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The seminar leader as ‘a new baby’: teaching observation for the first time

Beth Miller*

Every infant observation marks a beginning, most dramatically for the observed child and family, as well as for the observer, taking up an unfamiliar role. Sometimes, however, the seminar leader is also a ‘new baby’ teaching observational studies for the first time.

The journal interviewed three tutors who recently started as seminar leaders in infant observation on the Psychoanalytical Observational Studies course based at the Tavistock Centre in London. Students on this course are expected to undertake a full two-year observation as well as a shorter young child observation. They attend weekly seminars usually made up of about five participants where a write up of a visit is considered in detail.

Suzan Sayder began teaching at the Tavistock last year (October 2010) Tanya Leonard and Julie Klingert-Hall have both taught infant observation for two years in Liverpool. All three are child and adolescent psychotherapists.

Why did you decide to teach infant observation?

Suzan: It’s something I have wanted to do since I qualified. I don’t think I appreciated how important infant observation was until I started the clinical training. I found myself thinking how much I would have loved to do another and how much more I would have got from it. More recently, I started working in a perinatal service and I felt how useful and informative it would be to be in touch with infant experience in the unique way observation provides. That’s certainly proved true and I feel the chance to take on the teaching has been a great help in my clinical work.

Julie: I was approached by the course tutor and thought it would be a challenge and good CPD. Also I hoped it would help my research – I am writing my professional doctorate on: *The patient’s body in the transference: towards thoughts becoming thinkable* so thinking of the baby early on is very relevant. I would say there has been a real interweaving between the observational teaching and theory.

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What concerns did you have at the beginning?

Tanya: I wanted to help the story of the baby and observer unfold in its own distinctive way. There is so much else to attend to, such as the students' anxieties and practical issues. Would I be able to help the observers to be in touch with the baby in front of them without being overwhelmed? I also felt a pressure 'to get it right', and not just to see what was there in the observations but what I might not see and that I might miss; I still worry about this and I expect I will in the future too.

Julie: I was very nervous about managing the seminar group. Also I was aware of how core infant observation is in the process of training as a child psychotherapist. I think I felt a responsibility towards the students in making sure they had a good experience and learnt from it. I still feel this, but not with the same anxiety. I realise sometimes you can't rush things.

How did you get started?

Tanya: One of the course's most experienced tutors was planning to retire and we were able to arrange a handover term in which we co-taught. She was very supportive and it was an invaluable experience. I would strongly recommend doing something similar to anyone else wanting to teach observation. But I would also say that being with someone so experienced when you feel so new can be daunting in its own way. But you have to go through it, just as the baby does.

Suzan: I began by what's sometimes called shadowing. I sat in on the seminar run by a very experienced and skilled tutor. She told me she disliked the term shadowing because it was too passive and encouraged me from the start to take an active part in seminars. She was extremely helpful. I learnt a huge amount from her. I would definitely recommend to other people that they begin by joining a seminar run by an experienced tutor. But I would also say that it is quite an odd role; you're not the teacher and you're not an observer and it can be quite tricky to find out where you do fit. I was lucky that the other tutor was so generous and had confidence in me. She reminded me I could draw on the clinical training and everything I learnt there, so I wasn't perhaps as inexperienced as I thought.

As it happened, other commitments meant she decided to step down from the seminar and I was asked to take over in the new academic year. There were two members of the group from before and five first years. The second years were great, talking about their own experiences and anxieties in a really helpful way. I could see how much they had learnt and was impressed with their ability to share it.

Did you do any reading in preparation?

Tanya: I re-read 'Closely Observed Infants' which I found immensely helpful, just as I had done when I did my own observation. I also re-read my own infant

observation and young child observation papers and would recommend this too. I found they brought my experiences very vividly back to me and I saw so much more in them.

Julie: I would say that for me, at the beginning, talking to more experienced colleagues was more helpful than reading. More recently, as well as 'Closely Observed Infants', I have found useful Sue Reid's book 'Developments in Infant Observation. The Tavistock Model' and Andrew Briggs' 'Surviving Space: Papers on Infant Observation'. I also find the journal very stimulating and would recommend it to all tutors of observation. I like the feeling that you will always find something new in each edition.

Were there problems for students in finding babies?

Suzan: This provoked a lot of anxiety among students, and in myself. Quite a few people struggled, especially the one male observer. Eventually a member of the seminar used her contacts to help him and I was worried about the impact this might have on the group. Would there be resentment that he had been given special treatment? I decided to bring this into the open and we discussed it as a group. This seemed a relief for everyone and we could move on.

Tanya: In the first weeks of the course most of the students didn't have babies to observe and it seemed a problem. Then suddenly, or so it felt; three found observations just before Christmas. It was like getting triplets! There was so much to think about with them all arriving at the same time – including the impact of the Christmas break itself. I am not sure if it was co-incidence or there was a reason behind the timing, but it certainly had an impact on myself and the group.

