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From Baby to Boardroom: The Tavistock–Bick Method of infant observation and its application to organisations and in consultancy. A conference held at the Tavistock Centre, 17–18 October 2008

Reports from Katy Dearnley and Lydia Hartland-Rowe, compiled by Lisa Miller

‘From Baby to Boardroom’ was the arresting title of a conference held at the Tavistock Centre in October 2008. The idea for the gathering had evolved from a discussion between two people investigating the application of the Esther Bick method of Infant Observation to organisations and consultancy, David Armstrong (UK) and Ross A. Lazar (Germany). While Bick’s focus, as the programme acknowledged, was on the interplay between the child, its mother and its family, her ‘method and conceptualisation’ has ‘influenced ways of framing and understanding the use and practice of observation in a much wider variety of settings, including those afforded by institutional life’. Keynote speakers were Ross A. Lazar himself, Robert D. Hinshelwood (UK), Anton Obholzer (UK) and Margot Waddell (UK).

Katy Dearnley reports that Anton Obholzer began with a provocative fairytale about all the great psychoanalytic thinkers getting on famously and developing a coherent view. He used this to illustrate the difficulty of cross-fertilisation, noting how long it took Bick to get other disciplines to consider Infant Observation. Then Margot Waddell gave a paper bringing the conference back to the centrality of the transference, with the idea that preconceptions block observation being a key theme. Katy Dearnley also tells us that Robert Hinshelwood ‘gave fascinating examples of the unconscious at work in organisations and drew attention to the complexities of relationships and group processes in organisations which are different from Infant Observation’.

A variety of international presenters offered workshop opportunities for discussion, and one of these presentations, ‘An exploration of “quality of life” in

nursing homes' is published in the present issue of this Journal. Online observers were present, and Lydia Hartland-Rowe writes a contribution for us from the point of view of one of them.

An observer observing observers: a review by a 'virtual delegate'

The recent conference held at the Tavistock and Portman Clinic NHS Trust, 'From baby to boardroom', focused on the relevance and usefulness of both the practice of Infant Observation and on an observational stance in understanding human activity. A pilot attempt by the Tavistock at providing 'virtual' conference membership through relaying the conference live online meant that for the first time a limited number of 'online delegates' had access to the conference from a distance, via the Internet.

As one of these 'virtual' delegates, my experience was both rich and frustrating. There was the obvious attraction of being able to have access to some of the content of the conference, and there was something particularly appealing about the idea that a conference about Infant Observation, in which the observation of organisations would be a central theme, would itself be observed, and I would find myself an observer.

As with all observers, my view of the conference was inevitably a partial one; I was never properly a member of the conference family or organisation, but was still allowed to watch it at work. Some of the proceedings of the conference remained off-limits to the online observer, as only the main papers were relayed—but similarly, as an observer rather than a conference member, I could switch off or take myself away more easily than those committed to the event with their physical presence.

The virtual community connected to the event had its own group life. The conference organisers had ensured that, once logged on to the event, online delegates had access to the full programme and to the delegate list. There was also a list of online delegates which included a precise account of the amount of time each delegate had spent logged on; a strangely intimate detailing of one's attentiveness or propensity for woolgathering, both of which tend to remain a more private matter at a conference attended in the real rather than virtual world!

The possibility of moving in and out of contact with a conference is of course one of the attractions of online access in a world where time to invest properly in full attendance at such an event is hard-won. It is, of course, also one of the main disadvantages, because it means that the understanding and impact of the event is too quickly made partial and disjointed, and it is also simply too easy not to stay involved with what might be more difficult or less appealing. It is much easier to start doing the ironing or even just gazing out of the window in a

situation where there are no witnesses beyond one's own superego than it is to drift off or march out of a paper that bores, irritates or disturbs one too much.

What the experience lacked, for all it offered, was a sense of the containment that a live group event can provide, as much as such an event can also provoke. It was too easy to hear only what there was time for (in my case, only one main paper and one plenary discussion) perhaps intensified by the feeling that online delegates were already partly excluded by not having access to the parallel papers.

Both Robert Hinshelwood's paper and the lunchtime plenary discussion on the second day of the conference certainly gave a sense of the themes that were being discussed: the meaning of the role of observer in organisational settings; the distinctions, hard to define, between observer and consultant; the purpose of observation as a training model or a mode of intervention in organisational settings. Perhaps there was also an undercurrent of uncertainty or disagreement about where the practice of observing organisations had come from, and to whom it 'belonged'. One of the effects of being outside of the group looking in was that some of the group discussions about the nature of the conference itself, and to which institutions it did or didn't belong, seemed much less important or interesting than they might have had I been physically present. At these moments the group seemed to be rather preoccupied with itself, and it is hard to know whether distance gave perspective and made this helpfully visible (in the way of some aspects of observation), or whether absence meant a lack of contact with a live and meaningful emotional event. I understood from colleagues who had attended the conference in person that the whole question of the 'virtual delegates' was the subject of much discussion and the source of not a little persecutory anxiety—ironically, I missed all this because of being a virtual delegate.

There is no doubt that online streaming of conferences is an important and creative way to ease access to these kinds of events, especially where geography might make the difference between being able to attend in person or not. As with all families or organisations who take the brave step of allowing an observer to join their lives, however partially, attention needs to be paid, by both observer and observed, to the risks and benefits of this involvement. If a contract has been made to include virtual delegates, then they need to be made as welcome as possible given the inevitably partial nature of the connection, and this was largely done very well for this conference. On the part of the virtual delegate, perhaps there is a responsibility to know the limits of one's participation in the event, and to hold on to the awareness, as one does as an observer, that what is seen is inevitably only a snapshot of family or organisational life, and not to expect more.