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Article:

Notes on the Technique of Psychoanalytic Infant Observation: A Group-Analytic Training Perspective

Recent developments in the field of psychoanalytic infant observation are considered as a basis for extending the dyadic focus of the technique to encompass a group orientated perspective. A provisional method of 'group-as-a-whole infant observation' is presented using illustrative material and is accompanied by a contextualizing analysis. It is posited that group observation of infants and children may highlight group dynamics in unrefined forms and may therefore be a useful resource not only in the training of group practitioners but also as a way of deepening group and social theory.

Since the pioneering work of Esther Bick (1964) in the field of infant observation study, psychoanalytic observation technique has extended its role in the field of research as a useful tool, not only for corroborating current psychoanalytic theory but also as the means to generating new ones (Miller et al., 1989; Rustin, 1994; Reid, 1997). The technique of psychoanalytic observation has been honed over recent years with an increasing number of trainees in psychoanalytic studies, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, child analysis, psycho- analysis and child psychotherapy who are required to undertake an intensive training in infant observation. Trainees are primarily required to observe an infant/mother relationship in its natural setting for a period of two years. The technique of observation is akin to

ethnographic or anthropological fieldwork where the observer/researcher aims to be as unobtrusive as possible when gathering data over an extended period. Material from each observation is presented on a weekly basis to a tutor and other trainees at a seminar. As the material is discussed in the group, various theories come in and out of focus. The observation process usually supplies valuable in-depth and longitudinal information about the normative development of the infant.

Although the Bick model of infant observation has become 'part and parcel' of various psychoanalytic trainings, Sue Reid (1997) has more recently argued that there is a shortfall of research output compared to the amount of observation work carried out. She believes that the speciality of the psychoanalytic observation procedure has failed to co-opt the research discipline of other academic discourses. The attachment theorists would seem to be the closest research ally, insofar as they have developed standardized tests and measures deriving from infant observation which have been applied fruitfully in diverse settings (Fonagy et al., 1991). Bowlby and his followers drew from the established field of ethology in order to enhance the repertoire of their own approach, a type of paradigm pluralism

which may be a template for supplementing psychoanalytic observation with research rigour from other scientific fields.

It is possible that the technique of psychoanalytic infant observation has suffered from being too linear or insular, failing to adopt social science paradigms which might offer research corrugation. Arguably, the Bick technique of observation is too narrow to lend itself to extending social scientific enterprise. While the predominant focus on the mother/child dyad has produced some rich material, the dyadic focus reduces the scope for exploring more social or group-related dimensions of the experiences being observed. The established traditions of sociological or group methodologies would seem therefore to be notably excepted from current infant observation discourse. Is it possible that a group perspective might enhance the dyadic discourse and therefore act as a source for the type of intellectual and academic development that Sue Reid calls for?

The fact that infant observation has been the reserve of individual analysis reflects, to some degree, the lacuna in psychoanalysis where the concept of family and group has become tangential to the two-body psychology of individual psychoanalysis. This is surpris-

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ing considering that Freud's later formulations were often concerned with ego development and its relation to wider group relations and society (Freud, 1912, 1921, 1929, 1939). E.J. Anthony has likewise commented on the rather 'chequered career in psychoanalysis' (1980: 5-6) of the idea of 'family group', noting the paucity of references to group and family group in Freud's Standard Edition, compared to the individualized references to 'mother' and 'father' (1980: 10). Few would argue today that it would be too narrow to view the infant's early interpersonal experiences as dominated by singular contacts with otherness. Even though the early contact with mother prevails, this contact is shaped by a subtle but crucially influencing family and cultural matrix. Even *in utero* the protomentality of the infant may be well attuned to the sounds of the world - the television, the traffic, the noises of elder siblings, the cacophony of experience surrounding the womb which already impinges on the oceanic oneness of infant and mother. Here there is a fluid interchange between inside and out, the parents and other family members shaping particularly the earliest experiences (the work of Piontelli and Henri Rey are notable here). The very first sense of the world is therefore a web which arguably roots the emergent layers of experience in what we might call a *primary group protomatrix.*

The development of a group, social or culturally based infant observation method would therefore seem to be found wanting in offering a commentary on primary multi-personal infant experience. The lack of a primary group research and theory may be due to the fact that infant observation is not a requirement of group-analytical training. Addressing the hiatus between the individually focused psychoanalytic observation technique and the need for a group- orientated process observation tool therefore represents a serious methodological challenge.

