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## The challenge of becoming supervisor/seminar leader in infant observation

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### ABSTRACT

Becoming an infant observation supervisor/seminar leader is a complex challenge, generally experienced in a solitary way. Despite the various, creative local solutions that have been tried in different parts of the world, the issue of the training of new supervisors remains open to discussion. No formal training exists for this demanding function that includes the responsibility of maintaining and transmitting the technique, as well as sustaining the dynamic and continuity of the group. In the last several years, we have witnessed a number of colleagues who have sought to prepare themselves in different ways for this new function of supervisor: a second supervised observation, supervision in pairs of supervisors, joining a group led by an experienced supervisor, and, more recently, supervision of supervision. Based on the latter experience, the aim of this paper is to present some reflections on the training and function of the infant observation supervisor. Maintaining a certain distance, the supervisor of the new supervisor/seminar leader is in a privileged position to take a more experienced and, perhaps, calmer, detailed look at the primitive unconscious observation material. This enables the new seminar leader/supervisor the opportunity to listen to herself and to simultaneously train her psychoanalytic listening of primitive psychic phenomena.

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Infant observation supervisor; seminar leader; infant observation; psychoanalytic transmission; psychoanalytic training; supervision of supervision

It is well to remember that the beginning is a summation of beginnings (Winnicott, 1965, p. 56)

The aim of this paper is to present our reflections on the training and function<sup>1</sup> of the infant observation supervisor<sup>2</sup>, derived from a new experience of *supervision of supervision* that has unfolded naturally in recent years. After a long journey including supervision and applications of the infant observation method to research in the area of perinatality, especially pregnancy, delivery, and prematurity (Caron & Fonseca, 2011; Caron & Lopes, 2015a, 2015b; Caron

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& Lopes, 2017; Caron, Lopes, & Donelli, 2013; Caron, Fonseca, & Kompinsky, 2000; Caron, Fonseca, & Lopes, 2008; Steibel, Caron, & Lopes, 2014), many colleagues contacted us asking how they might prepare for the new and challenging function, *infant observation supervisor*.

A wide range of ways are used in the world of infant observation teaching to assist in preparation for this challenge. One is for pairs of supervisors to have supervision. Another one is to conduct a second observation to help supervisors become more confident in this new function. A third is to join a group led by an experienced supervisor in the position of a participant observer of the group; and, more recently, we have become aware of colleagues looking for *supervision of their supervision* either sporadically or regularly. This has stimulated the writing of this paper.

It is important to highlight that even though supervision is recognised as an essential element throughout the observation journey, it is interesting to note the relative absence of references, in infant observation publications, to *the supervisor/seminar leader figure* (for exceptions, see Davids, Miles, Paton, & Trowell, 1999; Miller, 2011). Furthermore, we have not found any papers on the specific theme of this paper, i.e. the infant observation supervisor's function and training.

We were fortunate to be able to present a previous version of this paper in a meeting of supervisors at the 10th AIDOB International Infant Observation Conference, in November 2018, in Turin, where we learnt that, although local solutions have been tried in different parts of the world, the issue of the training of new supervisors is a significant preoccupation, everywhere. For example, at the Tavistock Clinic, the very place where Esther Bick started infant observation, 70 years ago, no formal training exists for new supervisors. In fact, there is no formal Tavistock accreditation for new supervisors/seminar leaders (Trudy Klauber, personal communication), but a number of ways have been tried to support new supervisors in preparation for the new task. These were first discussed at the First Tavistock International Infant Observation Teachers' Conference, in 1993, 45 years after Bick started her first seminar groups of four or five observers.

There are no specific papers from Tavistock authors on their thinking about preparing new infant observation teachers and supporting their continuing professional development, but a number of ideas have been tried out, which are briefly described in two papers on the broader issue of how the Tavistock model of infant observation has evolved over the years (Rustin, 2009; Klauber, 2012). Magagna's (1987) paper also offers an account of her personal experience of a second observation with Esther Bick herself, a solution spontaneously requested by her in order to prepare herself when Martha Harris invited her to lead a seminar during the 1980s.

