning to her responses seemed to come as a result of my active observations of the pair’s interactions.

In the visit that followed the observation about the hungry outburst, Laura was in a different mood: It was an unrushed morning. She commented on my watching ‘their interaction’. She cheered as Claire rolled over for the first time. When the half hour of play tired Claire and she protested vociferously, Laura was responsive. She did not see the protest as a tantrum as she had before, and she picked her daughter up and held her as they looked out the window. Laura seemed in a state of reverie: she and her infant felt contained. This was an important development. The emotional engagement was exquisite. Maybe the
close observation over many months where I received, contained, and responded to the mother’s early chaos and confusion helped the pair reach this moment.

Seven months to one year

Changes in Claire and patterns of attachment were revealed in new ways. Laura was the anchor allowing her baby to leave and return fostering exploratory behaviour. Claire attempted to create social exchanges through gaze following, joint attention to an object, and understanding gestures such as pointing in dyadic and triadic contexts (Rochat, 2001). I believe these new abilities helped Claire to understand that her mother had a separate mind which had a great impact on her experience of others.

Laura was experiencing Claire more positively, enjoying her daughter’s newfound learning capacity. When I was there, I could see that the baby seemed to experience her mother as a reliable social partner whose broad smiles matched her own. The importance of facial movements in forming these experiences became more obvious. When feeding, Laura’s affect matched her daughter’s, who willingly yet slowly adapted to new tastes and temperatures.

Laura shared more about her life. Our time together for that hour each week made me her confidante. It became even more evident that Laura’s experience of Claire depended on the meanings given to her behaviour. We came to some understanding of why she interpreted crying as tantrums. One day when the baby was vocalising loudly, Laura told me that she remembered she had temper tantrums and yelled when a child. Her own mother’s manic activities could also be loud and disorganising suggesting that Laura may have been linking a temper to mental illness in her family. These childhood experiences may have been too much stimulation for Laura that were stirred by Claire’s protests like an old trauma. She confided further that when her boyfriend tried to comfort her when she was depressed, she yelled at him. When married, she and her husband had yelled a lot, and she worried this yelling affected Claire in utero. Laura often commented she hoped I’d be Claire’s therapist when she turned five, the age when she herself had tantrums. At the time of these comments, Laura’s mother was hospitalised, and I was viewed as a safety valve for mental health.

My observing led Laura to become a better observer. By the eighth month, she observed that her daughter was ‘bothered’ when she left the room. Her daughter wanted her in sight. She had become more in touch with her baby’s mind. I noticed when Laura left the room that Claire stared at the door until her return. When Laura came back, Claire smiled with welcoming sounds and reached for her mother who gave her a warm hug. Claire had developed different vocalisations to communicate her needs, and Laura responded appropriately to these communications affording the baby a more positive regular maternal experience.

When depressed, Laura seemed less able to experience her baby. It wasn’t a distorted experience, just more vacant. While feeding her a bottle one evening,
Claire held on to her mother’s hair and pant leg gazing into her eyes, and even though her mother faced her, she seemed dissociated. It appeared as if Laura temporarily felt lost, and there was a concomitant loss of her experience of her baby. I wondered about Claire’s experience of both her mother and herself at that moment.

Thus, Claire had to endure her mother’s intermittent loss of interest in their attachment. While it wasn’t clear how the baby responded internally to her mother’s periodic despondency, she remained attentive and would regulate herself well if the need arose (thumb in her mouth). When Laura was preoccupied, Claire did not give up on her. She satisfied herself by playing alone or began cooing as if to reanimate her mother. I had learned over the course of my observation that Claire was resilient and would use what was available to her (her thumb, the mechanical swing, my presence).

During the ninth and tenth months, Laura periodically misrepresented her baby. When Claire dropped something that she wanted picked up, Laura regarded this as ‘testing’. She told me this worried her. I became aware that I’d been experiencing Laura and Claire’s close attention to each other’s whereabouts as they moved to and from each other. When her mother left the room, Claire became still, focusing on her return. She also visually tracked her mother as she moved around the apartment. So, I responded that dropping something that she wanted returned to her could be a game about people leaving and returning. This was a nexus between observation and intervention. Evident was Laura’s desire to understand her baby’s behaviour and her expectation of meaning. Thus, I felt I shouldn’t be too neutral or passive in my approach at that moment and spoke up instead.

My response to her worry about Claire’s dropping things helped Laura reflect on the behaviour positively. She believed her baby was a trouble-maker, and she was asking me to respond to this belief. I was able to intervene before she began reacting too negatively to her baby. Her response was to look up at me contemplatively, identify with my reflection, and think about her baby’s mind. With this new understanding, she reflected on her baby’s comings and goings. Laura explained that at the child-minder’s her baby left her arms to go easily and directly into the arms of this specific caretaker, and when she returned, her baby reacted with joy and excitement, a sign of a securely growing child.

