

Infant Observation and Research

Emotional Processes in Everyday Lives



Edited by Cathy Urwin and Janine Sternberg

Infant Observation and Research

Psychoanalytic infant observation is frequently used in training psychoanalytic psychotherapists and allied professionals, but increasingly its value as a research method is being recognised, particularly in understanding developmental processes in vulnerable individuals and groups. This book explores the scope of this approach and discusses its strengths and limitations from a methodological and philosophical point of view.

Infant Observation and Research uses detailed case studies to demonstrate the research potential of the infant observation method. Divided into three parts this book covers:

- Infant observation as part of the learning process
- How infant observation can inform understanding and influence practice
- Psychoanalytic infant observation and other methodologies

Throughout the book, Cathy Urwin, Janine Sternberg and their contributors introduce the reader to the nature and value of psychoanalytic infant observation and its range of applications. This book will therefore interest a range of mental health practitioners concerned with early development and infants' emotional relationships, as well as academics and researchers in the social sciences and humanities.

Cathy Urwin is a consultant child and adolescent psychotherapist and a research fellow at the Tavistock Clinic, London.

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Foreword

Wendy Hollway

As a researcher with no direct involvement in the traditions of psychotherapy or child welfare work, I have become an ardent supporter and user of the infant observation method because I found it could draw me imaginatively into naturalistic and culturally diverse family situations, helping me to make sense of the fine detail of emotional processes I encountered: the method and what it revealed went beyond what I previously knew.

Here was a method that put the relationality of the infant and infant's carer(s) at the centre of the paradigm and could preserve the social setting at the heart of the research encounter. Here was a method that cultivated the full emotional attention of the observer and developed in observers an expertise in writing detailed retrospective notes that still leaves me awestruck! Here was a method that taught a way for observers to cultivate objectivity, not in the positivist sense of that word but in the sense of paying attention to their emotional responses and noticing when, where and how these informed their understanding of what they were observing. Here was a method that used a group to help the observers process their experiences and thus think more creatively about the data.

This book demonstrates these virtues and more. Its success in illustrating the current range of uses of infant observation research is particularly impressive given the dynamism of this rather new area. We are not just offered a range of topics and new settings (foster care, a mosque, complex births, identity transition, residential care homes, babies in groups) but also a range of disciplinary perspectives paired with the infant observation method (anthropology, developmental psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis and attachment theory).

Accompanying research methods include a laboratory study, grounded theory data analysis and single case analysis. Moreover, the methodological and epistemological challenges in these innovations are carefully considered: how is it possible to generalise from a single case; can psychoanalytic concepts be operationalised; how can affective and subjective responses in the observer be used as research data; what policy implications can be extrapolated from infant observation findings? These questions are not only discussed, they are drawn out in the context of detailed, rigorous treatment of data, so that readers can learn lessons for

our own research practice as we enter the powerfully depicted worlds that are offered for our imaginative use.

This book shares some valuable characteristics of infant observation with the publications now available through books and the *International Journal of Infant Observation*. Writers in this tradition seem to share a jargon-free writing style, deceptively simple but insightful, that communicates the vitality of the scene to the reader, who can thus share the experience and be changed by it rather than just 'learning about' the topic. Authors also tend to explore their topics in a manner that avoids the imposition of preconceived ideas, which opens our minds, as readers, to provisional and open-ended insights that we can cultivate while avoiding the seduction of certainty. There is a genre in the making here, one that researchers, students and teachers in the human and social sciences can benefit from, a genre that makes this collection a pleasure to read.

This book demonstrates the spread and diversification of infant observation from a method of training practitioners to a research method, and I now see how it could potentially be applied in any setting where the psychoanalytically informed observation of emotional processes can deepen and refine research insights into everyday life, through focus on individuals, dyads, groups and organisations. We see how, using the infant observation paradigm, researchers can notice and understand consequential aspects of everyday life that have been beyond the reach of other research paradigms. May it grow from strength to strength!

Acknowledgements

This book owes its genesis to the many developments in the field of infant observation, now made more widely available through several publications, especially the *International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications*. More recently there has been a growing interest in taking infant observation's unique contribution further by initiating a research culture. Over several years we have been involved in discussions with psychotherapists, researchers and others interested in bringing together these apparently different traditions: infant observation and research. This led to the idea of gathering in book form some key works in this field, culminating in this book. We are especially grateful to Anne Alvarez, Andrew Cooper, Anne Hollander, Wendy Hollway, Effie Lignos, Nick Midgley, Lisa Miller, Simona Nissim, Sue Reid, Margaret Rustin, Michael Rustin, Gianna Williams and Isca Wittenberg for their many ideas and continuing interest.