Julie: It's been a massive thing; I do think it's getting harder than in my time especially for men to find babies. Maybe it reflects something about society more widely and a culture which is suspicious of men's interest in intimacy and children. I was very anxious that all the students should get babies quickly but looking back I realise that some people need longer before they start an observation. They will find babies but they need time. The timing of when you find a family can reflect a lot personally and professionally about being ready or not ready.

Suzan: Another challenge I recalled was in advising students on how many degrees of separation there should be between them and the observed family. I think I was less strict than some teachers might have been, probably to do with my own sense of anxiety about how long it was taking for some of them to find babies. One student observes a baby whose parent works in the same large institution as she does albeit not the same service. As a result, the observer is seen as providing a link to professional identity and tends to ask many questions about organisational matters. Thankfully, the observer, with support from the seminar group, has managed this well so far. But it has made clear how important keeping that separation is.

What difficulties and dilemmas have you faced?

Suzan: Early on, there was a very difficult problem when a parent who had agreed to an observation was unexpectedly bereaved. There were practical as well as emotional issues and I found that I really needed help in thinking through how best to advise the student so I talked to the course tutor. She was incredibly supportive and accessible. I have contacted her as well as personal tutors about different concerns that arose later and I think this kind of support is vital especially in the first year of teaching.

I was also very aware of the particular challenges that the male observer in the group had to face. He had initial worries about how he would manage the intimacy of breast-feeding – with the baby’s mother but also with the baby’s father, whom he hadn’t had a chance to meet until after the observation had started. He had a very uncomfortable relationship with the father of the observed child. He found it helpful when I recommended him to read Judith Jackson’s paper on the male observer.

Tanya: Where do I start? A lot of students have had very difficult families. I have been very aware of the demands they face in coping with it. I do wonder about ways of supporting them especially as they are taking on observations so soon after starting the course. One thought is whether for a small percentage of students a more gradual approach might be better – I have wondered could they perhaps start with a young child observation – but of course this is difficult practically.

I have also been very struck by the effect the experience of even a less difficult observation can have, on very grounded and strong students. In one case the observer became so stirred up by the intimacy of the mother and baby. She was full of feelings she wanted to make sense of and she herself was surprised by just how powerful her feelings were. Ironically the power of what she experienced was in part a sign of her sensitivity. We were able to discuss her feelings of being excluded, and what I described to her as the ‘exquisite pain’ of being left out, how unbearable and beautiful it was.

Has anything surprised you?

Tanya: Looking back I have been surprised by the impact teaching infant observation has had on me. It has brought back vividly my own infant observation and young child observation. So many emotions have been revived as well as new challenges.

Suzan: I think I was surprised by what a good group I had and how well they worked together. They often saw things I hadn’t seen and contributed a lot. One of the things which was really brought home to me was that sometimes an unsettled baby provokes in his or her mother a rather desperate desire to find out why he or she won’t settle. But sometimes you can’t know, you just have to learn to bear the uncertainty. This resonated with the struggle in our seminar

discussions to try to make sense of things but to accept that there were many ideas and hypotheses we wouldn't ever be able to confirm.

Julie: I was really surprised by the amount of anxiety provoked by starting and trying to find babies – in the students but also in myself. Now I feel I would be less anxious, less carried away and that is better for the students.

What have you learnt?

Julie: How important it is to learn to sit with uncertainty and anxiety and not to act. The ability not to know and to be able to bear it – it is a core skill.

What have you learnt from your students?

Suzan: Mainly from how they understood the material in interesting ways that I hadn't thought of. To give a recent example, one student commented on another student's observation in which Mum's friend, a former work colleague, and daughter were visiting. I found it interesting that the student commented on a possible split in Mum's mind of her friend as the 'working woman' and Mum as the 'stay at home mother', which seemed to help Mum feel more contented with her maternal role.

What would help?

Julie: I would like a chance to discuss some material with others – maybe as a peer group. The conference for observation teachers is also good – but expensive.

What advice would you give those considering teaching observation?

Julie: I would say: use the tutor group at the beginning especially – ask for help and a chance to talk things through.

Suzan: It can be daunting but it's definitely worthwhile. Try to join a seminar with a well-established and experienced leader. Most of all – take it slowly. Don't expect to know it all and get help if you need it. Remember that things unfold slowly, and do not be in a rush to think you've definitely understood something. Also, if you are asked to mark papers in infant observation do not be put off. It's an invaluable way to get a sense of how other seminars work and to widen your knowledge of teaching observation.

Tanya: Having a supportive tutor group has helped – I feel it is essential for all tutors but new ones most of all, to be able to discuss concerns with others. I would definitely encourage others to take it on. For me it has been a consolidation of all aspects of learning. It has helped me integrate theory and clinical practice in a way I feel I wouldn't have done otherwise. I really enjoy it – I look forward to the seminars and hearing how all the babies are getting on – and to seeing the students too develop and getting fascinated by what they are

seeing. And I must say how very proud I feel of the students' ability to develop the observational stance and their capacity to allow themselves to take seriously what they see. Even though now I feel more experienced there is always something new, something fresh to experience.

With thanks to the interviewees.

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