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Managing intimacy and distance: an exploration of links between the experience of an observed mother and baby and that of her observer

Alexandra de Rementeria*

This paper illustrates a new mother's conflict between different modes of parenting and how these are determined by very different states of mind. It explores the observed mother's oscillations between being 'regulator', 'facilitator' and 'reciprocator', the links with regulation of emotional distance and the impact that the different modes have on the mother-baby relationship. The author hypothesises that a parallel experience can occur between mother and observer in which they both seek an external authority in order to regulate or defend against the threat of overwhelming, unconscious, infantile anxieties. The observer was also identified with the new mother. The paper considers how a successful negotiation between the 'facilitator' mother and 'reciprocator' mother over time can allow for healthy development for both her and the baby and for their relationship.

Keywords: observation; mothering; regulation; attunement; second-skin; intimacy; emotional distance; identification

This article explores some of the themes that emerged from a two-year infant observation, focusing primarily on the issue of regulating emotional distance within relationships. It addresses how this played out between the mother, Maria, and her baby Ruben and also explores parallels with my own struggles to establish the observer role and maintain the right distance. Both Maria and I found ourselves powerfully identified, she with her son and I with her as a new mother. At times we both seemed to be pulled toward an idealisation of merger. In our attempts to regain boundaries we each invoked an external authority; for her it came in the form of Gina Ford, for me it was the Tavistock guidance on maintaining the observer role. I hope to show how, at times, these responses

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seemed to blunt our capacity to be receptive and engaged in regulating emotional distance within the to and fro of actual relationships.

Introducing Ruben, his family and initiation into infant observation

I was apprehensive about starting my infant observation, which was undertaken as part of my MA in Infant Mental Health at the Tavistock Clinic, validated by University of East London. We were urged to look closely, and told we would be surprised by what we would see. However, at some level I knew that it was not a matter of whether or not my eye could be trained to attend to the detail. To tune in to the unconscious communications of the pair was to require a reawakening of my infantile self and all the associated baby experiences of neediness, unspent fury and unsated hunger. Part of me was not sure that I wanted to embark on this journey at all.

To complicate matters further, I was to become pregnant with my first child towards the end of the two-year observation. In addition to being identified with Ruben and my infant self, I became powerfully identified with Maria and invested in her success as a mother.

I was shopping for presents when Maria contacted me to say that she was home and ready to begin. Only dimly aware of my uneasy feelings, I let my nervousness become imbued with some of the childlike excitement around Christmas. Surrounded by twinkling lights I had an urge to dive in. I asked if I might come right away and Maria agreed. As I watched them breastfeed on that first visit, I was struck by the way Ruben's breathing and body seemed to meld into hers. Despite her angular frame, he seemed to disappear into the fold of her arms. I now wonder about my own motivation to dive in and make the distance and time between us disappear by coming right away.

Maria and her husband, Ashwin, are Argentinian and Indian,¹ respectively. I am a white woman. They both grew up in the UK, but their parents have returned to their countries of origin. Both sets of grandparents visited in the first year but much of the transition to parenthood was done without the immediate support and influence of family and 'home culture'. Maria complained that Ruben's early arrival meant she had not packed the bag to take to hospital. She found herself suddenly caught unawares. In retrospect, this comment betrayed her fear that chaos might ensue. From before the birth Maria believed that chaos could be reined in and made safe by her imposing a structure on their lives together: She intended to follow Gina Ford's programme (1999), establishing routines for sleeping and eating, rather than letting them emerge.

Ruben had light-brown hair, which grew into soft curls, and large brown almond-shaped eyes. He was born three weeks premature, jaundiced and small. At four weeks 'the routine' was established. He was put down to sleep at specific times, alone, and feeds were four-hourly and immovable. By eight weeks he was beginning to take great pleasure in face-to-face interactions with Maria, family and friends. However, she tended to lead in her play with him, not giving herself

the chance to consider his intentions. She was also quick to fill their week with groups and activities. She seemed to be striving to impose order and meaning on their time together. By 12 weeks there had been a sea-change. He relished the games he had seemed to find intrusive before and, as he became more animated, she attuned to him beautifully. By 16 weeks it was clear that, like his father, Ruben suffered from eczema, and a multitude of food allergies were discovered on weaning. He managed to remain in good humour most of the time and continued to gain weight steadily. By six months he was sleeping through the night in his own room, and it was easy to see how he took into himself, through the bedtime routine, enough of the good experience of his parents' loving care, to sustain him through the night.