Towards a Group-Analytic Infant Observation Method

Group Analysis, *since its inception in 1967, has featured a number of reports on group work with older children (usually of around 9 years of age) and adolescents*

(Goldberg and Shafar, 1973; Schardt and Truckle, 1975; Farrell, 1984). A special edition of the journal focusing on group dynamics with children (age 7-10 years) was published in 1988 to: 'Compensate for what seems to have been a somewhat neglected area. . .' (Bamber, 1988: 99). However, none

of these articles focused on pre-school age infants and children. Since 1988 there have been only a few indexed references to infancy and child development in *Group Analysis* (cf. Piggott, 1990; Pines, 1992). Ahlin (1995) has recently opened up a debate after he compared the developmental psychology of Daniel Stern (1985) to group-analytic theory, proposing that Stern's theory of the patterns of self relatedness in infancy (core self, emergent self, etc.) could be mapped with developmental stages in the evolution of group- relating capabilities (dyad, sub-group family triad, family-as-a-whole, etc.). As a juxtaposition of the discourses of child development and group analysis Ahlin's formulation would seem to be a helpful starting point, though without any direct infant/child group observations it is not possible to gauge the epistemological compatibility of Stem's theory with group-analytic theory.

Although some would argue that group-relating capabilities are absent in children until the age of 2 years, on the basis of Atkins's (1983) observations of children under 2, it is possible to hypothesize a developmental line for peer relatedness beginning long before. Atkins (1983) felt that the early play of children in group situations had been virtually ignored as the location of emerging social relationships. He undertook to show from a series of observations that interrelatedness during the first year of life was not just reflexivity or response by contagion, as Piaget (1951) believed, but that peers were far more than lifeless objects. Atkins referred to a 'fascinating lure' (1983: 234) that peers (or siblings) demonstrated in their contact with each other, representing a palpable foundational social linkage via an early mirroring interchange. He proposed that such experiences could potentiate a healthy basis for sensori-motor integration enhancing the development of self-other-relating capabilities. In considering the impact of non-caretakers in the emergence of object relationships, Pines (1985) concluded in his discussion of Atkins's contribution that it would be useful to combine the disciplines of social psychology and psychoanalysis in order to build theoretical bridges between concepts such as peer mirroring and object relations.

Towards a Group-as-a-Whole Infant Observation Method Savi Mackenzie-Smith (1992) and Marco Chiesa (1993) have each undertaken observation studies following Bick's technique in settings beyond the infant mother/infant dyad. Mackenzie-Smith

(1992) observed elderly patients in a geriatric ward and produced a \ range of data about the emotional experiences of the patients. Whereas Mackenzie-Smith had some limited engagement with her observees, Chiesa (1993) in his study of an acute psychiatric ward kept his contact to a minimum of what might be called 'courtesy contacts'. Like Mackenzie-Smith, Chiesa found focusing on the general atmosphere of the psychiatric ward provided a rich array of material from which he

was able to draw inferences about the projective processes between patients and staff.

In my observations of children in the setting of a nursery (age 4 months to 4 years) I adopted the non-intrusive observation procedure, limiting my contacts as far as possible. For two years I observed just one child (as in Bick and the Tavistock method) following and recording events as they occurred outwards from the single observee. While there was much material to work with, I often felt dissatisfied that a singular observation limited my capacity to note the much wider events and how they impacted on my observee. Thus I began to wonder about a more outward-inward type of observation and the feasibility of observing several children simultaneously. Thus I set about a study over a period of 18 months with the explicit aim of addressing and articulating a methodological description of a group-as-a-whole observation technique.

My study sites were two nurseries with infants and children aged 4 months to 4 years. In undertaking my observations I refrained from active involvements other than those initiated by the staff and the observees which necessitated the type of courtesy response described by Chiesa. I did not focus on any single individual, instead I gathered data from the general events and prevailing atmosphere. I encouraged the nursery staff to follow their natural routines as far as possible. In gathering data I attempted not to encode events prematurely to fit preconceived axioms, but observed what was happening and then recorded the events of the observation afterwards remaining as faithful as possible to the chronology of occurrences (cf. Rustin, 1989). The approach was something of a *circumscribed* observation which began from, as far as possible, a position of zero intention (no hypotheses or predicted outcomes) in order that the vicissitudes of meaning could emerge with as little impingement as possible (start point -K as Bion might have called it). The aim was to maintain an open-focus observation unsullied by a search for wanted facts and truths.

