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On: 19 February 2013, At: 06:45

Publisher: Routledge

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Infant Observation: International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riob20>

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Version of record first published: 16 Jun 2011.

To cite this article: Steven Groarke (2011): Understanding babies from the standpoint of experience, *Infant Observation: International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications*, 14:2, 163-177

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2011.583431>

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Understanding babies from the standpoint of experience

Steven Groarke*

This paper raises questions about the use of psychoanalysis as a frame of meaning in infant observation. It is part of an ongoing dialogue with Michael Rustin and others about the meanings and justifications of infant observational research. The author begins with his experience as a teacher of infant observation together with some introductory comments on his approach to understanding. He elaborates on the experience of understanding by comparing the use of infant observation in teaching and research.

Keywords: experience of understanding; frames of meaning; infant observation; pedagogy; psychoanalysis; situation of practice

Anne Enright tells the story in ‘Yesterday’s Weather’ of a first-time mother full of doubts and uncertainties about her ability to understand her baby. In what is, perhaps, the most crucial passage in the story, Enright tells how Hazel, the mother, ‘thought that she would fall in love with the baby if only it would stay still, just for a minute’:

but the baby never did stay still. Sometimes it seemed like it was all around her, as though there was nothing in her world except the baby, but every time she looked straight at the baby, or tried to look straight at the baby. . . whatever it was, just wasn’t there. (Enright, 2008, p. 146)

Hazel is and is not looking at her baby; more exactly, she goes on looking in the direction of her baby until a question of great consequence takes shape in her mind: ‘she still clung to it, whatever it was. She still hoped and hung on. Was this enough? Was this the way you loved a baby?’ The mother’s questions raise questions for the reader. What do we mean by ‘enough’? What is the mother clinging to and hoping for in her relentless gaze? What does understanding babies really mean? In this paper, I wish to concentrate on the experience of understanding in infant observation, how we understand as well as what we understand.

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Seeing what is there to be seen

What is infant observation, and what is its purpose? In her introduction to an authoritative collection of papers on the Tavistock model of infant observation, Reid (1997, p. 1) states that students undertaking observation are ‘encouraged and supported to *see what is there to be seen*’ (emphasis in the original). For me, the idea of letting things show themselves indicates the kind of phenomenological *seeing* that constitutes the essential task of infant observation. I am calling upon my own experience. I have completed two infant observations of the sort established by Esther Bick, one at the Tavistock Clinic in the 1980s, and another at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis some 20 years later. My experience of infant observation, therefore, is rooted in the context of the seminar and, in the second case, formed an integral part of my analytic training. Working within a common post-Kleinian tradition but each in their own unique and creative way, Maria Rhode, Margot Waddell and Denis Flynn have helped me understand in greater depth certain aspects of a baby’s earliest experiences. Moreover, and this is the point I wish to stress in the paper, they also taught me important lessons about the experience of teaching itself, lessons that I have gone on to make use of in my principal work as a university teacher. I remain indebted to these teachers *as* teachers.

The students’ experience is central to my thinking about infant observation. Most importantly, over the years in the classroom I have come to appreciate that, ‘in addition to studying development *in statu nascendi*’, as infant observation teachers we are also ‘privy to our students’ discovery of infantile life and the rediscovery of the infant part of the self’ (Wittenberg, 1997, p. 26). The classroom is no less an important part of the general framework of infant observation than the observational setting itself. In my view, the students’ experience is the nodal point in the process of infant observation, where re-finding infantile states of mind grounds the pedagogic dialogue. Wittenberg (1997, pp. 23–24) confirms this idea by drawing attention to the emotional difficulties involved in becoming an observer; in particular, the ‘shocking discovery’ inexperienced observers make in the face of primitive agonies.