Ashwin rocks Ruben, singing a lullaby he has learnt in Spanish. Maria stands next to them, rocking in time. They both kiss him before putting him down, then they both kiss him again once he's in the cot - a pleasurable ritual that they are all familiar with. (6 months)

At seven months Maria returned to work four days a week. After a long and difficult search for a child-minder, they finally found Eileen, who was to become a close family friend. I spent a pleasant hour most weeks watching Maria cook and Ruben potter in and out of the kitchen in the evening. He crawled up and down the corridor, occasionally taking her things of interest and she sang to him over her shoulder. They mastered the art of a bond over a distance. Yet it was clear that the long daily separation did cost them something. Sometimes I observed him for his last hour at the child-minder's and saw that the pain of separation tainted some of the pleasure of reunion when Maria collected him.

Theoretical frameworks

I have used three theoretical frameworks in thinking about Maria's style of mothering. I begin with Joan Raphael-Leff's work (1993) and her description of three approaches to parenting. At one extreme is the 'regulator', who expects the non-discriminating baby to make a passive adaptation to her lead. The demanding baby must be conditioned into being 'good'. Taking the opposite approach, a mother seeks to subsume herself in a symbiotic merger of self with baby, as she becomes a 'mere' facilitator for meeting the needs of her idealised baby. The third way allows for mother and baby to negotiate within a reciprocal relationship. The 'reciprocator' allows herself to receive her baby's communications and to respond to them, at times by meeting his demands and at times by setting limits as to what can be demanded of her. In so doing she gives him two crucial experiences in relation to her: a sense of agency and a sense of boundaries. His emerging sense of agency needs contingent responses but in order to know where to draw the line she will need to own and tolerate her ambivalence towards her baby. I hope to show how Maria moves between these positions during the mothering of her baby. Winnicott's thoughts on the earliest mother/infant relationship are helpful, to my mind, in thinking about Maria's response to

becoming a mother. When he asserted that ‘There is no such thing as a baby’, he explained that there was only a mother and baby (1952). The baby cannot exist alone. A very young baby needs his mother to be both a reciprocator, alive to his innate capacity for human relating, and a facilitator, capable of merging with him in phantasy so that she experiences his needs as her own and can therefore meet them almost before he knows he has needs. Yet she must also retain enough of herself as an adult and separate being to prevent herself from becoming overwhelmed by his experiences. Joyce (2010) describes this as the paradox that should be held and not resolved and I will return to her explorations of Winnicott’s ideas. Finally, Bick’s (1968) ideas around second-skin formation will be explored, in relation to my own use of defences to help manage my new role as an observer and also the parallels that might be drawn with Maria’s difficulties with aspects of her new role as a mother.

Some thoughts on my struggles to establish and maintain the observer role

Before looking more closely at Maria and Ruben’s relationship I want to reflect a little on some of the methodological and ethical issues that arose for me and impacted on my capacity to maintain an appropriate emotional distance from the family. On my third visit, I noted feeling uncomfortable when Ashwin arrived home and came to kiss his wife and child. I was sitting with them on a small sofa and suddenly I felt that I was in the way. In the observation write-up I comment on his friendliness and record the long conversation with him and Maria about their adjustment to parenthood, but I also comment on how this made me feel like a family guest and took my attention away from observing Ruben. In retrospect, I enjoyed being treated like a family friend and did little to communicate that this was not my role. Perhaps I was grateful for a way to remain enveloped within the family because I also noted that, when Ashwin assumed his rightful place in their threesome, I felt pushed out of the intimacy that had been established between Maria, Ruben and me before Ashwin had come home.

Later in the paper I write about my countertransference experience, exploring some of the aspects of observing a young infant that might have motivated me to couple with Maria in this way, but I also want to comment on another pull to transgress the observer role. At the end of this same visit, we overran the hour because we were chatting. I was embarrassed. Ashwin laughed, asking if it really mattered if it was a bit more than an hour. This was my opportunity to assert the importance of boundaries and so signify that there was something particular about my role in their family that differentiated me from a friend or guest. I said the right words, something about the course requiring us to keep to the times and the task in hand, but I think that somehow I conveyed that I was not wholly convinced myself, at the time. He responded with a conspiratorial smile: ‘Yeah, but you’re not at college now, are you?’