My observations served to increase Laura’s capacity for a range of responses that were otherwise heretofore closed off to her. Laura’s ability to attribute more accurate meanings to her baby’s engagement with her seemed to come as a result of my observation of the pair’s interactions.

Sometimes Laura’s envy prevented her from enjoying Claire. She envied her blue eyes and blonde hair and resented the baby’s interest in others. She anticipated the baby would forget her when she left the room when in fact the baby spent her time watching the door. Laura saw her baby as a potential abandoner who would easily forget her, a representation of her daughter rooted in her own past experience.
During the tenth month Laura and Claire’s experiences of each other broadened. Claire could crawl and sit up on her own. She immensely enjoyed hand clapping and clapping objects together, and Laura mimicked. At these times, Laura became the enthusiastic partner. With clapping, Claire experienced her ‘own vitality: from calm to being excited, then calm again’. Her hands moved in front of her face resembling a choreography of what the infant feels from within’ (Rochat, 2001, p. 41). In addition, Claire associated the word, ‘Yay’, with clapping, a beginning of language. Claire’s experience of a mother who enjoyed her was more evident. They engaged in games that emphasised communication such as rolling a ball back and forth. Claire even rolled the ball to me in a three-way catch, showing she saw me as part of their relationship.

An infatuation with objects had clearly turned to a ‘people/object stage’ (Rochat, 2001, p. 162) and ‘early practicing stage’ (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975, p. 65). The mother-infant bond was evident. Claire was able to climb into her mother’s lap when she needed refuelling and comfort. She also climbed into my lap for additional security, showing she was able to engage with others in her mother’s presence. Sometimes Laura took on the refuelling function well, holding Claire and kissing her as needed. Other times, Laura felt invaded and pushed Claire’s hands away from her face, and the baby cried. Her cry indicated the derailment of the expected interaction.

Stern (1985) points out that parents can ‘regulate what affect category the infant will experience’ by the interpretation the parent gives to the affect (p. 103). Laura had multiple negative representations of her infant’s affects. On the one hand, she saw her as rebellious and ‘defiant’, when, in fact, she was resilient in regulating herself. She interpreted strong expressions of affect as danger signs, possibly of mental illness, rather than normal infant development that included Claire’s burgeoning sense of self. It seemed that at times Laura saw her infant as an objectified vessel containing affects Claire held in or let out, without thinking of her infant’s mind. At other times, in identification with me, Laura held on to her baby’s mind and observed her engaging responses to her motherly ministrations. As Laura enlivened her baby, Claire enlivened her mother. My interventions about her misattributions seemed to help her engage her baby more positively and support Claire’s developmental changes. As these changes made Claire feel more present, Laura could respond on a different level. Recalling the first visit when the mother’s anxiety prevented her from picking up on communicative gestures from the baby, I observed an enormous change in their pattern of reciprocal communication. Early patterns did not predict later outcomes.

The months of observation helped reduce the mother’s anxiety and fear of her baby. My calm, containment, and help understanding her baby enabled her to learn the function of a mother. This change seems to derive from a variety of factors, many of which seemed related to the mother’s internalisation of an experience of me as observer. I was internalised as an anchor, as nonjudgemental
support, as having a reliable thinking attitude, and as a safety valve for mental health.

There were many areas of progress in Laura and Claire’s relationship. There continued to be a ‘balance between moments of engagement and disengagement’ (Beebe & Lachmann, 1988, p. 328). Developmental shifts in Claire made it easier to communicate and play with her. There was evidence that Laura and Claire were building memories of affective resonance. Being able to dialogue nonverbally aided this bond. Laura was able to meet her infant on Claire’s terms and put aside some of her own preoccupations. This attunement contributed appreciably to their mutual positive experiences.

**Afterwards**

This study set out to explore the evolution of how an at-risk twenty-one-year-old single mother and her infant experienced each other and the impact of observation in a naturalistic setting on the development of their relationship. Their experiential world developed through ongoing mutual regulations of the repeated and expected daily experiences of eating, sleeping, feeding, and playing.

Following the observation year, the mother asked for an office visit. This visit offered the opportunity to see the developmental changes of Laura and Claire in another setting. It also seemed to testify to Laura’s internalisation of a positive trusting experience of me as the observer who had furthered the development of the dyad. A vignette from this visit in the beginning of Claire’s first year illustrates the affective transactional patterns that developed between Laura and Claire that continued away from home.

