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# Masculinity in observation: a male observer's thoughts on his observation of a baby girl whose father was the principal carer

Barnaby Rhodes\*

This is an observation of a baby girl, Katy. It was unusual in that there was a male observer observing a father who was in the position of the primary carer. The paper focuses on how the mother's return to work affected Katy and her relationships. The idea of the observer's presence was representing an absence for both Katy and the father is explored. The paper also considers how gender and gender identity affected the observation and the world in which Katy developed.

**Keywords:** maternal absence; gender; gender roles; masculinity; male observer; primary carer; attachment to father

In Judith Jackson's paper, 'The male observer in infant observation' (1998), there is discussion about some of the difficulties that a male observer can have in finding a baby to observe. Indeed I was the last to start in my observation group with two false starts. Returning to the material now it has become clear how usefully alive the observation is in my mind. When I eventually found my baby, Katy, some of the difficulties were avoided for the new mother and me as she was going back to work just after the baby was six months old. The father was going to be the primary carer, so some of the problems that a man alone with a nursing couple can face were not present.

Katy was born through an elective caesarean around a month before Christmas, and was big at just over nine pounds. Katy has two older siblings; Kelly and Charlie, who were seven and 10 respectively at Katy's birth. Katy's dad, Ollie, is the primary carer in the house and has been since shortly after Charlie's birth. Katy's Mum is hard working but took maternity leave for the first six months of Katy's life. In this paper I shall think about how her mother's return to work affected Katy and her relationships with her father and me. I shall

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explore the idea that my presence as a male observer represented an absence of Katy's Mum for Katy and Dad. Following on from this I will think about how gender and gender identity affected the observation and the world in which Katy developed.

For the first six months of the observation Katy was very lucky to have two parents at home looking after her. Mum was able to focus on Katy comfortably whilst Dad took a slightly more background role, making food and looking after the other children. Having the two parents at home also allowed them to have periods of time to themselves in which they could pursue their own interests.

Both Mum and Katy enjoyed breast-feeding for the first three months of Katy's life. Though the physical closeness would not linger beyond this feeding, Katy never got too distressed and Mum was able to contain and mother Katy from a distance, so long as Katy sensed that her Mum was around.

But mum did not seem to have much confidence in herself as a mother. When thinking about why this might be the case two thoughts came to my mind, the first being a brief conversation that I had had with Dad about him being the primary carer. Dad mentioned fleetingly that Mum had some unspecified difficulty when Charlie was born. My thoughts went to postnatal depression though this would be speculation. The second, which now feels significant, was when Mum confided in me that she does not have a single happy memory of time spent with her own mother. Mum went on to say that she did have happy memories of time with her father. In the same conversation Mum told me how good Dad was with the children. This made me think of Selma Fraiberg's concept of 'Ghosts in the Nursery', (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1932) and I thought there might be a ghost in the nursery for Mum and Katy, one that might have played a part in creating a distance which Mum had to cross to reach Katy.

The observation settled into a pleasant pattern. Katy became more organised in her movements and had slowly accepted my presence at the weekly visit. My seventeenth observation, when Katy was five months old, had a different feel to it. Mum twice encouraged Katy into a wobbly standing position, calling her 'My beautiful baby bear' and saying, 'Aren't you big?' At the end of this observation Mum is going out at the same time as I am leaving. I observed:

Katy at 20 weeks

Mum pulled the door to and locked it. I said as she was doing this, "Shall I come the same time next week?" Mum shrugged. I felt worried for a second. After a slight pause Mum said, "This is my last Friday off. I am back at work full time next week. You will be with Ollie next week." I replied, "Oh, ok."

In thinking about this afterwards I realised I had forgotten that the mother was going back to work. Although Mum had always known that she would go back to work around this time the ambivalence in her about this never felt as clear as in this observation. Mum was encouraging Katy to stand on her own two feet

and calling her 'Big' and 'Bear'. It is as if Mum does not give herself time to be worried or mourn the loss of her time with Katy; she is not worried because Katy can stand on her own two feet. However, the pause that I am left with momentarily when I ask about next week left me with a gut-wrenching moment where I thought I might be abandoned by the observation. I wonder how much Katy was aware of the changes around her which I can feel in this observation. Katy did not until now seem wobbly but she did this day when encouraged to stand.