Three months later I found myself in an awkward situation again. Ashwin asked if he could read an observation write-up. I explained that the whole idea was that I learned to describe exactly what I saw in as much detail as possible without interpretation, and that if I had to keep in mind how they might interpret what I wrote this would be very difficult. Maria reiterated that I was only describing. The subtext was that I was not having and recording secret opinions about them. Over time, I began to realise that part of my difficulty in resisting the invitation to become friends was that at some level I wanted to make some reparation for my guilt about writing up and discussing the observations. I had gained consent to observe their baby grow in relationship to them. However, the psychoanalytic framework from which I approached this task meant that I was there to observe unconscious phenomena which, by definition, they could not be entirely, or at all, conscious of. How valid, then, was the consent? In a therapeutic setting, it is part of the therapist's role to bear responsibility for such inequities in the relationship and to bear responsibility for maintaining the boundaries, but Maria and Ashwin had not sought therapeutic support. I had assumed a position of power, I felt, by setting limits, to my time and my thoughts, and that this established inequity in our relationship. When Ashwin pushed a little against these boundaries I found it very difficult to resist or justify resisting these attempts because of my unease with the imbalance of power. Equally I could not become their friend and remain in role as observer.

Wise (1987) evaluates a fellow qualitative researcher's style of engagement with participants, warning that, 'In encouraging reciprocity and intimacy within the research relationship, Oakley (1985) may indeed be fostering the patronisation and exploitation that she seeks to avoid' (p. 66). I felt myself to be in an impossible situation, sometimes angry with my institution for providing what felt to be inadequate or, at times, impossible guidance. At other times I felt remorse; the Tavistock was wise and benign and if I had only been able to adhere to their requirements, to establish the boundaries properly, I would not have felt so adrift.

I was struggling to hold a paradox. The observer role requires intimate engagement with those being observed. It depends on the observer's subjective experience of this engagement for data. Yet, it also depends on a degree of distance, the observer must refrain from participating in the action as far as is possible. At times I could not hold the tension between being neither neutral nor active, being neither detached nor an agent and I would let the tension break and swing from one extreme or the other. I was pulled to transgress boundaries – as when I agreed to go for a coffee with Maria and Ruben – and at other times I followed the rules rigidly and awkwardly. Perhaps some of my anxieties had got mixed up with Maria's personal doubts about her capacity to be a 'good enough' mother. Perhaps my ambivalent feelings about the Tavistock guidance were counter-transferentially bound up with her need for clear guidance on parenting? Perhaps I felt adrift because she felt unanchored, especially if she was feeling out

of touch with her own experience of being mothered and, indeed, cut-off from her mother tongue.

Holding the paradox (the first three months)

In parallel with my personal dilemma in establishing my observer role Maria was grappling with the paradox described by Joyce (2010) as a time when 'the mother and baby exist in a paradoxical dyadic potential space where oneness and twoness coexist' (p. 62). During my first observation Mother and baby did seem to have re-merged, since birth, as a complete and discrete unit, calling to mind Mahler's concept (1975) of omnipotent fusion of infant with satisfying object. A young baby has a rightful expectation to dive in and connect with its preconceived satisfying object, his mouth knows to grope for a nipple before it has actually met with either nipple or breast; indeed his survival depends upon this readiness to dive into his mother. However, as early as one week into life, any possibility of an unfettered relationship was under threat. I learnt, later in that observation, that Ruben's jaundice, and a problem with the skin attaching his tongue to the floor of his mouth, meant that there were concerns about whether he would get enough milk. It had been recommended that they express and bottle-feed in addition to breast-feeding, because it would be easier for him to get milk and easier for them to monitor his intake. To this end they were also advised to time the length of his feeds. Right from the beginning, Maria's unease about letting herself *feel* his needs, and trust that she would be able to meet them, and her own, seemed to be compounded by these anxieties.