The task of observing a group of several infants, children and

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adults in this way presented an immediate problem compared to the dyadic focused observation. Whereas, when observing one child, the visual field of study was manageable, with several bodies the space is perceptibly larger and unwieldy. Thus it was impossible to attend to all events. I located myself in a position where I could see as much of the observation field as possible, usually seated on the outside of the room. Initially I directed my gaze towards the centre of the room, following events as they occurred outwards from there, attcmpting not to focus on any single event or child, inslead watching the reactions of other children in the context of focal encounters. For example, when one child was upset I attempted to monitor the impact on the other children as well as observe the focal encounter of the upset child. In short, my visual field was the *space of the observation setting* (always the day room of the nursery) as much as it was the *dramatis personae.*

In considering the concept of the space of the observation some of the following ideas were reference points: Winnicott's (1951) notion of 'transitional space', the interim space that facilitates the child in his movement away from his mother (an idea which bears some resemblance to Lacan's (1960) concept of *'l 'objet a':* the absence of the object that leads to a desire to fill the space with

something else); also Balint's (1968) differentiation between 'ocno- philic' and 'philobatic' contact in object relations (the space in between objects as much as the objects themselves) and Segal's (1991) concept of 'mental space'; the absence of the breast that leads to early symbol formation and creativity (cf. Bob Young's *Mental Space,* 1994). Rey's ideas about space were apposite in my mind too where he discusses the movement from maternal space to a marsupial space (1994a: 21), before a more elaborate psychical organization develops where a spatial awareness of self-space and non-self-space becomes the impetus for movement - the 'weft and warp' (1994a: 30) of primary experience. Rey further suggests spatial research when he states that:

> ". . . there is still a great deal of work to be done in examining the precise way external and internal objects are constructed and their relations to not only external and inner spaces, but also to local spaces. There is also the relationship of those local spaces to each other and to global space". (1994b: 189)

Finally, there was Hinshelwood's (1994) concept of 'reflective space between minds' which he applies to intersubjective experiences in group settings.

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In undertaking the observation I attempted to absorb a wide range of experiences based on the premise that the concrete data represented only a fragment of the multiplicity of events taking place. In order to process events I aimed to conduct something of a organic process of observing, acting as a conduit for the nuances of collective experience. I attempted to sense the atmosphere of the setting, for instance the smell of food or faeces, or the sound of an aeroplane passing overhead, the telephone ringing or a car pulling up on the drive, or how a draught created by the opening of a door, the breeze from a window or how the crying of a baby in the room next door, impacted upon the intertextual experience of children in the space I was observing. This approach which fundamentally aimed to be receptive to bioemotional states, might be described as a type of *sensory-organic engagement* the structuring of experience as a result of the interaction between internality and sensual externality (Rey, I 994a: 33).

The observation technique I adopted was not one that actively sought to gather data, but rather one that was a state of being with the observation that attempted not to impede the ingestion of experience - a kind of *observational valency* (after Bion). I aimed to watch less in an attempt to observe more.

Observation Vignette
This provisional technique of a group observation can only be considered as experimental. In establishing a framework technique my aim was to provide a baseline from which a methodology may be potentially developed, tested and improved. In order to illustrate the technique I will present a fragment of the findings from one observation, from which I will then draw inferences. The observation described here took place in a creche with two staff and three infants aged 4 months to one year. The names of the children have been changed.

Francesca (aged 4 months) was lying on her back on a blanket. Above her there was a frame with various plastic objects dangling - rattles, mirror, shapes, etc. Jan (staff) was sitting on the floor with Francesca making occasional contact with her, touching and moving the objects above her head. Patsy (staff) was attending to Bethany (II months) in a cot on the other side of the room. Patsy said to Jan that Francesca had 'a beautiful head of hair'. Jordan (12 months) was sitting on the floor playing with wooden blocks of various colours, shapes and sizes; picking them up, rubbing them together, running the blocks over his feet and legs, putting the blocks in his mouth, sucking and gnawing. He