Our own most recent experience of 'supervision of supervision' as we have termed it, has enabled a more refined look at the 'impossible task', echoing

Freud, of psychoanalytic supervision, which is so little explored in the psychoanalytic literature. It is also one more opportunity to deepen our knowledge of the infant observation method and to sum up experiences in the never-ending process of psychoanalytic training. This experience of supervising new supervisors revived certain questions which are ever present in our discussions:

- How does one become a supervisor?
- Is there an essential training for supervisors in infant observation?
- Are there desirable criteria including age, previous experience of teaching or of observation itself?
- Should all supervisors have completed an infant observation?
- Should all supervisors have a psychoanalytic training and have had personal analysis?
- What are the desirable personal qualities to look for?
- How best to support new supervisors in their role?

There are so many questions when we are faced with the task of helping new supervisors prepare for this new function because it is their responsibility to maintain technical rigour, so as not to miss the essence of the Bick spirit, ethics, vigour, and clarity.

### **The bick method of infant observation and its aim: a requirement for child psychotherapy training**

It is well known that Bick's dissatisfaction with her research experience in using experimental methods for her 1936 PhD in child development, led her to mastermind an infant observation method *rooted in psychoanalysis*, whose basic tool is internal, that is, based on the experience of the observer herself<sup>3</sup> directly encountering the infant's primitive world.

The Bick method is the only one firmly rooted in psychoanalysis – in contrast with other observation methods used by psychoanalysts such as Spitz, Mahler, Bowlby, and Stern, especially because it includes the observer as a fundamental element, just as the analyst is the main instrument in the analytic process. The observer is simultaneously the instrument of her observation and part of the observation field; she observes her own feelings, physical sensations, in the process of taking in as much as she can of events during the observation time.

She is a participant observer who both influences and is influenced by the observed field. There is a specific requirement not to intervene actively, but she participates with her presence and her person by way of attention, willingness, commitment, interest, and internal reflections. In other words, she is in intense psychic activity while observing; she is passive only in abstaining from action. She has an effective nonverbalised participation.

Thus, the method is not merely about observing a baby develop, but about a *shared experience* with the baby, the family and any others in the home. The observer is a weekly companion as the story unfolds 'in living colour', in its own birthplace, because she is there at the time and place of the events. The observer sees the unique complexity of each baby's psychic, physical and psychological development. She also follows the baby's developing relationship to parents, siblings, and others including the observer. This enables her to develop the capacity to understand and take in primitive transferences wherever they may be, in everyday life, or clinical work with all age groups.

Bick developed the idea of infant observation as a way of helping prospective child psychotherapists and psychoanalysts to recognise the baby's primitive world of anxieties and fragile developing ego, as well as the projections into them from family members, who also project into and interact with the observer, analyst, or psychotherapist. Bick concluded that for the analyst to understand the development of human personality, 'setting aside the prevailing theories', she needed to have a lived experience of observing the daily life of an infant weekly, in her natural environment, preferably the family, from birth to the age of two.

Infant observation also provides the opportunity for the observer to experience and to become familiar with the turbulence families go through when a baby arrives. Esther Bick's aim was to provide this element of psychoanalytic training for both child psychotherapists and psychoanalysts to be receptive and containing and better able to recognise and manage the intense anxieties provoked in encountering unspoken, primitive fears or catastrophic anxiety (Bick, 1968, 1986). Over time, she discovered the potential of this experience for the internal expansion and refinement of psychoanalytic listening, as well as for sharpening curiosity, the desire to know, for reviving memory, and for developing an interest in and understanding of primitive psychic phenomena. The method contributes to the development of what has been referred to as the 'psychoanalytic attitude', i.e. the capacity to observe and reflect before acting, receptivity, respect for the patient, containment, patience, and tolerance to the unknown and uncertainty.