During the office visit, positive mutual experiences supported their reactions to the unfamiliar environment. Claire’s practicing stage (Mahler et al., 1975) was a delight as she responded to a new place to play in. It was also a good opportunity to observe Laura’s reactions to her infant. After playing with toys her mother brought, Claire began crawling around the room. Her explorations were facilitated by her mother’s positive affective disposition. As Claire headed towards some new toys, she stopped part way to look back at her mother to whom she returned. She climbed on to her lap where she was welcomed with a secure chest-to-chest hug followed by kisses on her stomach and face which resulted in hearty laughter. Through this warm body-to-body holding Claire could feel her mother’s positive image of her. Claire’s experience of her mother as a safe haven and her mother’s experience of her daughter as an explorer who needed comfort and reassurance were evident. They met each others’ expectations liberating Claire to continue her exploration.

After Laura validated her baby in her lap, Claire felt free to climb into my lap, so I could share in her excitement. Her inclusion of me suggested an internalisation of me as someone who gave her added security, enjoyed her, and supported her explorations.
An illustration of trust in her mother occurred when Claire found a stuffed dog. She cautiously put out her hand but shrank back. She repeated this. Laura commented she’d never seen Claire so interested in anything before and felt her daughter might think the dog real. The baby moved back to her mother then back to the dog. Laura picked up the dog to assure Claire there was nothing to fear. They shared broad smiles. Laura helped Claire learn to tolerate her fear which enhanced her affective development and encouraged her autonomy. Claire had to be able to sense the emotion of her mother or she would not continue. She checked with her mother before proceeding. The child’s experience of her mother as trustworthy was evident.

The significance of this scene can be understood in the context of the preceding observational year. What is revealed is that the infant’s regulatory system was not only situated in the infant; it had evolved in the dyadic system. The mother was able to help regulate her infant more and more successfully. Seeing me keep her daughter in mind helped her do the same. Whether Laura could maintain this disposition for all her baby’s affects, such as anger, would remain to be seen. Still, Claire’s representation of her mother as soothing was a major transformation from her first months. The way in which this pair experienced regulating Claire’s affective states was a co-constructed developmental achievement affected by the intervention of observation. Of significant importance was that the potential for a secure attachment increased when Laura could go beyond meeting Claire as a baby whose needs had to be satisfied to treating her as an individual with a mind (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001). She began to see from Claire’s point of view, to understand her intentions accurately, and to read mental states that lay behind her behaviours.

I found that I could not observe extensively without having a far-reaching effect on this dyad. Observation is not an objective-distant task but an experience-near phenomenon. Thus, observation with occasional intervention became a powerful tool. Observation was not a dispassionate objective task of recording in my mind what I saw and heard, but an intersubjective activity that utilises conscious and unconscious processes. It was active not passive, with a large impact on those being observed as well as the observer. Both Laura and Claire internalised an experience of me as a thinking, caring, reliable, steady individual who affected their development. This was a deductive process in which as the observer I identified coherent patterns that emerged between mother, baby, and me.

At several junctures during the observation, Laura’s reactions to Claire seemed rooted in her own past confirming my belief that to be too unresponsive might be experienced as re-enactments of her own traumatic history deeply affecting the development of the pair. Therefore my work suggests that occasional participation and intervention during an observation can play an important role in the evolution of relationships of at-risk mother-infant dyads. In fact, without some intervention, what is intended as not acting (just observing) could be felt instead as the act of abandonment.
Following the observation, I read extensively. While I don’t have the space to detail all my findings, I learned that many observers in a wide range of settings with at-risk mothers and babies had come to the same conclusions that I had. Briggs (1997) details his experience of observing five at-risk infants simultaneously from various cultural backgrounds. He reports,

in the interest of concern for their welfare and development, I was obliged to adopt a more interventionist approach to observation than is traditionally assumed ... the role was... a ‘parental container’ (p. 208) ...to have rigidly maintained a non-interventionist strategy would be incomprehensible within this...style of parenting, and possibly unethical. Some specific and clearly oriented interventions became part of my role. (pp. 215–216)

Other observers also intervened similarly in carefully considered ways (Ciotti, 2007; Reid, 1997; Rhode, 1997).

Through my observations I was able to see Claire developing an experience of an evolving supportive mother capable of being reanimated when she faltered. I also saw Laura developing an experience of an alert, affectionate, resilient, and enjoyable daughter. Initially, Laura said she didn’t like children and was unable to soothe readily both her infant and herself. This startling comment revealed her deep anxiety. By year’s end, she was able to experience her baby with warmth, empathy, balance, and flexibility. Through their emerging experiences, they placed each other at the centre of each others’ lives.

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