I think the greater part of the ‘shock’ that Wittenberg describes is to do with the realisation of how little one knows, or can realistically expect to know, as a student in this situation. For an observer trying to make sense of his or her experience, the *full* impact of infantile states of mind is not felt at the time in the presence of the baby, but only afterwards in the register of knowledge. The real shaking or jarring comes about after the actual observation when, in the context of trying to understand what has happened, the student is confronted by the limits of knowledge. In palpable and incomparable ways, infant observation places the experience of *not* knowing centre stage in the classroom. In my experience this can be profoundly unsettling for students who, for the most part, are encouraged to identify themselves with objects of knowledge and methodological rules. The discomfort therefore extends to the very rationale

of the conventional learning environment. When matters turn to understanding babies, the seminar is made uneasy by the inscrutability of things, by the realisation that words cannot always be found for what one would like to say. Discovering that knowledge is only one form of understanding is unsettling.

On the other hand, intuitions that depend on students being affected constitute a pre-understanding or unprocessed awareness. These original intuitions indicate what students know they feel, in particular the feel of the baby in the student's mind. And it seems to me that Esther Bick's model of observation sits especially well with the pedagogic validation of intuition. As we shall see, Bick set store by students getting to know babies by getting the feel of them, and the tactile metaphor conveys the nature of the kind of learning I am trying to describe. The mode of understanding Bick came up with, which is rooted in embodied emotional meaning or sensible intuition, goes beyond the verification or certainties of cognition.

The clarification of experience that initially lacks what Freud (1900, pp. 339–349) called 'representability' (*Darstellbarkeit*), has radical implications for the classroom. The ability to tolerate the frustrations of not knowing, the oft-repeated quality of 'Negative Capability' (Keats, 1817, p. 43), is an important part of the experience of understanding in the seminar. At the same time, being aware of not knowing, or indeed learning from not knowing, is a paradox that one has to work with in the classroom. This involves what I shall call a *reach for meaning*, a way of 'reaching an understanding' (*Verständigung*).

I have come to these views about the emotional experience of understanding over a reasonably long period of time, having taught a modified version of the Tavistock model of infant observation to undergraduates for many years. Over the past 20 years or so I have supervised upward of 300 infant and young child observations, and in this paper I want to mention some of the reasons why I think the psychoanalytic *focus* of infant observation works particularly well in the pedagogic setting. At the same time, I wish to differentiate the students' psychoanalytic focus from the use of infant research as a type of psychoanalytic knowledge. This distinction is central to my argument. I have set out my views on the relationship between infant observation and psychoanalysis in some detail elsewhere (Groarke, 2008), but for the purposes of this paper I want to concentrate more specifically on the experience of understanding.

By way of introduction, I shall add a word or two on my own approach to understanding. The matter of meaning should become clear in due course. Suffice it to say here that my account of *frames of meaning* and the concomitant *situation of practice* draws on the work of Gadamer (1976, 1979) and Ricoeur (1970). In line with the basic claims of this philosophical tradition, I consider frames of meaning as distinct from conceptual schemes. Whereas the latter presuppose the dualism of scheme and world from a representational point of view, frames of meaning delimit the horizon of our experience of understanding within particular lived contexts or situations.

When it comes to the creation of meaning in our relations with one another, frames and situations are inevitably and inextricably linked. Any given frame or horizon of meaning applies as a matter of course to a particular situation or context; at the same time, the frame remains open to the context as the condition of meaning. The openness of the frame to the situation *is* the experience of understanding. On this reckoning, to understand is to grasp something in the way of making sense or comprehending, but it is also a potential for doing something in the world, for making something happen, and for communicating with others. Gadamer (1979, pp. 274–278 *et passim*) articulates these different directions or orientations of understanding under the heading of ‘application’ (*Anwenjung*). An application is essentially the meaning we need to find in any given situation. Infant observation is no different in this respect from any other situation of practice; that is to say, we are always dealing with its applications.

The aim of this paper, then, is to assess the practicability of using or applying psychoanalysis as a frame of meaning in infant observation. The critical question for me is whether psychoanalysis affords infant observation a viable frame or horizon of meaning. Are psychoanalytic interpretations tenable in infant observation? I shall address this question firstly in the context of research, and secondly, in terms of the process of teaching and learning.