In the next few observations there was a change. Obviously Dad was there alone as the carer and Katy was not the same; I was left feeling more anxious and unsettled. This came to a peak about four weeks after Mum's return to work. In this observation in which Katy is seven months old, I had just arrived at the house, when I observed:

Katy at 24 weeks

Katy looked at me, interested in this change of circumstances. Her face had red blotches that looked as if she had been crying and there was a tear half way down her cheek. I sat down on a chair. Katy looked at me giving me a big smile. I smiled back. Her smile increased and she turned to look away from me. Both Dad and I laughed at this. Katy looked back at me smiling. If I had not been there to observe I might have tried to interact with her more at this point but I refrained and just smiled back at her. The smiling and turning away felt intense, sort of "hyped up", and I wondered how long she could keep it up. I looked away briefly and when I looked back I tried to keep my smile less engaging. Katy smiled at me for a few more moments then lost interest and looked away. Within a few seconds her face crumpled and she started to sob. Dad said, "Oh dear, what's the matter?" Katy's sob turned into full crying. Dad picked her up saying, "Come on now Katy."

As I came to write this, I realised that this was the only time that I saw Katy remain completely inconsolable in her crying. After 15 minutes of trying to stop her, Dad put her to bed. He asked me to wait downstairs while he got her to sleep. I spent the next half hour watching Katy sob in her sleep which is, even now, painful to remember.

In this meeting with Katy after Mum's return to work, although Katy looked as if she had been crying before I had arrived, my appearance seemed to reinforce her distress. Katy at first seemed very pleased to see me, whereas in the past she had been slow in taking me in. I felt the need to be engaging with Katy as if she wanted, or needed, something from me. I had to take a step back to remain in my observer's role. Katy's need to engage with me then felt gradually more frantic until both her ability to maintain it and her sense of self collapsed. It was as if my presence allowed Katy to come up against what was absent, her mother. Dad is a very good father; however, he is not Katy's Mum. Katy might have hoped on my arrival that I was her Mum or that I might be able to provide what is missing from her Mum being absent; but I could not.

Dad in this observation seemed distracted, not as connected with Katy. Again this brought to mind the absence of Mum. Was Dad feeling left 'holding the baby'? In processing his own loss of Mum being at home, was Dad less available to regulate and contain Katy's distress?

Dad was not able to comfort Katy. It was not that she was hungry, cold or alone. Katy's tears were not angry tears but sad tears and there seemed to be a depth to her crying that bordered on grief. Obviously Katy will have been missing her mother. I felt, however, that it was more than that. I have thought about this in relation to Melanie Klein's concept of the depressive position and its relation to the Oedipus conflict (Klein, 1932/1997). Mum was Katy's primary object both in her early concept of the good and bad breast. Katy felt both love and destructive impulses to both her internal and external representations of her mother. At this time Katy would have been in the early stages of the Oedipal conflict and be developing the concept that her Mum could be with her Dad whilst still loving her. I think it is significant to think about the change in the balance between time spent with her mother and her father which recently occurred for Katy.

Katy was spending more time with her Dad during the days and developing her attachment to him. During the evening this could affect the balance of feelings in relation to the Oedipal conflict; when she then comes across sharing the love of her parents, there might be an increase in the destructive impulses towards her mother. When her mother is not there in the morning this increase in impulses may in turn lead to an increase in anxiety that her mother will abandon her or die. The threat to Katy in this observation could have contributed to her feelings of loss and inability to maintain her sense of self. I wondered if the inconsolable state in which Katy was left and the anxiety that it provoked was due to the fear or feeling of what Melanie Klein would call 'annihilation', (Klein, 1946/1997). Over the next few weeks my initial appearance at the house would induce tears in Katy. This gradually reduced until she was again able to slowly take me in as she had before.

Something else that changed when Mum returned to work was Katy's ability to be left alone in my presence. For a long period of time when Katy was left alone in my presence she would get upset and break down in tears.

I thought that Katy might have been more able to manage her Dad's absence if I had not been present. This was similar to how my presence just after Mum's return to work had unsettled her. I talked this through with my observation group and was left thinking about how my presence could have been felt as an absence by Katy. Dad is good at containing Katy in a maternal way as well as pushing her on developmentally in a paternal way. I think, a lot of the time, Katy accepted me as a benign presence who accepted her for who she was. This could be interpreted by her as a maternal presence and act as a counterbalance to Dad when he is being more paternal with her. However, my maternal presence is far from a replacement for what Katy at times wants and needs from her Mum. In fact, at times I believe that my presence reinforced her awareness of what was absent.