At my second visit Maria outlined two main problems that she hoped to resolve using 'the routine'. Firstly, Ruben was apt to fall asleep at the breast and not finish his feed, causing more concern as to whether he was getting enough. Secondly, they wanted him to start sleeping in his room, which would involve him settling himself alone. He would be put down to sleep at specific times, alone, and feeds would be four-hourly.

By the third observation Ruben was four weeks old and the routine had been established. Once he was washed, massaged and dressed, Maria brought him to the sofa, lay back and lifted her feet onto the seat to cradle him between her thighs in a propped-up position. She said that he was sleepy, but that it was not naptime. She sang him nursery rhymes with his tiny hands in hers, making him 'do' the actions. He looked puppet-like. She did not watch for clues about his intentions. Instead she led the play slightly intrusively and soon he began to cry. In response:

Maria picks him up and it seems to me that she instinctively holds him in a feeding position. He starts to mouth. She says that he may be hungry, but she seems a little reluctant. While stating that it is not really time for his next feed, she brings him to the breast and all three of us relax. He becomes still and drops off, waking and feeding and going back to sleep in a blissful cycle. (3 weeks)

I wondered whether her working at keeping him awake required a deadening of her sensitivity to him. Her receptivity to him came alive here, despite her best efforts to be the 'regulator'. It seemed Maria may have been struggling intra-psychically with what Joan Raphael-Leff (1993) termed '...bipolar conflicts – where a mother is torn between facilitator and regulator extremes within herself'. (p. 142). She seemed mistrusting of her instinctive response. It was a guilty pleasure when her arms betrayed the routine, bringing him to her breast for an enjoyable feed, when it was not the right time. Yet, it was through this act that he recovered from his distress after her mis-attunement. My noting that all three of us relaxed as he started to feed suggested that Ruben may have projected his frustration into Maria (and me), so that it were as though a hunger we all experienced had been satisfied when he was put to the breast. My own experience of a pull to act, to have the hunger sated, convinced me that, without being conscious of the process, Maria received the projection as a communication and her body acted, independently of her conscious intentions and resolve. Then it was Maria who was pulled into an action that contradicted the words she spoke. It seemed that her autonomy and the boundary between her and Ruben was undermined. In the service of his care she became a 'facilitator'. Her discomfort, perhaps with the loss of boundaries that ensued when she slipped into becoming the 'facilitator', led her to swing, sometimes too far, in the other direction; unable at first to make a thoughtful move toward a reciprocal engagement, she took up a regulator stance.

I felt that it was a relief for Maria to collapse the paradox by bringing 'the routine' between them, thus insisting on their separateness. I also felt that this required some cutting off by Maria, of receptivity to Ruben's communications. In the following excerpt Maria is trying to keep Ruben awake, for the routine. She holds him, propped upright with her hands under his armpits as his heavy head droops, then lays him on a mat jangling the toys suspended above him:

He responds to her jangles with little kicks. After a while Ruben begins to look away and Maria looks up at the TV more. Maria looks glum. She is in a position that was ideal when leaning over Ruben to talk to him but as she strains to see the TV her neck is crooked and her posture seems hunched and sad. I find I am increasingly aware of the TV and in fact following the program (The Weakest Link) myself. It strikes me that Maria is losing interest in Ruben and so am I. (8 weeks)

Maria's apparently depressed and detached feelings came after she had been working against his bodily need for sleep. She appeared to be steeling herself against her own sense of his needs.

A few moments later:

Maria leaves the room unannounced, Ruben becomes very still for a moment, throws his head stiffly one way then the other. He kicks and makes a 'pre-cry' 'nyaah'sound. When Maria returns he pauses then continues kicking, face screwed up. She puts her hand on his

tummy and speaks to him in a soothing voice. He becomes more still. Maria removes her hand but continues to lean over him smiling and making 'conversational faces'. He gazes into her face with a relaxed open expression and wide-open eyes. I notice that I can now hear his breathing and it has settled into a steady to and fro of gentle, nasal, snuffling intakes and a louder and satisfying exhaling through the mouth. I like being able to hear it and feel its rhythm is rocking me into a calm state. I have blocked out the TV now!... I comment that he seems to really enjoy being engaged with her right now. Maria says "Yeah, it's really great... but you can't do this all day." (8 weeks)