Infant observational research

Infant observation has been an important context for the application of psychoanalysis beyond the clinic. There is a wide and diverse range of research in this area, a comparative analysis of which is not my topic here. I shall focus instead on the Tavistock model (Miller, Rustin, Rustin, & Shuttleworth, 1989; Reid, 1997), and particularly the work of Michael Rustin as illustrative of a certain trend in applied psychoanalysis. Rustin is primarily concerned with infant observation as ‘a resource for generating new ideas and understanding in psychoanalysis’ (2002, p. 122). In contrast to what he describes as the ‘passive stance’ of the pedagogic rationale, Rustin promotes the idea of infant observation as a fully autonomous ‘research instrument’ (1997, p. 95). His aim is to establish infant observation as ‘a genre of “psychoanalytic research” in its own right’ (1997, p. 98).

This is quite different from my view of infant observation as a discrete mode of understanding, that is, distinct from psychoanalysis in terms of its technique and its setting, as well as its aims and purposes. My disagreement with Rustin applies to the basic assumptions of his argument. Firstly, together with the aim of generating understanding *in* psychoanalysis, for Rustin the project of infant observation is also aimed at understanding *through* psychoanalysis. Rustin makes an explicit claim on psychoanalysis as a horizon of meaning. He is committed to this claim over and above any contribution infant research is supposed to make to psychoanalytic knowledge. The contribution to psychoanalysis is conditional on a justifiable claim to analytic intelligibility. Without making a prior claim on

psychoanalysis as a frame of meaning, infant observation could not validate any subsequent claims regarding its substantive contribution to psychoanalytic knowledge. The phenomenological idea of getting 'back to the things themselves' (*Zu den Sachen selbst*) is set aside by Rustin's prior adoption of a particular interpretative framework.

Secondly, Rustin seems to think that what observers and clinicians do is essentially analogous. The underlying claim regarding frames of meaning, what we might call the foundational claim of psychoanalytic infant observation as a research method, rests on this practical analogy between the observational setting and the analytic situation. The foundational claim is valid only so long as this analogy stands up to scrutiny. The analogy concerning situations of practice, therefore, is the focus of my critical comments. If the analogy is found wanting, then the foundational claim becomes invalid.

In a series of articles dating from the 1980s, Rustin reiterates the claim that infant observation is analogous in certain fundamental respects to clinical psychoanalysis. While he accepts that observers are 'encouraged to be tentative in their use of psychoanalytic methods of understanding' (1989, p. 66), at the same time, he argues that some of the most important things they observe are commensurate with basic clinical phenomena. Most importantly, Rustin compares the prevalence of 'unintended and unconscious communications from mother' (1989, p. 66) in the observational setting with transference phenomena in the analytic situation. This comparison, which occupies a central part of Rustin's argument, seems to me to blur the distinction between objects of knowledge and modes of understanding.

Can we speak of the respective unconscious communications of mothers and patients as analogous *events* in any meaningful sense of the word? I do not see how we can. The encouragement to caution is the telling caveat in Rustin's statement. I agree that observers are subject to all sorts of unconscious communications, identifications, and projective identifications from the mothers whom they observe. How could it be otherwise in an intimate human encounter of this kind? The ubiquity of transference phenomena is not in question. Transference is something that happens as a matter of course. It is *what* is going on. Mothers presumably have all sorts of fantasies about the kind of person the observer is and, no doubt, entertain conscious and unconscious thoughts about what is in the observer's mind as routinely as patients entertain similar thoughts about their analysts. Such thoughts form an important part of the transference in the analytic situation.