In Edna O'Shaughnessy's paper, 'The Absent Object' (1964), she explores the idea of an infant progressing from experiencing a wanted breast as a 'bad breast present' to a 'good breast absent when needed'. O'Shaughnessy hypothesises that the absence of the breast is a catalyst to thoughts. She writes, 'The infant had to advance from experiencing the "needed absent breast" in the phantasy of a 'bad breast present', to being able to think of a real "missing good breast"' (O'Shaughnessy, 1964). This got me thinking about the possibility that my presence might have inhibited Katy's ability to think of the 'missing good breast'. Perhaps my presence, being sometimes felt as a maternal presence, was experienced by Katy in the earlier anxiety state of a 'bad breast present'. This would mean that Katy would have transferred the phantasy of a 'bad breast present' to me, experiencing my presence as her own frustration and hunger for what she wants, with me leaving her as O'Shaughnessy writes, to 'starve and die'. If I had not been there she might have experienced the absence of her mother as a 'good breast absent' and therefore more tolerable. This anxiety about my initial appearance and also being left alone in my presence was gradually contained and worked through over time. Katy in the presence of her loving mother in the evenings, weekends and holidays will have been able to face the anxiety about both her internal and external good objects. Edna O'Shaughnessy writes: 'When her child attacks her for deserting him, he internalises a damaged mother, so that her external presence gives him visible disproof of his internal state, and he can introject the external object to improve his internal object'. O'Shaughnessy goes on to add, 'Absence is a natural and essential condition of a relationship, which otherwise becomes a symbiosis detrimental to the separate identity of either person' (O'Shaughnessy, 1964).

I am pleased to say that my presence did not always reduce Katy to tears and I was able to see a thoughtful, persistent and careful little girl who developed her own agency in what at times was a more male world than little girls would be used to. This observation is from when Katy is one-year-old:

Katy at 52 weeks

Dad and I started talking for a while about work and sport. I noticed as we talked Katy would occasionally look in both our directions. At one point Katy was waving her hand in the air; it left me with the impression of someone trying to wave over someone's attention. Katy picked up a small rugby ball and moved over to the sofa carrying it. Katy held it up to Dad who took it and then said, "Can you catch?" Dad gently threw the ball so it landed just in front of her on the sofa. Katy picked it up grinning. Katy turned to smile at me. She then held it out in my direction, chuntering. I smiled. Katy continued to hold it out to me. I got out of my seat and reached over taking it and saying, "Thank you." I held it and looked at it for a few seconds, before handing it back and saying, "Thank you."

My idea developed that Katy was feeling excluded from the conversation and the couple and when an attempt to signal for attention goes unanswered she takes

the initiative. Interestingly it is a rugby ball that Katy selects to re-connect with her Dad, predominantly a male item to interrupt a male conversation. Katy continued this passing the ball to both Dad and me for a while. Katy would often play in a similar way bringing items to both her Dad and me. In Sigmund Freud's paper, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920/1995), he describes how a little boy made small objects disappear from view so that he could play with the pleasure of then making them re-appear. I think in a similar way Katy is here able to play at excluding both Dad and me from a couple and through this may have been exploring some of the feelings that she was processing in relation to the Oedipus complex. I enjoyed seeing Katy playing and often wondered how much of this play was a way for Katy to process thought and try to work things out.

Gender and gender identity were significant factors throughout the observations. In Judith Jackson's paper, 'The male observer in infant observation' (1998), when discussing the relationships of the male observers to fathers she wrote, 'Sometimes a father welcomes a man as a support for himself, although he often invites the observer to discuss the world of work or sport or politics, as though to find a common ground away from the world of mothers and babies'. As mentioned briefly above, this common ground away from the world of mothers and babies was somewhere Dad and I dipped into almost every observation. We would talk briefly about work, chickens, cricket, rugby, cycling, and the various benefits of different bike trailers. Luckily never politics, though. It felt that my presence represented another absence for Dad and me, the absence of what could be seen as male pre-occupations.

Being the primary carer for a baby is conventionally seen as a female role. Spending an hour observing a baby may also be seen as a feminine occupation. Dad and I would set off together with Katy for trips to the shops or to baby group as a male couple both focused on Katy. When I was out and about with Dad and Katy I was very aware of what an unusual threesome we looked. At baby group one time, when Katie was one year and three months old I met a woman who sat close to us:

Katy at 15 months and 1 week

I made eye contact with a woman I had not seen before. I offered a greeting smile. The woman said, "What's this then? Three men and a baby." I felt a bit uncomfortable and went on to explain that I was doing a baby observation and had been observing Katy since birth.

In this observation the reference to a comical film in which three men try to adapt their lives to look after a baby could be just how we looked; it could be to do with discomfort in our maternal roles or to do with both her fantasies about our sexuality and our uncertainty about others perception of it. Most likely there was an element of all of these. In another observation Dad had arranged to meet up with friends at the cricket nets for some cricket practice, taking Katy along in

her pushchair. I stood to one side and observed Katy in her pushchair. In this observation I was encouraged to join in a number of times:

Katy at 7 months 3 weeks

Dave called over to me, "Do you fancy a ball?" Dad added, "Yeah, feel free to join in."