Maria has helped him recover from his distress at her absence. However, this happens through a different kind of bond or link – a connection through the eyes, not the sleep-bringing comfort of bodily merging. When mother and child become two separate beings who are aware of their separateness and able to bridge the gap, through eye contact or the sound of the other's voice, it is of course a developmental achievement but Joyce (2010) warns of the dangers when: 'an infant is prematurely faced with his separateness'. (p. 63)

When Maria is absent he needs to hold himself together physically using his own musculature. At times I worried that he might come to use his 'second skin' (Bick, 1968) defences to cope with her emotional distancing as well as her physical absences. Later it became clear that my fears were unfounded and I had to reflect that close observation of a baby managing his separateness had stirred up feelings of panic and foreboding in me.

While a phantasy of merger is not without its risks, especially if it comes to feel too real, there are clear evolutionary advantages for a species such as ours with such dependent young. The infant who cannot meet his own needs flourishes when his carer literally feels his pain as her own. This heightened receptivity, observed in most mothers in the perinatal period is less to the fore when a mother defers to the baby manual and the authority within. Maria no longer relied on her sensitivity to inform her care decisions. She would not now react to his projections to inform her of his needs, will not now act as she had in that early feed, mentioned above. If she had allowed herself to feel what he projected, then she would have had to experience his infantile hunger and longing as well as her own. It seemed to me that cutting off from her receptivity helped to keep the knowledge of infantile pain and need at bay, by deadening some of her feelings.

In contrast, a 'reciprocator' is more aware of the maternal struggle and the paradox. She remains receptive to her baby's communications, but in confronting her ambivalence she recognises the pull towards regulation at times. Without some pull towards regulation an unhealthy, enmeshed relationship between mother and baby would develop. Recognition of resentment at the relentlessness of the task of mothering leads to some healthy withdrawal at times, so mother's own needs can be met. These moments serve as important spurs to development and some more appropriate emotional distance as the baby grows. The mother bears full responsibility for the decisions she makes, which will

include owning some glee at resisting the demand of her baby for perfect care, and she will feel concern and guilt at times about setting limits and whether she has been too harsh. The regulator-mother, following instruction from a baby manual, misses opportunities for working through such situations, and misses some of the satisfaction of learning from experience, and learning from mistakes. There was something achingly sad about Maria's comment suggesting that even the good aspects were spoilt by the fact that they could not fill the whole day with them.

Ambivalence did not feel tolerable at this moment, the bad threatened to obliterate the good. In order to tolerate the bad times all of us must be bolstered by the good. However, if the price of 'the routine', for Maria, was desensitisation on her part, this might also have undermined her pleasure in their good times together because a defence against feeling his need *of* her might also have dulled her perception of his joy *in* her. Maria did seem vulnerable to joylessness and perhaps even depression at times. The threat of depression was also hinted at in her eagerness to keep herself and Ruben busy. The stay-at-home parent's week can have a shapelessness to it that contrasts with the identity affirming structure of the working week. I wondered if Maria was trying to replicate this with their rota of classes and activities.

I was also interested by the way we both lost Ruben to the TV. Perhaps we took refuge in the pleasantly numbing programme as a defence against the pain of sustaining emotional contact at that moment. Later Maria told me that she had confided in Ashwin that she found it hard to be interested in Ruben all day, day after day. Ashwin had comforted her by pointing out that it was bound to happen: she was not, after all, a two-month-old baby. I think Ashwin made an important and supportive point: one cannot always readily, or without pain, understand or appreciate a baby's communications, and the baby cannot appreciate his mother and communicate with her in her full adult complexity. Further, relating to a young baby is hard work and does not offer much ordinary narcissistic reward.

I also wondered about my own resistance. Perhaps I too was resisting a certain level of emotional engagement with Ruben, which might have involved my own infantile feelings. Perhaps something similar was happening to Maria and to me. I have described how I invoked the authority of the course guidance when I felt a pull to transgress the boundaries of the observer role. By calling on this extrinsic authority, rather than an internal understanding of how to develop or sustain the observer role, I sidestepped something. Perhaps I did not make use of the opportunity to think through the question of an appropriate distance between myself, Ruben and his family.