Bick did not theorise her method, but it is clear that she believed that learning occurs from direct experience, i.e. through 'person-to-person', human exchanges, in a personal journey of training and maturation. It is like an 'analytic process on a slow-motion camera' which unfolds in three stages, observation, a detailed written report and supervision, corresponding to the three distinct stages required for an unconscious process of working through to take place in the observer over time. In this way, the observer goes through ever-deepening levels of psychic contact with very primitive states of mind as more links are made in the creative process of writing and presenting the notes of an observation. This entails a psychic work of integration, in Winnicott's sense, which leads to the observer's internal expansion and transformation. In a previous

paper (Caron, Lopes, Steibel, & Donelli, 2012), we discussed the challenges of the observer journey with a special emphasis on writing.

In our 2012 paper (Caron et al., 2012), we noted that infant observation first strips the observer of her professional tools and, we hoped, of her theories, so that, step by step, she identifies with what the baby and mother, father or other significant figures, are feeling; she is truly in their world, living an experience together with them. She unconsciously develops the capacity for psychoanalytic listening, based on an evenly suspended attention. No notes are taken, developing hypotheses or conclusions are discouraged, as are urges to criticise or to make moral judgements or premature interpretations of the observation material. When this is possible, week by week, we believe that observers deepen their understanding of the baby in the family and of themselves. The result is that their 'internal setting' (Caron & Lopes, 2015a) is enriched by the experience and can be used in applications of the method to different settings such as observation in hospitals or schools, or in the consulting room.

The observer-in-training comes to rely on a certain openness and receptive internal space where she can tune in to the live dynamics of the baby's and parents' primitive communications. She is thrown into a world of sensations, feelings and primitive anxieties that affect her according to her personal make up. All senses are involved. The presence of a baby stimulates regression to primitive states of mind and coenesthetic (bodily aware) communication, generating intense and wordless feelings and some physical sensations in the observer.

For example, in the first observation at the home of a baby (Julie) born prematurely, the observer can feel the mother's awkwardness, trying to hold her tiny, totally strange and fragile baby. The mother asks the observer to hold the baby, places her in the observer's lap, and leaves, saying she's going out into the garden. The observer writes,

I'm alone with the baby. I try as best I can to make her comfortable, but my arms feel awkward holding her. I finally find a position that is comfortable for both of us, my left arm supports her little bum, and my right arm her back and head. I hold her in front of me. I notice her jaundiced colour, the lack of hair on the right side of her tiny head, and that her eyes make me think of Down's syndrome. Maybe they are like that because of being born premature'. [...] While the mother nurses the baby the observer mistakenly writes, 'Julie [she mistakes mother's name for that of the baby] talks as she nurses, which seems to bother the baby.

At the end of the first observation, she makes another slip with names. She notes, 'Julie wants to leave but finds it difficult'. [...] and then, on the way out, 'I have the feeling of being hollow, my head is hollow, and I have no brain. I feel desperate that I might not remember everything that was said, because I feel empty'. The observer seems to be in touch with how much the mother identifies with her baby and is in touch with her own baby self as she breast-feeds. The observer clearly finds these feelings very painful – she feels empty, hollow, without a brain, perhaps picking up unspoken communications from mother

and baby. It is very common for observers to fear that their presence in the family might be invasive. However, we maintain that the greatest and most challenging fear the observer must deal with is undoubtedly the fear of being invaded by the baby and the family, and not having the usual ways to protect herself from it.<sup>4</sup>

In the second stage of the method, i.e. writing the account of the observation, the observer continues her solitary journey, with the challenge of having to convey an experience which is predominantly felt in a sensory way, without the support of words, logic, and reason. How to translate the sounds, smells, images, bodily sensations, gestures, looks, faces, and feelings into words? Observers are told to try, as Bick suggested (1964), as soon as possible, to write as best they can about what happened during the observation hour, including remnants of memories which contain fragments of the intense experiences during the observation. They are asked not to attribute meaning or explanation. As we said before, it is demanding psychic work trying to put together apparently loose pieces of experience into a coherent account.

When writing the report, quietly, alone, and without attempting anything other than a description of what happened, the observer provides herself with a new and different kind of contact with her own material, reconnecting with and giving meaning to the experience. The written observation notes slowly acquire some order, some elaboration, and, perhaps, resemble the account of a dream. In a way, the notes transform partial and fragmented memories into a relatively coherent discourse. Then the time comes to try to share with other observers in their seminar what happened during the observation. At times, there is a tendency to want to edit and polish the text, perhaps in an attempt to avoid exposing what the observer experiences in the observation, which can provoke inhibitions, fears, severe self-criticisms for gaps in memory, word lapses, which are, of course so valuable, when the object of study is the unconscious. We also encounter surprisingly talented writers who stir the group and enrich the discussion.

