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CONFERENCE REPORT

A half-day conference: ‘What do we see when we observe infants and children? Cultural and historical perspectives on Psychoanalytic Observation’

The Association of Child Psychotherapists Programme Planning Committee with Taylor & Francis Publishers and *The International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications*, Saturday 12 May 2007

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This conference, held at University College, London, provided a valuable opportunity to draw together historical and contemporary perspectives and applications of infant and young child observation.

In her introduction as Chair (and author of *Infant Observation at the Heart of Training*) Janine Sternberg (2005) pointed to some of the historical antecedents of the observational method, including Darwin’s observations of his own baby in the 1880s. She linked the developments that psychoanalytic observation can bring for the student-practitioner to Houzel’s description of three levels of receptivity – perceptual, emotional/empathic and unconscious.

Nick Midgley (Anna Freud Centre, Marlborough Family Centre and Centre of Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex) added to the historical perspective with a lively talk evocatively illustrated with recently discovered photographs and film from the Anna Freud archive. As a leading figure in the integration of direct observation of children with the new psychoanalytic knowledge emerging from the consulting room in early twentieth century Vienna, Anna Freud played a crucial role in the emergence of the psychoanalytic tradition of observation. She recommended infant observation to medical students to ‘witness the birth of the mind out of the body and to see the close interaction of the mind with the needs and functions of the human body’.

Her major contribution came during the Second World War when she founded the Hampstead War Nurseries. The three nurseries in Hampstead and Essex looked after children affected by the war as well as undertaking research into children’s psychological

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needs to inform post-war child care policy. James Robertson was one of six Conscientious Objectors who worked in the Anna Freud nurseries to provide a male presence among the mainly female staff, some of whom slept in chicken houses to allow visiting parents to stay with their children. High turnover among the staff, many of whom were refugees, diminished when a training programme of evening lectures and reading was set up.

The Anna Freud method was one of direct observation; staff were trained to make detailed observations of the children's play and behaviour, including their eating, sleeping and interactions with adults and other children. A card index was kept of salient observations under specific themes. As a result of these observations, especially of the impact of separations on young children, the organization of the nurseries was changed and 'artificial families' were set up. Striking levels of developmental delay were rapidly alleviated; and at the same time other complications ensued as the children became clingy, possessive, demanding, jealous, and visibly distressed when staff left. Anna Freud concluded that 'choosing between the two evils of broken, interrupted attachments or an existence of emotional barrenness, the latter is the more harmful as it offers less prospect for normal character development . . . what helps the child to grow up normally is the painful, disturbing process of learning how to deal with such emotions'.

Cathy Urwin (Tavistock Centre) gave a presentation entitled 'Becoming a mother in an ethnically and culturally diverse community: Infant observation as a research method used in exploring changing aspects of identity'. She described findings from the psychoanalytic observation of six babies and first-time mothers followed from birth to one year, as part of the research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, with their 'Identities and Social Action' programme.

The six observers formed a working group and prepared by reading relevant papers. Each seminar began with a recapitulation of the family history to lead into an account of the atmosphere in the session and of the emotional work the baby was requiring of the mother, and how this was reflected in the material. The observers were also encouraged to record their reactions to unfamiliar practices; experiences of shock were noted in many sessions.

The six mothers are part of a larger group of mothers who were all interviewed before, during and at the end of their baby's first year using the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). Infant observation was found to be especially useful in revealing how the emotional and physical demands of the relationship with the baby, its pressures and pleasures, evoke the mother's infantile experiences, memories and associations. As readers will see in many of the papers collected here, the method also showed how the mother's changing sense of herself as a parent is mobilized in the context of social and cultural expectations. Drawing on observations of White, Bangladeshi, African and African Caribbean mothers and babies, the presentation highlighted differences in handling separateness and separations and the role of the extended family in care and support of mother and baby. A common experience in many families included passing the baby around; this seemed an important theme for mothers who have been displaced, echoing their own experience of displacement.

Cathy Urwin also addressed methodological issues, the adaptation of the infant observation model developed by Esther Bick and the contribution of the weekly seminar to the research process and in deepening understanding of the processes involved in developing identity and the impact of cultural differences.

Margaret Rustin (Tavistock Clinic) in her concluding remarks adroitly gathered up themes relating to infant observation within clinical practice and a lively and wide-ranging discussion followed.

References

- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (London: Sage).
- Sternberg, J. (2005) *Infant Observation at the Heart of Training* (London: Karnac).