Perhaps another parallel can be drawn here, between Maria and me, in that we could both be thought of as, temporarily, self-protecting by pulling on a second-skin. Jackson and Nowers (2002) describe second-skin as a 'muscular or intellectual carapace'. They stress that the skin is both a

physical organ acting as a boundary between inside and outside, self and object, literally holding the parts of the body together, and the skin [is] a metaphor symbolizing the alpha – functioning and containing mind of the mother'. (Bion, 1962a, p. 209)

In the absence of an internalised containing maternal mind, second-skin formations may manifest. Perhaps in our new roles as observer and mother Maria and I felt a little at sea, unable to get in touch with an internal container. Both my inflexible reliance on the course guidance and Maria's use of the routine felt too rigid and superimposed. For Maria and me such rigid rules may have acted like the second skin, as a barrier to somatic and psychic merging. But neither of us, in this state of mind could provide the 'alpha function' of a containing experience. Perhaps there were times when being with Ruben put Maria and me in touch with baby parts of ourselves that did not feel sufficiently well contained to free us to engage with him in an undefended way.

From regulating to negotiating and inter-subjective joy (three months to six months)

By three months he was sitting up and his interest in the world beyond his mother has quickened. She seemed relieved and supported his explorations, proving to be an exquisitely sensitive partner, as illustrated by this game with a helium balloon:

She draws it towards him on the string speaking in a slightly teasing, anticipation-building sing-song. When the balloon is very close to his face he wriggles and kicks out his limbs with great excitement. Maria then pauses for a moment and he holds a little more still, staring at the shiny foil balloon until she releases it accompanying its ascent with a drawn-out ascending phrase. At this, Ruben's body flips into jiggly action and he makes explosive little noises. Sensing his pleasure at seeing it right up at the ceiling, she leaves it there for a while. She then repeats the whole process several times using very similar timings. Ruben's pleasure in this is infectious and we both laugh with him. I have the feeling that our pleasure in his adds something to the quality of his pleasure. He seems to be taking something in that keeps him topped up and in this state of excitement. Maria then tries leaving a longer pause between the drawing down and the letting go. Ruben notices and bounces himself wildly with a big gummy smile until Maria 'gives in' and lets it go. (12 weeks)

Ruben has moved on from being a passive baby adapted to the 'regulator mother' because his sense of agency is developing through their play, if not their care routines. Yet, some of Maria's play with him is still intrusive, even frightening at times. At four months I observe them playing a game in which she kneels over him in his bouncer, arms raised before swooping down and gently brushing his face with her fingers. He watches as she sails up but flinches when she swoops again. Once she has risen again, however, he breaks into a large

open-mouthed smile and jiggles, kicking out both feet. I am hugely relieved to see his enjoyment of this game because a few weeks earlier, after flinching, he froze and looked frightened. At the time I had felt uncomfortable that she repeated it several times, apparently not noticing his response. I wondered whether this was a symptom of having had to distance or cut herself off in order to be able to implement the routine. His obvious pleasure in the game, however, left me with the feeling that he was 'growing into' her mothering. He may have had to face his separateness a little too soon but mother's capacity to bridge the gap with reciprocity in play seems to have put them back on track.

At five and a half months their relationship is suffused with the warmth of intimate knowledge:

Soft light comes through the blinds and the room is pleasantly stuffy. I cannot see his face. Maria wakes him by gently rubbing his back and saying his name in an ascending call. He begins to draw up his legs and his bottom rises. She bends in closer and her call becomes playfully insistent. He is making jokey sleepy protest sounds, just like an adult might: 'mnnmah'. She smiles and tells me to come and look. He still has his eyes closed but he is smiling. She kisses him softly and lifts him out of his cot. (5 ½ months)

They were sharing a joke even as he is on the cusp of consciousness. I felt quite envious of their intimacy. The days of merger were safely behind them and it seemed as though Maria now felt it safe to come together in this exquisitely intimate way.