There does not seem to be much in the way of a disagreement here. However, this still leaves the question of what the situation or framework allows one to make of what is going on, that is, *how* we understand these experiences. As I have already indicated, in my view understanding is always relative to the context in which it appears. It is the context or situation that renders meaningful what is to be understood. Claims to psychoanalytic frames of meaning notwithstanding, unless they are understood in context the purported meanings are in fact

groundless. This is most certainly not an argument in favour of excluding others from the privilege of psychoanalysis. To the contrary, the integrity of infant observation itself depends on the contextual specificity of its knowledge and understanding. The strength of the Tavistock model depends on the dissemination of a particular form of learning from experience, where one reaches an understanding through the discipline of infant observation rather than psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, Rustin is intent on pushing the analogy yet further. For instance, in cases where mothers are seen to form intense but 'unrecognised attachments' to observers, these are understood as 'analogous to the transference aroused in analytic relationships' (1989, p. 67). The *situation* itself is understood in terms of 'the transference-feelings observed in the mother's relations to the observer, and the observer's countertransference relations to mother and baby' (1989, p. 74). The idea that inferences drawn from the phenomena of the analytic situation are the same in kind as those drawn from the observational setting, underscores the confusion between objects of knowledge and modes of understanding. While observers and analysts may understand the same things, they do not understand those things in the same way. Embedded in two quite distinct situations of practice, observers and analysts are not involved with what they know in comparable ways.

To be clear, in my experience the observer is no less involved than the analyst in a type of communicative interaction. Infant observation is clearly an emotional experience, and it is evident to me that intense feelings may be stirred up for observers and observed alike in the observational setting. However, understanding in observational and analytic situations is reached by entirely different means. Rustin does not share this view. Together with the analogy between inferences drawn from the phenomena of the analytic situation, and those drawn from the observational setting, I also want to question the use Rustin makes of knowledge and understanding derived from observation. This brings us to the practical import of his argument. Rustin uses the analogy with the analytic situation to promote infant observation as a research method. For Rustin, 'elements of a transference relationship' are available to the observer for research purposes, providing 'significant data about a mother's state of mind, vulnerability, and indeed psychic history' (1997, p. 105).

What is being defended in Rustin's defence of infant observational research? Over and above the student's experience of understanding, Rustin is interested in the use of transference and countertransference as research methods: 'there seems little doubt that given careful recording, and self-analysis, [infant observational] data can generate insight into the states of mind of mother and baby in *the same way* that it does into the "infantile parts" of the minds of older psychotherapy patients' (1997, p. 105; my emphasis). It is not clear to me what we are meant to understand here, particularly when babies as well as mothers come into the picture. Based on the analogy with the analytic situation, the legitimacy of the knowledge claimed for infant observation depends on blurring our

understanding of infants and the infantile. Far more than a psychoanalytic focus, Rustin argues for the use of psychoanalytic formulations in the context of observational research. While the psychoanalytic *focus* of infant observation seems perfectly viable, in this context, the construction of psychoanalytic *formulations* makes no sense to me.

Rustin accepts that psychoanalysis is a clinically viable theory; that the consulting room is ‘the primary “laboratory” in which psychoanalytic research takes place’ (2003, p. 140); and that there is actually limited scope for empirical research in clinical practice (2001b, p. 85). This all seems fairly self-evident. Matters become contentious, however, with the claim that infant observation is an independent source of psychoanalytic knowledge (Rustin, 2001a). I can see reasons for making this claim on political or ideological grounds. For example, child psychotherapy is especially vulnerable in a publicly funded health care system that is preoccupied with evidence-based practice. Studies of what works and what does not may help the reputation of a profession that is clearly at risk in the current political conjuncture.

I agree there is a political argument to be made for the practice of psychotherapy in the public sphere. My misgivings about the use Rustin makes of infant observation as a research method should not be read as a limiting definition of psychoanalysis *contra* psychotherapy. This is not the point of my critique. However, Rustin’s argument is not confined to a defence of welfare services; indeed, quite apart from any political commitment to the institution of child psychotherapy, Rustin appears actively committed to the idea of establishing psychoanalytic knowledge itself on ‘a more verifiable, replicable and publicly accountable basis’ (2003, p. 138). Further to the defence of National Health Service resources, he is demonstrably in favour of developing ‘more formalised empirical methods in psychoanalysis’, arguing for the application of these methods to ‘the work of the consulting room’ (2003, p. 143).