I was tempted. I called back, "Thanks, I'm fine. I'm here to observe Katy." Everyone seemed satisfied with this and carried on. The wind really began to gust and it wobbled Katy's pram about.

In thinking back over this it was as if I represented a female presence at what was a male activity. There was a strong desire from the group and myself to break away from my observation and to join in with 'the lads'.

In Judith Jackson's paper about the male observer she writes about the various complexities of the task of being a male observer. It was interesting to read these, not only to think about them in relation to my own experience of being a male observer, but also to think about how they were also potential complexities for Dad as a male primary carer. Jackson wrote about how a man requesting to observe a baby is often seen as 'odd and somewhat female'. In turn it is likely that some people see Dad wanting to be the primary carer as odd and somewhat female. This can be seen in the above illustration when I am encouraged to join in and play cricket. I think the discomfort at times for Dad and me in our maternal roles also comes from ourselves. Freud stated in his paper, *Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes* (1925), that "The reactions of human individuals of both sexes are of course made up of masculine and feminine traits" (Freud, 1925/1995). It is possible that in the anatomical distinction between the sexes, getting in touch with feminine traits feels difficult for a father. Jackson wrote that 'maternity is synonymous with womanhood'. Being a primary carer or observing a baby is not like being a fireman or a builder or a pilot, all of which are still mainly seen as male roles. In the time when we were in more maternal roles the balance towards being more motherly, connected to the psychological and anatomical distinction of this role, may have put us in contact with a castration threat to our potency as men.

When Katy started walking it was, as I would have expected from knowing her, in her own time and a careful walk. There was something else in the quality of her walk, observed here, that struck me and got me thinking:

Katy at 1 year and 4 months

Katy slid down the sofa and walked, slowly and carefully like someone who was recovering from an injury, over to the other side of the room.

From frequently going to a baby group in my observations I had come to know a number of different babies more or less the same age as Katy. All these babies had different walks, one blundering along knocking things over, one floating about and Katy who seemed to be almost painfully careful in her walk. When I took this to my observation group someone suggested that it was as if she were 'walking on



egg shells'. This brought to mind how I had felt at times whilst doing the observations. When Katy would get upset about my presence I would feel anxious round her and metaphorically speaking tread carefully. Similarly at times when I could be seen observing Katy out in public there was often an uncomfortable and uncertain feeling about what people would think I was doing. This may have included both the feeling of being seen as 'odd and somewhat female'. Another possible factor in this could be the more vigilant state that society has now with regard to there being adults who abuse children.

This brought me back to think about what it was like for Mum and Dad to have done, in the public eyes, a role reversal. Dad is great with the children and I was able to see him having a lot of fun with them. At times, however, he had to negotiate the complexities of this role reversal and how it affected his sense of masculinity. Similarly Mum's ambivalence about returning to work was obvious as illustrated earlier. Katy's maternal grandmother came to the baby group at one observation. Whilst talking to me Grandma was critical of how attached Katy was to Dad. The opinion of grandparents is another factor that may have affected the ambivalence which Dad and Mum feel about their role reversals.

I was left thinking that this constant underlying tension, which was present for Dad, Katy and me, was shown in how Katy's walk developed. Katy walked as if the ground beneath her were not quite steady or even. Katy would place her feet down carefully as if she was making sure it was solid beneath her before she would put her full weight down. Perhaps the unsteadiness Dad and Mum felt in their resolve around their role reversal left Katy feeling the ground beneath her was slightly unsteady.

Whenever I saw Katy walking, however, I never had any fear that she was going to fall or trip. At the baby group every so often you would hear tears from a child who had stumbled or banged into something. This was never Katy. Katy was definitely one to explore and have a go on everything and although she may not have been the fastest to get there she would always get there safely. This may have been partly to do with her negotiating an unsteady surface carefully but I also believe it was an element of the love and care that all her family showed for her that she had taken in to herself.

I have thoroughly enjoyed seeing Katy develop from a hesitant baby to a thoughtful, inquisitive little girl. Katy was born into a loving family and had a good start to life. Mum's return to work had a significant effect on Katy and her world adding complications to her development and thinking. Katy was, over time, able to process this change in her world and develop around it. The role reversal in Katy's parents also played an important part in Katy's development, perhaps leading her on the path to the careful girl that she is today.

I would like to finish by acknowledging how grateful I am to the family for allowing me to observe them over two years and for the privilege of having the opportunity to complete an observation.

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