The third stage of the method, i.e. group supervision (presenting to the group or seminar), is a new phase in which the private experience gets its first public appearance. The solitary observer's arduous work is shown to her peers who share the common goal of trying to understand the material. At this stage, the discussion has fundamental importance in facilitating the emergence of potential meaning in the material. The observers, stimulated by the reading of the material, are engaged in a psychoanalytic group exercise in which diverse, and often-changing and developing points of view and perspectives emerge. Over time they may disappear, be discarded, or confirmed. The different observers observing different babies in different environments, all unique, uncover the complexity and singularity of psychic life, as well as the dynamics of each group. Once again one can see the similarities with the psychoanalytic process. It is necessary to look in detail, with enough time and patience, to avoid premature or hasty conclusions or interpretations. When the group allows itself to be touched and surprised by

the live, emotional experience with the mother-baby couple, primitive material may emerge which, when understood, can surprise and enlighten with ideas about new meanings and hypotheses.

As far as the supervisor is concerned, Bick (1964) only stated that she should be an experienced psychoanalyst, making clear that her method is rooted in psychoanalysis. As the first supervisor/seminar leader, Esther Bick had a rare intelligence, curiosity about the depths of the human soul. She was very gifted, and sensitively in touch with the experiences of tiny babies. Like all great psychoanalytic thinkers, starting from Freud, she had an exceptional talent for using her capacities to think new psychoanalytic thoughts about the lives of infants and young children. In supervision, she was able to foresee the multitude of problems that would be faced by other supervisors in coping with the multiple transferences involved in a group with several observers and different families with their babies. Bick was completely identified with the psychoanalytic method, and she valued the keystone of transmission and training in psychoanalysis, through person-to-person exchanges, within a relational matrix encompassing a multitude of relationships, both vertical, i.e. the supervisor-observer-baby-family relationship, and horizontal, i.e. the observer-observer relationship.

The method has triggered curiosity and interest from psychoanalysts across different continents, Europe, Latin America, North America, Africa, and Asia, many of whom have encouraged the use of the method and its applications in clinical practice and research in their home countries. While on the one hand, this wide propagation suggests that the method is being increasingly recognised it makes us think about the potential risks involved in the multiplication of supervisors and use of infant observation in training. Some institutions, or even non-institutional groups, adapt or modify the method, thus incurring the risk of losing its psychoanalytic foundational principles and transforming it into something else. For example, they reduce the time from 2 to 1 year or less, they form groups with too many participants (more than 5) or with 'listeners', they supervise by using video or Skype, they employ supervisors who have no consistent analytic training; they conduct sporadic supervisions rather than systematic weekly ones, individual rather than group supervision and so on.

### **Becoming an infant observation supervisor**

Becoming an infant observation supervisor is a complex challenge, which can be highly mobilising for the new teacher/supervisor who feels alone beginning this task. No formal training exists for such demanding work which includes the responsibility of maintaining and transmitting the technique, as well as sustaining the dynamic and continuity of the group and ensuring all is well for the observed family.

We believe that the creation of the infant observation method can be followed within the path of Esther Bick's personal development. Significantly, it

was only in 1948, almost 10 years after defending her thesis in Vienna, that Bick, invited by John Bowlby to organise a child psychotherapy training at the Tavistock Clinic, first put her method into practice. It was only 16 years later, after a lengthy experience as an infant observation supervisor, testing her theory and method, that she published her first paper about it, in 1964. This demonstrates to us the coherence and integrity of Bick as an analyst, firmly rooted in psychoanalysis, with her own ideas, method and theory.<sup>5</sup>

Becoming a supervisor in infant observation is part of a developmental process which entails the participation of all involved. The observer is formed in the relationship with the supervisor, the supervision group and the baby in her family, just as the supervisor is formed in the relationships with each observer, helped, where she has the opportunity, by the supporting role of an experienced supervisor or consultant. Hence, the importance of each one sustaining and maintaining her own function and task. We believe that if the supervisor is not experienced or is ill-prepared, the group runs the risk of breaking up or dissolving itself, as we have witnessed ourselves. So, what is the supervisor's role when the group fails?

