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# Psychoanalytically informed observation

## Book Chapter

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## **PSYCHOANALYTICALLY INFORMED OBSERVATION**

Psychoanalytically informed observation as a research method derives from the method of infant observation as it was established in the 1950s by child psychoanalyst Esther Bick in her teaching of child psychotherapy trainees at the Tavistock Clinic in London. Infant observation is now a widely established method in psychoanalytic training. An appropriation of the principles of this method for research purposes, observing people of any age, in any relational, group or institutional setting, affords a method that transcends the reliance on what participants say; a reliance characteristic of most contemporary social science research. For any research broadly interested in identities and relational dynamics, the method can ensure that affect, unconscious intersubjectivity and embodiment are not ignored and that identity change over time remains in view.

Classically the infant observation method involves the observer visiting the new mother (or other primary caregiver) and baby at a regular time each week for one hour over a two-year period. Supervision is essential as strong feelings are stirred up in observers during the process. The observer intervenes as little as possible, while recognizing that her presence has effects on the family. The observation is as naturalistic as possible in not selecting in advance any categories of behavior. Note writing is deferred until after the hour and emphasizes fine detailed description kept distinct from making theoretical inferences. The notes provide the basis for discussion at a weekly supervisory seminar group, enabling the observer to go beyond her single viewpoint and

reveal and learn from transferences that are inevitably produced as a result of powerful identifications. The emotional significance of the observation experience provides a central vehicle for learning about babies' early self development.

Stephen Briggs used the method to follow six babies of 'at risk' mothers. He identified characteristic and persistent patterns in the way that mothers and babies managed anxiety. This method, adapted for use as a formal qualitative research tool, provides a qualitative case-based and in-depth method for studying the extra-discursive alongside what people say. For example, as part of a research program into identities, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, a research team (Hollway, Phoenix, Elliott and Urwin) investigated the identity processes involved in becoming a mother for the first time. Psychoanalytically informed observation was used alongside Free Association Narrative Interviews in order to open up for exploration the aspects of becoming a mother that are less conscious and therefore less capable of being expressed directly through language. Six observed mothers were part of a group who were interviewed three times over the baby's first year. The observational focus was the mother-baby couple; this being based on the principle derived from object relations psychoanalysis concerning the relational nature of subjectivity. The many other relationships affecting new mothers' identities were often also observable.

In this method, the ontology of research participants—including researchers—is consistent with the epistemology that guides the method in producing data and its analysis. Both are based on psychoanalytic premises, namely the effectivity of a dynamic unconscious and the relational, affective and embodied nature of subjectivity. In contrast to epistemologies based on rational cognitive assumptions, psychoanalysis uses a method

based on using one's subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. Different conceptualizations of reflexivity, objectivity and validity underpin this methodology. This is reproduced in the style of note-taking, in which any experience that engenders a notable emotional response is attended to and recorded as such, and in the way that the group works with data. Observers' notes, each set developing a unique case as the mother's identity changes over her baby's first year of life, provide the material for discussion at weekly seminars, attended by the observers, the seminar leader and researchers. Seminar notes provide a preliminary pass at making sense of the observation data and constitute another layer of data available for analysis.

Compared with interviews, observation data reveal the strains and conflicts associated with becoming a mother that she may not talk about or even be consciously aware of. It also registers the deep emotional bonds that are often expressed in embodied ways.

*Wendy Hollway*

See also Free Association Narrative Interview

#### **FURTHER READINGS**

Briggs, A. ed (2002) *Surviving space: Papers on Infant Observation*. London: Karnac. This includes Bick's 'Notes on infant observation in psycho-analytic training' from 1964.

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Rustin, Michael (1997) 'What do we see in the nursery?' *The International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications*, 1(1) pp93–110.