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occasionally moved around the floor space within a radius of 3 or 4 feet from the middle of the carpet, either on his seat or crawling. He was bright and alert although looking rather puzzled and frowning from time to time. He was concentrating on the toys and then, about every 30 seconds, he stopped and looked at Jan and Patsy and occasionally at me before carrying on his play with the blocks. He looked at Francesca only on a few occasions. Bethany, who was sucking a dummy, then began to make throaty noises. She began shifting between standing up and reaching out from the cot and sitting down looking out from the cot. After Bethany made a long reach to touch something outside of the cot, Patsy lifted Bethany out saying 'We had better lift you out before you fallout', Bethany crawled over to near where Jordan was and proceeded to play with the building blocks, There was a big bucket in which the blocks were kept. Jordan pulled the bucket on its side and retrieved a block and then Bethany did the same. During this time Bethany's dummy fell out of her mouth. Bethany and Jordan both mouthed the blocks, gnawing at them or rubbing them over their bodies, looking at each other a few times during a period of 4-5 minutes. During this time Jordan's attention was still focused mainly on the adults. However, after a while he began to look more inquisitively at Bethany. Then Jordan reached over to Bethany with an empty hand and tried to touch her mouth, The first time he did not reach, but then he tried again and this time he did reach. It was not clear whether he was trying to put his fingers inside her mouth or whether he was just attempting to touch her lips. Bethany pursed her lips and recoiled slightly. Jordan also sat back and continued with his own activities with the bricks. Bethany's and

Jordan's play continued for some time until Bethany became increasingly agitated, Jan said that Bethany was tired 'but as usual was fighting it all the way', She lifted her up and said she would take her down to the cot room to see if she would settle. Jan left with Bethany. Until that point, Jordan had paid no attention to Francesca, who was still under the frame, Now, he crawled over towards her. Francesca had been very quietly toying with the objects on the frame above her. Jordan looked as though he was going to touch her head. Patsy said' Jordan no'. He sat back, looked at Patsy and then repeated his move again, This time he did reach Francesca and took hold of her hair, Patsy said' Jordan, no', louder this time, He let go and looked bemused as Francesca let out shrill cry, Patsy went over to him and picked him up and set him down away from Francesca. Francesca settled after a short while.

Inferences from the Observation

The interchange between Jordan and Bethany as they played with the blocks with appeared to be a mirroring-type play mediated by a

mutual oral engagement. At some point during this play, Jordan's \ sense of his self (his boundaries) may have become fuzzy as he became uncertain of his separateness from Bethany. His attempt to reconstruct his boundaries may have been what prompted him to reach out and touch her. To make a distinction between himself and Bethany, he investigated a primary sensual zone - thus, by touching Bethany's mouth he was alerted to a not-me experience and so retrieved his sense of me once again (Winnicott, 1951). At this early stage of differentiating self and other, the recognition of the otherness of mother, or in this case the mother imago of the staff, is more easily achieved than distinguishing the otherness of a peer. Whilst the self-resemblance of Bethany and Jordan may have made differentiation difficult, the resemblance may have also potentiated a mirroring recognition. The play between Bethany and Jordan and later the contact between Jordan and Francesca were not simply born out of the distance of the staff, rather there was a palpable curiosity towards peer contact; Bethany wanted to get out of the cot, Jordan crawled over to Bethany and later made contact with Francesca.

Murray (1991) describes how a gradual process of defining self and otherness develops as the infant begins to perceive something of a *virtual self* This perception of a virtual self could be described as an interim phase as the sense of self-other object as one is challenged. The play with the blocks between Bethany and Jordan appeared to be part of a process of discovering a 'virtual self in this sense. Initially the blocks were wishfully gnawed like food (or suckling at the breast). This mouth-self-mouth sensuality was the basis for the first moment of peer contact (though somewhat clumsy) as Jordan touched Bethany's mouth. Thus the objects did not appear to be barriers to interchange; rather they mediated cohesion and exchange insofar as Jordan maintained contact with the staff and increased his contact with

Bethany whilst playing with the blocks. To some extent, the blocks gave Bethany and Jordan a medium of common interchange and therefore might be considered as normal shared autistic objects (cf. Tustin, 1980). In these .. exchanges a merged state of identification with the mother (or surrogate) might be said to have been deconstructed through intersubjective peer interchange, where the sensual traffic of experience led to a sense of a new co-presence.

The question as to the emergence of rudimentary group dynamics is complex; indeed the observation raises questions as to how we

might define a group. It did appear that the play between Bethany and Jordan represented a *common* object-relational experience, if not a *group* experience per se, although inchoate social fittedness; mutuality, shared affiliation and compatibility are apparent. Bethany's dummy falling out of her mouth may not have been a cohesive act of mutuality as she noted Jordan's empty mouth, but one cannot necessarily rule out a process of dialogue where there was a recognition of the sameness of other and self. Through the series of interchanges, particularly at the point where the 'hatching process coincides with the spurt of locomotion' (Mahler, 1986), it would appear that Bethany and Jordan were exploring and differentiating their sense of self, grasping their understanding of me/not-me and at the same time establishing a common identity with the shared purpose of play.