It is important to contemplate the differences between supervisors; their personality, experience, the particularities of their training, and the impact they have on observers, influencing the group and the transmission and subsequent diffusion of the method. It is up to the supervisor to uphold, in delicate and firm fashion, the ethics of the Bick method of infant observation, which is firmly rooted in the ethics of psychoanalysis, and offers some guarantee of the authenticity of transmitting the method and maintaining the life of the infant observation group. There are many group transferences/counter-transferences, invasions, dissatisfactions, and competitions which need firm and friendly management by the supervisor. We believe there are some qualities of the supervisor that contribute to her function in maintaining the group's continuity: coherence, integrity, ethics, identification with the method, emotional containment and ability to cope with primitive anxieties, both in the group, amongst the participants and in situations of all kinds in the families of babies brought to the group.

It is the supervisor who helps to sustain the observer's function. So, who helps to sustain the new supervisor's function? In our experience of supervising new supervisors, supervision of supervision, supervisions took place according to the availability of both parties, the frequency of the supervision varying, from weekly to every 15 days or sporadically throughout the group's two years. The material used was the written report on the group supervision and the raw observation material report, both written by observers from the observation seminars.

The following are extracts from an account of an analyst's transition from her experience as an observer to becoming the supervisor of an infant observation group, and her search for an experienced analyst to supervise her in this process.

A few years ago, I decided to do an infant observation, driven by curiosity and my eagerness to learn. I had already completed my adult, as well as my child and adolescent, psychoanalytic training. But I was like a cat on hot bricks, at the idea of experiencing, step-by-step, the construction of psychic life, the origins of character, emotional development at its source in the most primitive. *I did not know* what it was, I had done no previous reading, I began stripped of my usual analytic tools and raw ...

Obviously, I felt a certain anxiety, faced with this unknown that I desired so much but that I also feared, since *I did not know* what was going to happen. It is not easy entering someone's home, placing myself as an observer, freeing myself of any judgments regarding any situation that could occur. It was necessary to be as stripped as possible from my usual analytic tools. My task was to be there, in that place, at that time, observing the relationship of a baby with its mother, and of a mother with her baby ...

At the time when I had the observation experience, *I did not know* that "just by observing" I would learn so much. I surprised myself, as I could not imagine that I would feel/connect so much, without uttering any words. Also, *I did not know* that just by being there, in that place, at that time, would produce such a sensory experience in me. I was also surprised to find out that my attitude, and not necessarily words, could have the meaning, depth and strength that it has. And ultimately, I also *did not know* that this experience would be a milestone in my personal and professional life ... An analyst who lives this profound experience has a feeling of a "before" and "after" doing infant observation ...

After some time, once the observation and the observation paper had been written, I began to participate in a group of psychologists (colleagues) who would gather with the aim of studying the observations of other colleagues, for research purposes. This experience was very rich; I was neither the observer nor the supervisor. I was somewhere else, examining observations by other colleagues ... Interestingly, I suddenly saw myself somewhere else, thinking, reflecting on these observations by observers who were not in the research group (applying the method in specific settings).

Time went by and I talked to some colleagues in training at a psychoanalytic training institution which I coordinate it together with a colleague. I imagine that my enchantment about what I had learnt came out of my mouth and through the pores of my skin ... Some colleagues approached me with a request that I lead an infant observation seminar ... And once again I found myself faced with the unknown ... Beginning something new is always a challenge ...

I experienced the impact of the invitation, a bit like news of a pregnancy and for a few days and a few weeks I digested the news. I thought, "How could I provide continuity so that more people can equip themselves personally and professionally by doing an infant observation? I saw myself handed a big responsibility, a new challenge but I also thought that one needs to face the challenges life serves us up in order to continue to learn and to grow. Following this I went to talk to a psychoanalytic professional who had extensive infant observation experience. She agreed to supervise me, and then I was eager to start.