I find this argument problematic on two counts. Firstly, psychoanalysis and infant observation alike, albeit in different ways, demonstrate the extent to which methodological knowledge is a secondary phenomenon of understanding. In trying to make sense of their observational experience, students are faced with the inadequacy of methodological thinking. The infant observation seminar is preoccupied with the difficult realisation that we reach an understanding not through the application of method, but rather, ‘from the conversation that we ourselves are’ (Gadamer, 1979, p. 340). Gadamer’s point is that there are certain experiences of truth which do not depend on the application of method. The clarification of the experience of understanding is irreducible to ‘the critical method for the empirical investigation of facts’ (Gadamer, 1987, p. 40).

Secondly, Rustin’s argument assumes that the credibility of psychoanalytic knowledge and understanding depends to a greater or lesser extent on other research methods, including infant observation. He cites attachment theory, and particularly the work of Fonagy, as a good example of the use of corroborative

methods in clinical research. Alongside clinical practice and its corroboratory methods, Rustin also proposes a third tier in the form of evaluative research. He argues that outcome studies can 'evaluate the effectiveness of treatment', not only for those who fund public health services, but also for 'the clinical guidance of practitioners' (2003, p. 142). The notion of 'clinical guidance' is an explicit attempt to clear the ground for more formalised research methods in psychoanalysis, including an epistemological commitment to the 'scientific rules of logic, accumulation and accountability' (2003, p. 139).

It is the epistemological commitment that is under critical discussion, and the criticism concerns the things to be understood – the so-called 'data' – as well as the process of understanding. Rustin has some rather fundamental objects of knowledge in mind, including the contribution of infant observation to a psychoanalytic understanding of 'the timing of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions' (1989, p. 211, n. 11). At the same time, he extends his epistemological argument to the process of understanding, concentrating on the kind of experience he assumes infant observation provides and, most importantly, on how this experience relates to 'the development of psychoanalytic theory' (2002, p. 122). I can see there is an argument for dialogue between psychoanalysis and infant observation, which would allow for both parties to extend and deepen their understanding. This would amount to what Gadamer (1979, p. 273) calls a 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Interdisciplinary collaboration, however, is possible only insofar as disciplinary boundaries are acknowledged and respected.

It is the idea of infant observation as an independent source of psychoanalytic knowledge that I find most problematic. Rustin seems to think that observers formulate their experience of observation in much the same way that analysts arrive at interpretations. The assumption is that these formulations are the sorts of things observers would say were they to make interpretations. While they do not make these interpretations *in situ*, according to Rustin, when observers formulate their experience they are effectively making psychoanalytic interpretations. This assumes far more for infant observation than a psychoanalytic focus.

It is possible to maintain this view on the assumption that interpretation is simply a way of testing psychoanalytic conjectures against reality. Rustin's idea of understanding is predicated on this assumption. This implies that the observer remains separate from the observation, that understanding is derived from reflection on the meaning of experience without recourse to mutual interpretative constructions worked out between the observer and the observed. In short, Rustin's argument does not allow for understanding as a mutual process in accordance with the analytic specificity of interpretation and reconstruction. Instead, the familiar antinomy between cause and meaning is 'resolved' only as far as the 'recognition of multi-dimensional patterns of organisation' (2002, p. 133). In arguing along these lines for more complex causal connections and their measurement, Rustin presents a type of knowledge that seems to me fundamentally at odds with the creation of meaning in the analytic relationship.

It privileges the objective being of the object of knowledge over intersubjective clinical facts.

The pedagogic rationale for infant observation

We get on with understanding before getting around to theoretical and methodological discriminations. As we inquire further into what is going on for us, the question of meaning always arises in the midst of understanding, and occasionally the question turns out to be inaugural. For instance, through the sorts of questions he put to himself from the dream of 'Irma's injection' in 1895 onwards, Freud set understanding on a new path; he came up with a 'psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams' (1900, p. 1). Although modest by comparison, in her contribution to the understanding of babies Esther Bick nonetheless announced and inaugurated something of an event in the field of interpretative understanding.