Separation and weaning, intimacy and aggression (six months to eight months)

Mother had been encouraging Ruben to try solids but he still had many bottles. In the lead up to her return to work, however, Maria seemed to be trying to wean him from the intimacy of their bottle feeds. At seven months I observed a feed in which it seemed that Ruben was becoming aware that this last bastion of somatic merging was under threat and needed to be defended:

He blinks a few times so lazily that he almost has his eyes shut but when he opens them he is looking into his mother's face. His hands are wondering up and down the bottle, and occasionally one reaches toward her face and lands, tapping gently, on her chest. Maria apologises to me for "going quiet", explaining that he doesn't like her to talk to other people while he is feeding. I answer saying something about what a special time it is for him and it being understandable he wants her undivided attention. I am obviously not brief enough because, as though to prove the point, he pulls himself up spitting out the bottle to glare at me. I apologise and he returns to his feed, glancing back at me a couple of times out of the corner of his eye while Maria and I exchange a smile. (7 months)

One week later Ruben had started going to his child minder more regularly. Now he seemed to be resisting the 'blissed out' and merged state of earlier feeds:

He holds on firmly to the bottle, feeds for a while, goes a little dewy eyed but does not completely lose himself in the feed. He pulls the teat out of his mouth regularly and sometimes clamps down on it really hard with his gums while pulling at it so that the teat stretches out. He repeatedly pulls himself up in to a sitting position and resists being tipped back again. (7 months)

Three weeks after that his play with a mouse doll while he waited for a feed, he demonstrated savage oral aggression:

Maria leaves the room to prepare his bottle. The mouse doll is made of a patchwork of brightly coloured fabric. It has enormous long floppy ears and a sausage-like stuffed snout with spindly arms and legs that hang limply. He puts the nose in his mouth. I imagine that it gives a satisfying amount of resistance. He bites harder into it, wrinkling his nose and shutting his eyes with the effort. Taking an ear in each hand, in order to get a better purchase on it, he pulls the mouse away from him and holds the nose fast in his mouth so that he is yanking it so hard in two directions that he starts to wobble. The mouse arms and legs swing violently until eventually he topples over. . . (8 months)

Moments later the feed begins and Maria's role in creating distance during feeding becomes evident, as does his anger about it.

Maria sits cross-legged on the floor opposite me and lifts him into her lap but facing out towards me! She puts the bottle to his mouth and he takes in the teat and sucks and swallows at a fast rate taking half the bottle without a pause. Then he begins to slow the pace and, as he does so, he turns a little so that he is facing side-on and can glance up at her face. He also begins to reach up her body with his left arm so that the back of it gently rubs her breast as he feeds. His face relaxes, as his eye lids flutter and close momentarily. All this is lost when she suddenly props him up again. The arm that had been against her body he now brings round to cup the bottle. Soon he begins to tap the bottle, at first in the distracted and sensual way he had moved it up and down her body but increasingly the tapping gets harder and faster until it is more like hitting. He is no longer drinking the milk but holding the bottle in place by biting down on the teat while he hits it from the side. (8 months)

Once his hunger was satisfied Ruben attempted to bring the couple together again through his positioning and caresses. However, when mother returned him to his outward-facing disconnected place, the bottle became the recipient of a punitive attack on the withholding mother/breast. Likierman (2001) describes Klein's observation about feeding and weaning, 'When the object becomes available again the infant is simultaneously relieved yet vengeful. . . these two contradictory impulses are united in the single phantasy of a vengeful devouring' (p. 104). Ruben's play with the mouse-doll seemed to betray just such a phantasy.

I found the themes of frustration, desire and aggression quite difficult to think about and it took me more than a week to sit down to write this up. However, his determined possessiveness of his mother's attention and nipple, as represented by the mouse nose; his not wanting to tolerate a third person, are all

part of healthy development. Yet it was painful to watch him lose her to work, and when the very intimacy that might have sustained him through this loss was withheld, I found it hard to bear. Earlier we saw how the rigidity of the routine seemed to serve as a defence against anxiety about merger. Here it seemed that fear about the looming separation, the too-big gap when she returned to work, was dealt with by forcing a 'manageable' distance between them in the present as a sort of preparation or inoculation against the anticipated pain.

Back to work, increasing mobility and the bond over a distance (eight months to one year)

At 11 months they seemed to have adapted to a new mode of relating. They had mastered the art of a bond over a distance. Here they were reunited after a long day apart. They were together for a few moments in the sitting room before Maria went to put the supper on.