I think it is crucial to prepare oneself to be a supervisor in infant observation, but this preparation is not theoretical; it is a human, natural preparation, based on lived experiences during life history. The function of infant observation supervisor further opens up

the analyst's internal space. It expands her containing capacity, with several babies and observers to hold. Five psychology professionals applied to do the observation! How am I going to look after five babies?' This was the first question upon seeing the five psychologists in the group. The start of becoming their supervisor was not easy.

### Some reflections on the supporting role of the supervisor of the supervisor

The testimony quoted above illustrates very clearly the transition from observer to supervisor within a process of personal maturation, which reawakens interest in the origins of psychic life and revives the previous observation experience.

With the request to supervise the infant observation supervision, we came into contact, once again with the demanding task of training and the transmission in psychoanalysis, of which the starting point is tolerance of the unknown and uncertainty, the psychoanalytic attitude of respect, patience, observing and reflecting before intervening, receptiveness, containment, and a wish to learn. Formal 'knowledge' remains outside, just as the observer needs to be stripped of her usual clinical and theoretical tools in order to be able to observe the baby and its family.

We were excited about the idea of bringing our psychoanalytic attitude to the new role of apprentice-supervisors, working with new infant observation supervisors as peers. We all shared the goal of seeking to understand the observation material and also, we hoped, of strengthening our confidence in the infant observation method and facilitating the further development of our own psychoanalytic attitude and listening.

We began the work calmly, believing that as it unfolded, demands would arise naturally. Without theoretical or technical teachings, in the form of 'classes', the work went on, observing the idiosyncracies of each person, in an authentic and sincere atmosphere between colleagues, with different experiences: one analyst was a beginner as infant observation supervisor, and another analyst, an experienced supervisor, was also a beginner in the new role of supervising the teaching.

What makes an infant observation supervisor seek another professional to talk about her new function? We noticed that each search for supervision was unique. The reasons, needs, and objectives, were particular, and were to become clearer as meetings unfolded; their sequence was very important. It is important to stress, however, that psychoanalytic clinical supervision arises from the analyst or psychotherapist's desire to understand, as much as possible of the unconscious clinical material, and this is no different in seeking supervision for the task of leading an infant observation seminar. Borgogno (2004) reminds us of the importance that Freud attributed to the peer group, of at least one person, who helped to formulate thought, to distance oneself from the inner experience, by giving comment as well as personal

recognition and validation. He notes the various partners who helped him in his investigations.

The experience is shared in supervision, and the supervisor of the supervisor has a kind of 'grandparent' supporting function of witness. Here, she must struggle with the attempts of the supervisee to turn her into someone offering advice, direct teaching, passing judgement and taking on the 'parent' role herself, just as Bick wrote that the observer should avoid identifying with roles projected into her by members of the family (Bick, 1964). The supervisor is neither master nor teacher offering lessons on technique, theory or offering advice to the supervisee.

There is always risk involved in the thin line between supervision and personal analysis. The supervisor needs to look out for being cast in the role of analyst offering interpretation; the supervisor, like the observer, needs to strip away her professional tools in order to see and to take in what is seen, heard and felt. Like the analytic process, the supervision is a process of *joint working through*, and it begins when the supervisee seeks supervision, and then writes up the material to be discussed, just as the observer writes an observation report. The supervision has already begun with the writing and reflection in preparation. When the supervisor meets the supervision group, part of the process of supervision has already taken place, sometimes quite unconsciously.

Maintaining a certain distance, the supervisor of the supervisor, like a grandparent vis a vis the baby's parents, is in a privileged position with previous experience which enables her to look more accurately sometimes and in detail; this facilitates discrimination, reflection and the emergence of possible new understanding of the material. The new supervisor feels less isolated, encouraged to have confidence in listening to herself, in a similar way to mature grandparents being supportive rather than taking over. The supervisor of the new supervisor will be encouraging, and, one hopes, will encourage further thoughts rather than simply instructing, expanding some of the supervisor's intuitions and containing her in order to help her feel more confident in what she notices and feels.