Bick introduced the technique of infant observation into the curriculum of the Tavistock Clinic in 1948, and it was subsequently included as part of the candidates' training programme at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis in London some 12 years later. In the paper she published in 1964 on the role of infant observation in analytic training, Bick explained how she felt that the observation of babies 'would help the students to conceive vividly the infantile experience of their child patients, so that when, for example, they started the treatment of a two-and-a-half year-old child they would get the feel of the baby that he was and from which he is not so far removed' (1964, p. 558).

Having a sense of the baby in one's mind seems to have been the essential point for Bick, which raises questions about the focus of infant observation as well as its aims and purposes. How far is the student meant to conceive infantile experience as a psychoanalytic phenomenon? And are the meanings that students give to their feelings about infantile states tantamount to psychoanalytic formulations or interpretations? I find Bick helpful in thinking about these questions. A close reading of her methodological considerations allows us to differentiate between the psychoanalytic focus of infant observation, on the one hand, and the use of psychoanalytic formulations or interpretations, on the other.

In her 1964 paper, Bick addressed at least four methodological aspects of infant observation, namely, the role of the observer; the role of the seminar and of the seminar tutor; the object of inquiry; and the status of observational material. She saw important similarities between observers and therapists, most notably with respect to the capacity for free-floating attention, what she described as an 'unconscious attitude' of mind (1964, p. 558). The emphasis on *acts of attention* raises important questions about both the form and the content of infant observation, which I shall consider in turn.

With the emphasis clearly on 'patterns of behaviour' (1964, p. 563), Bick argued that the seminar group plays a decisive role in establishing 'reliance on

consecutive observations' (1964, p. 565). Through the experiential type of learning that takes place in the observation seminar, 'one may see a pattern emerging in one observation, but one can only accept it as significant if it is repeated in the same, or a similar, situation in many subsequent observations' (1964, p. 563). These 'patterns of behaviour' are worked out in the context of the seminar as part of the student's experience of understanding.

The seminar has a central role to play in establishing the narrative form of observational understanding, helping students to re-imagine their experience in meaningful ways. These accounts do not comprise a series of objective facts on the model of experimental psychology, but remain an irreducible combination of the seen and the imagined. What does this involve? The students' accounts are not formulated in the relationship between the observer and the observed. They are not intersubjective facts on the model of therapeutic encounters. The narratives only make sense in light of the reconstruction that is worked out between the observer, the seminar leader, and other members of the group. The method Bick introduced was essentially interpretative, involving a dialogue *within* the seminar. In my experience, this provides an opportunity for students to get a better understanding of themselves as well as their perceptions. The aim is for students to experience a mode of understanding that knows its own mind. The students' personal narratives become more meaningful through their enhanced capacity to imagine. Transformations in self-understanding therefore lie at the heart of the process.

The fact that students' reconstructions cannot be fed back and reworked *in situ* underlines the fundamental difference between the observational setting and clinical practice. While the seminar provides an opportunity for observers to create meaningful accounts of experience along interpretative lines, the observational setting itself does not allow students to try out their emotional responses in the form of direct interpretations. There is no scope for a verbal exchange comparable to the analytic encounter in the observational setting; instead, interpretation and reconstruction take place in the context of the seminar.

In the British tradition of object-relations theory, 'transference' and 'countertransference' are generally agreed technical terms for the ongoing relationship between analysts and patients, a relationship that constitutes the groundwork of psychoanalytic understanding. This relationship is simply not available in the observational setting. The method of observation that Bick introduced provides an exemplary lesson in intuitive, introspective understanding coupled with the phenomenological aim of describing 'the matters themselves' (*die Sachen selbst*). When it works well the method engages the conscious and unconscious understanding of students and trainees, but it does not and cannot involve the use of transference and countertransference in the psychoanalytic sense.