We might advance a hypothesis that even during the first year of life, experience is emphatically influenced by the vicissitudes of peer relations. The play in the observation could not be described as a manifestation of co-operative play, but neither could it be described as 'solitary' as Horner et al. (1976) argue, where the infant is 'cut off from their involvement with peers until there is an *active* involvement, which begins to emerge from the age of 2 to 3 years. The above observation suggests a more fluid and sustained interchange of intersubjective experiences, particularly if we take into account the staffs discussion about Francesca's hair early on in the observation and the fact that Jordan later returned to hold Francesca's hair. Speculatively Jordan may have profoundly internalized the discussion and his (envious?) contact could have been discreetly though concretely responsive.

My overall impression of the play dynamics was one of a web or mandala of engagement where awareness of otherness and self was diffused in a continual exchange between inner and outer experience where otherness and self was fundamentally intertwined. This view of the infant as suspended in a *space of engagement* would seem to be in keeping with the concept that social relatedness is intuited and exists from birth and is part of the infant's subjective experience (Stern, 1985). It would be important not to 'adultmorphize' the events in the observation by describing the pre-linguistic reciprocity as companionship or even group relations; however, it would also be erroneous to talk about these events as asocial. The observation supports Atkins's proposal that peer relations during the first year, and in particular peer-based mirroring, may be an

interface for learning that serves 'to stabilize the infant's self-representation' (1983: 240).

Observation Technique Validation

After undertaking 18 months of this type of group observations in the setting of two nurseries, I sought the views of independent witnesses to see if it was possible to begin to move towards a validation of the observation technique. I was concerned to see if my findings were perceived as distinct from the traditional technique of psychoanalytic infant observation. I enlisted the support of independent witnesses (Delphi technique); two child analysts and two group analysts. I presented each witness with four observations and asked them to comment on the findings and also to draw psychoanalytic inferences from the data. The responses from the witnesses were to greater or lesser degrees commensurate with my own interpretations, although each was also subtly diverse in their analyses of the data. The views of the independent witnesses suggested at the very least that the group observation process did extrapolate data that lent itself well to the drawing of psychoanalytic inferences. I asked specifically if the data derived from the 'multi-bodied' observation had compromised the in-depth value of the standardized mother/infant observation technique. None thought so, though there were comments about the lack of longitudinal data.

Tentatively, I would conclude that, *following the prototype of Bick's observation methodology - the empirical process of obtaining data. examining and testing the data within a seminar group and finally drawing inferences and making generalizations based on the homogeneity of findings - it is possible to extend the Rick method to a group-as-a-whole process of observation without creating a shortfall in the psychoanalytic scope of the data analysis.* Neither does the group observation process impede or compromise the depth of the data compared to a single child observation in the same setting. Indeed, it could be said that some hitherto unobserved peer-relating events were noted and this may have implications for examining the development of sibling relationships.

The technique of a *group-as-a-whole infant observation* does not necessarily mean that the observation is defined by a group per se, as we would normally think of adult group relations. Whilst we are observing a construction of a group-as-a-whole, infants may ex-

perience or engage only a 'virtual or part-group' so to speak. However, the notion of part-group is the basis for the emergence of a more integrated group experience. To describe the infant as preoccupied by an interior devoid of externality is incorrect. The boundaries between individual and group theory (inside and outside) are not only necessarily, but legitimately blurred. The paradigms of psychoanalytic group theory and individual theory ought to be less separated today with less of a dichotomy between group- and individual analytic approaches (Brown, 1994). Infant group-as-a-whole observation would seem to yield a striking range of material about primary group process representing levels of unconscious group process (Anzieu, 1984; Kutter, 1995) unadulterated by adult sophistication. We may speculate that raw and primitive manifestations of object relations are visible in preschool group play. The existence of inner objects and primitive intrapsychic

object relations in the group-dynamic play may confirm known components of psychoanalytic and group-analytic theory, though more intriguingly we may be able to postulate the *constructional activity of group object relations apparent in the less refined exchanges of early play.* Is there a case to be made for incorporating infant group or family group observations in group- analytic or group psychotherapy trainings, both as a training resource for developing observation skills but also as a method of developing group dynamic theory?

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