As an illustration of the way, we see the relationship between the new supervisor, the supervisor of the supervisor, the observer and the observed baby, we would like to evoke here, the image of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Virgin and the Child with St Anne'. In this painting, there are two obliquely set figures superimposed; Mary (the new mother/new supervisor figure) is seated on her mother's knee, St Anne (the grandmother/supervisor of the supervisor figure). She leans forward to contain the child (the observer being trained) who is, in turn, looking at his mother/supervisor whilst also holding a lamb (the observed baby). Everyone's gaze is in alignment.

Even though each supervisor is unique, over time we have begun to discern some patterns. For example, it is common for new supervisors to be anxious about the initial composition of the group, before they find babies. There is universal fear of the unknown, and of failure and supervisors feel uncertain about

whether the group will be sustainable. This is similar to pregnancy, waiting with more or less patience for the arrival of a baby. What lies ahead is unknown and after the babies are born and observations presented, there may be an intensification of conflicts, competition, and anxiety between the observers many of whom struggle early on to describe in much detail. Much depends on the supervisor's capacity to encourage and to contain.

As the baby grows, so do family members, and the observers themselves in the group. Generally, things work out and the group learns a lot. But here, in our view is the importance of systematic supervision of supervision. The new supervisor will acquire confidence if she is able regularly to talk about what happens and to think a lot about meaning and the development of the baby's mind and ego. The supervisor and the observers all acquire greater confidence and are able to be increasingly curious and creative about the meaning of what they see and what will happen next.

### Final considerations

Esther Bick's revolutionary psychoanalytic infant observation method is turning 70 years this year. Looking back, we can say that this powerful psychoanalytic training tool leaves more to understand its full potential to help expand and deepen psychoanalytic thinking and knowledge, and the care provided not only to infants, children, and adolescents, but also to adults and the elderly.

In the supervision of the supervision experience, observers, supervisors and their own supervisors all become participant observers of a clinical learning experience which can enrich everyone and promotes a mutual validation of their functions. In this process, it is always helpful to encourage the focus on the baby and to notice when observers or the seminar group are drawn away from that.

The function of infant observation supervisor involves an identification with Bick and her method. The supervisor's wish to share the experience and the transformations and to contain this process is part of the containment which encourages development. There is, of course, a personal benefit for those who supervise the supervision, enriching but difficult to measure. All those who follow Esther Bick's thinking believe that it enables the observers, their supervisor, and the supervisor's supervisor to enrich their capacity to be in touch with wordless, unintegrated, very early experiences, a learning process which is never-ending and fascinating when contained by another.

The testimony, which the supervisor often receives, at the end of this two-year learning process, can also help to validate this 'impossible' supervision function, as illustrated by the comments from one observer, in her last supervision:

I said to my analyst that my infant observation experience was equivalent to 10 years of analysis! Haha ... Seriously, I couldn't imagine how much delving into it would do for me.

The seminar leader thought that this type of testimony/feedback would also help seminar leaders to face the inherent difficulties in the gestation of a group and in finding her own solutions and paths in this ‘impossible task’.

## Notes

1. We use the term ‘function’ rather than ‘role’ to emphasise that it refers to an *analytic function*. The term ‘role’ belongs to the realm of the social issues, rather than unconscious, psychic issues. That is why in the psychoanalytic literature we also use ‘paternal function’ or ‘maternal function’.
2. We use the term ‘supervisor’ (adopted by Portuguese speaking authors) rather than ‘seminar leader’ or ‘teacher’ (adopted by English speaking authors), because it is an important and already instituted function which makes up the psychoanalytic tripod of psychoanalytic training: psychoanalytic theory, personal analysis, and supervision.
3. Observers and supervisors are both male and female, but for simplicity, we have used ‘she’ and ‘herself’ throughout. We have also used ‘she’ for therapist or psychoanalyst.
4. We suggest that psychotherapists and analysts might at times use interpretation as a defence against feeling invaded by so much primitive anxiety in the consulting room.
5. Editor’s footnote: Bick was also well known to be a very reluctant writer.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on the contributors

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