Bick was clear regarding the specificity of infant observation and left us in no doubt about its defining characteristic as a pedagogic resource. It 'was planned as

an adjunct to the teaching of psychoanalysis and child therapy, rather than as a research instrument' (1964, p. 558). Bick did not present the students' experience as a source of psychoanalytic knowledge, but viewed the experience instead as preparatory to clinical work. Students were introduced in this way to psychoanalytic ideas, their understanding of babies had a psychoanalytic focus, but these ideas and understandings were not seen as psychoanalytic formulations or interpretations.

Defining students' observations in this way as non-analytic, pre-clinical forms of reconstruction still leaves the question of content. What, exactly, are observers observing? What is observable in the material? When it comes to Bick's thoughts about objects of knowledge, the distinction between an analytic focus and analytic formulations seems less clear to me. Bick argued that the patterns observed over a period of time 'seem to suggest the working of intrapsychic defensive operations' (1964, p. 563). Her account was underpinned by the Kleinian model of anxiety and defence and, accordingly, she saw the patterns in consecutive observations as indicative of various forms of internal object-relations. The Kleinian model of object-relations is not the issue here. I am interested in a more general theoretical question concerning objects of knowledge in the observational setting.

Alongside her emphasis on internal objects and unconscious phantasy, Bick identified observational knowledge in terms of 'threads of behaviour' or 'patterns of communication between mother and child' (1964, p. 563). This requires no less in the way of understanding than intrapsychic states, and may indeed present the observer with complex and intimate patterns of symbolic interaction in need of interpretation. And yet rather than extend the method beyond its credible reach, the emphasis on behaviour and interaction allows for the fact that observable phenomena cannot be understood in terms of the psychic reality available in the analytic context. It is obvious that the infant's mind cannot be reached by psychoanalysis. On the other hand, I do not see how observed behaviour can be used to infer associated unconscious processes. Rather, the idea that observational material comprises preverbal patterns of interaction, including receptive and expressive modes of affective communication, is in line with my view of infant observation as a *complement* to clinical thinking.

In her own work, Bick used observational material in conjunction with clinical findings. This is clearly evident in her seminal paper on the function of the skin, where case material from infant observation is presented alongside particular 'problems of dependence and separation in the transference' (1968, p. 484). The idea of skin contact and the part it played for Bick in the earliest introjections of the ego cannot be easily attributed to one or other aspect of her work. In fact, I do not see how such a distinction could be made where someone is both an analyst and an infant observation teacher. However, the fact that these immensely influential ideas concerning the skin in early object relations came out of Bick's work *as a whole* does not mean, therefore, that her observational and psychoanalytical findings should be considered as one and the same.

My understanding is that analytic reconstruction provided the basis of Bick's findings on primitive states of mind, and that infant observation helped to support these findings. This continues to be the case in the most important work being done in this tradition. For instance, as Haag (2005, p. 115) confirms with reference to intra-corporeal identification and the introjection of the containing function, infant observation is invariably underpinned by the analysis of adults as well as the treatment of children with autism.

This more modest proposal regarding the scope of infant observation is consistent with its pedagogic rationale. Indeed, in this respect Bick made a strong case for psychoanalysis as well as infant observation, firstly, in terms of the primacy of analytic reconstruction over empirical data, and secondly, with regards to the analytic situation as the crucible for understanding infantile experience. Analysis seems to have been both the source and the end of Bick's understanding, as a complement to which the pedagogic rationale for infant observation and its psychoanalytic focus remains perfectly viable.

The pedagogic task of infant observation

It is important to know whether students are concerned with intrapsychic phenomena or with patterns of communicative interaction. Bick left us to sort this out. To take a recent example, Edwards (2008) draws on her extensive experience as an infant observation teacher to illustrate 'the different layers which are at work' in the pedagogic situation. She identifies the receptive and interpretative functions operating in the seminar group, where the teacher facilitates the emotional aspects of the students' learning experience by maintaining 'the fine balance of her own maternal containing and paternal explicating processes' (2008, p. 57). Edwards describes 'the fine balance' between receptivity and interpretation as a pedagogic task. This involves letting things show themselves as well as selecting an interpretative framework in order to make sense of the students' intuitions. The phenomenological emphasis on the things themselves pertains only so long as the frame of meaning follows from, and refers back to, what is intuitively given.