Crawling after her cheerfully he sits in the hall and looks into the kitchen at her where she is singing and cooking his supper. She sings certain refrains at him and he laughs then crawls up and down the hall before returning to check on her. (11 months)

His increased mobility and mastery of gross motor skills meant their games could be played across greater distances but, importantly, also meant he could have more control over the comings and goings.:

Ruben climbs the step into the bathroom turns around in a tight little circle, then crawls back down into the hall. He repeats this several times at some speed. When Maria notices what he is doing she also gets on all fours in the Kitchen, out of sight of Ruben, and when he next emerges from the bathroom she sticks her head out and calls 'peek-a-boo'. He startles and then giggles and they take it in turns to jump out on each other. He is an independent agent, a real player in the game and cackles heartily when he makes her jump.

He seemed to really delight in this peek-a-boo game. Perhaps he was becoming more confident about the idea of a mummy that disappears but then reliably returns. However, it seemed significant that he was now the one to introduce a gap to be bridged.

When Maria returned to the cooking, I was crouching, leaning against the hall wall, perhaps unconsciously inviting Ruben to come to me, to include me in their play.

He crawls to me and begins to explore my face and hair. Maria notices that I am being mauled and when he tries to push a finger into my mouth she intervenes. She turns it into a song taking his hand and, like a puppeteer, guides it to pat my nose, mouth and eyes while she sings about all these features. Ruben knows the song well and seems fine but I find it much stranger to have an adult so close up than to be slightly manhandled by a baby. (11 months)

Maria's intervention reminded me of her play with him in the earliest weeks. By subsuming his wondering hands into the narrative of her song she robbed his play of its meaning and imposed an external and less chaotic one; the naming of parts. What was the meaning of his play? It seemed significant that the intervention was to prevent his exploration of a mouth, with its associations with the long forbidden somatic merging of their early life, of breastfeeding and of sharing a bed. Again I was left with the feeling that when the emotional reality of the moment was messy, uncertain and possibly disturbing it got smothered or blotted out by something more certain and structured that was felt to be more manageable but felt less authentic. I was reminded again of the cutting-off required to facilitate the routine and how it seemed to have become a mode of operating, a 'clunky' superimposition where resonance with Ruben's experience might be painful but would have felt more faithful to the feelings. This, in turn, reminded me of my own 'clunky' superimposing of the guidance on the observer role when I felt unable to safely regulate our emotional distance using my experience in the moment.

Concluding comments

I think Maria's ways of coping with separation and weaning were largely attempts to establish some control over the distance, or lack of distance, between Ruben and herself. At times she seemed to be motivated by a need to defend against a feared merged state when she might have been overwhelmed by infantile feelings. At other times she seemed to be attempting to protect them both from the painful sense of loss that loomed with the actual separation of her return to work. When the overwhelming feelings threatened to pull her under, the rigid certainty of the regulator approach looked like a lifeline. However, it did seem to require a loss of receptivity to him at times. In retrospect I can see that this emotional withdrawal may also have made Maria vulnerable to post-natal depression. I was slow to think that this might have been the case, having become powerfully identified with her, partly due to my own pregnancy. My own fears and hopes had got bound up with her experience and I was heavily invested in her success as a mother.

The degree of attunement required at the beginning can make a mother feel as if her sense of agency has been magically co-opted, as when Maria's arms brought Ruben to her breast for the guilty feed. Maria's defences against loss of boundaries suggest to me that these experiences can be very powerful. If a mother can afford to give herself over to a 'facilitator's' role at the beginning, while remaining receptive to signals from the infant that he may be ready to tolerate more of a gap between his needs and having them met, he will be better supported to grow out of the need for such precise attunement. As his perceptual apparatus matures and he learns to trust that his object is dependable, he will come to perceive and tolerate her separateness. This will be part of what enables a reciprocal, intersubjective relationship between two distinct individuals to

develop. I felt that, for Maria, the motivation to disentangle herself from an experience of merger and to strive for individuation was too strong to allow for this process to take its course. I felt she needed the shape-keeping certainty of a rigid ‘regulator’ approach, as manifested in the rigid care routine and her slightly intrusive play at the beginning. As Ruben matured and Maria knew that he could relate over a safe distance, she was able to throw off her ‘regulator’ bridle and move more into the ‘reciprocator’ role.

Note

1. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality.

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