In this case, the seminar group was faced with the task of understanding early splitting and projective identification in a three-month-old baby. Edwards describes how the seminar leader in situations like this provides a maternal function in holding the group together, while feeling held herself by a 'knowledge of theory and the experience of its use' (2008, p. 58). It is the combination of containment and explication that proves decisive, and Edwards emphasises that it is important to avoid 'premature theorising'. In this way, the seminar leader holds open the reach for meaning at the interface of the observational setting and the classroom. This is not something the tutor does in his or her own mind independent of the students. The fine balance that Edwards describes is essentially part of the student's experience, a clarification of things beyond measure that students and teachers share.

Students come to an understanding of their experience in this way through a particular process. As well as the observation itself, the process includes detailed written accounts and group discussions under supervision. The complex nature of the task is evident in these different modes of experience, where students are engaged with the creation of meaning in various ways. I think it is the engagement in this complex process of attention, interpretation, and reconstruction that provides the most valuable pre-clinical experience for students. As I have suggested, it allows for a transformation in the manner of students' experience, a change in the way they feel about what they know. Facilitating this process, wherein 'things in the offing', once they are sensed, translate into 'things foreknown' (Heaney, 1991, p. 108), seems far more valuable to me than trying to make use of transference and countertransference outside the clinic.

The case that Edwards presents is not an unfamiliar one. The baby appeared suddenly inconsolable; the mother seemed unable to provide what was necessary; the observer looked worn out and anxious after presenting the material to the seminar group; and, in turn, the tutor herself 'was not quite sure what was needed' (2008, p. 62). We can see here how a certain state of mind, unprocessed or unmetabolised and yet fully real and alive in its effects, works its way through the pedagogic situation in search of meaning. There is a need in this case to re-imagine the baby's experience, and Edwards gives us a good description of this process. In addition to which there are a couple of thoughts on the pedagogic task I should like to offer by way of conclusion.

Firstly, for me Edwards' paper is not the last word on the student's observation so much as another layer in the general hermeneutic framework of interpretation and reconstruction. The matter under consideration in the seminar proceeds from the mother's attention towards her troubled baby. The baby finally managed to settle down by holding onto mother's forefinger as she fed. Edwards' recourse to the concept of 'primary splitting' (2008, pp. 58–59) forms part of an overall process in which we can trace the movement from pre-understanding to understanding. Edwards presented the concept to the group, as she presents it to the reader, in much the same way as the mother made an intuitive offer of her finger to the baby. For me, the mother's original intuition is not a creation of imagination, but rather, a spontaneous gesture that initiates the reach for meaning. Similarly, the concept Edwards came up with enabled the students, as it enables the reader, to go on thinking without bringing matters to a close. The concept of 'primary splitting' re-enacts the containing function of maternal intuition *before* it explains things as part of a theory. It gets us thinking and enables us to go on doing so in the direction of meaningful thought. In this context, at least, the *act* of conceptualising refers back to what is intuitively given in the mother's preoccupation with her baby.

Secondly, here as elsewhere, understanding comes about through learning to apply oneself to the possibilities of experience under conditions of dialogue. Thus, as Edwards (2008, p. 63) points out, understanding babies represents 'an episode in the ongoing narrative of both learning and teaching'. Edwards

presents this as a pedagogic task, namely, how to 'enable students to maintain some kind of dynamic tension' between feeling and knowing, how to make imaginative emotional links, rather than turning to defensive manoeuvres. That clinical thinking can and does throw light on the scene of teaching does not alter the fact that classrooms and consulting rooms constitute quite different settings. How we understand, and how our understanding is put into words, depends on the context. Instead of infant observation contributing to psychoanalytic knowledge, it seems to me that together, from their respective standpoints, infant observation and psychoanalysis contribute to a wider field of interpretative understanding. My argument throughout has been that, far from analogous, observers and analysts conduct the reach for meaning in entirely different ways, and that the hermeneutical exegesis required in each case is different in kind rather than degree.

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