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Introduction

Cathy Urwin and Janine Sternberg

How babies feel, experience the world, get to know other people and have minds of their own is fascinating. Although babies cannot yet talk and so cannot answer our questions, a great deal can be learned about babies' worlds by sitting quietly and watching the same baby for an hour each week, not intervening but opening oneself up to the impact of all that goes on.

This book is about a way of learning about babies' development that is based on such apparently simple principles and gives access to areas of experience relevant to us all. The approach was first used in training psychoanalytic psychotherapists and allied professionals. Increasingly, it has been used in a range of different contexts and its value as a research method is being recognised, particularly in understanding developmental and emotional processes in vulnerable individuals or groups (Briggs, 1997; Rustin, 2006). Its value is also being identified within the Social Sciences more broadly, where there is a need to develop research methods that incorporate in a systematic way the researcher's affective and subjective experience of the so-called 'object' of study (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway, 2007).

To date there has been no comprehensive attempt to demonstrate the range and potential of infant observation as a research methodology. This book illustrates the potential of this new field through presenting some landmark observational research studies while also including critical and diverse perspectives on different ways of knowing about babies' development and emotional processes more broadly. In this introduction, we first outline the history and nature of this observation method. We describe its contribution to training psychoanalytic practitioners and go on to discuss its actual and potential contribution to generating knowledge. This raises epistemological and philosophical questions, which we address through focusing on two seminal areas of debate. Firstly, given claims that it is relevant to psychoanalytic enquiry, what does the psychoanalytic community itself think about the status of assumptions about infant development and the potential of observation in relation to its theories and clinical practice? Secondly, how can the observation method be used in research and what standards should be applied in evaluating its adequacy from a scientific point of view? After all, by definition, naturalistic observation is not subject to the same criteria as those applied in the natural sciences.

A short history of infant observation

The term ‘infant observation’ used here refers to a method of following a baby’s development over time that can be contrasted with observations carried out on occasional or one-off bases and with ethological observation that uses preselected categories. It was developed initially by Esther Bick as part of the formal curriculum of the Tavistock Child Psychotherapy course in 1948. The Institute of Psychoanalysis course added infant observation as an option in the 1960s. The Anna Freud Centre also began what they call ‘mother–baby’ observation in 1962, although students working with Anna Freud had been observing small children during the war years and infants in well-baby clinics from the late 1940s.

Broadly, principles remain similar across the different trainings today. In the typical situation, an observation student on a course offered by a psychoanalytic or psychoanalytic psychotherapy training institution finds parents about to have a new baby who are willing to allow an observer to visit them at home regularly, normally weekly. In child psychotherapy trainings, observations usually take place over two years; one-year observations are usual in adult psychotherapy or psychoanalytic trainings.

After a preliminary visit to the family, the student begins observations as soon after the infant’s birth as possible. When visiting the family the student tries to take up an unobtrusive, non-interfering position, concentrating on the infant and taking in as much as possible of what is happening – the classic ‘observational stance’. Some training institutions expect the observer to concentrate primarily on the infant, while others pay more attention to the mother–infant dyad. No notes are taken at the time, but students aim to remember in as much detail as possible what they have experienced and to write this down soon afterwards. They may be encouraged to note, whilst acknowledging that it is separate, what they felt when observing what they now describe. Students are encouraged to make their actual observations as free from theoretical preconception as possible, and the descriptions of what they have seen often have a spontaneity, even a rawness, that may reflect the impact of the observation experience.

These narrative accounts are discussed subsequently in a small seminar group (not usually exceeding six members) that meets on a weekly basis for the duration of the observational assignment. In the group the students also get to know about the infants and families observed by their colleagues. Over time, patterns in each infant’s ways of behaving and responding may become apparent. Theoretical ideas may be introduced gradually by the seminar leaders if and when they become relevant. Each student normally writes a paper at the end of the course based on tracing, over time, aspects of his or her observed baby’s development or characteristic relationship patterns, backing the account with observation extracts as evidence. This method is now practiced in a broadly similar way in many parts of the world, although in France a procedure has evolved, from one practiced by Bick towards the end of her life, in which one baby only is followed by the group, so every observation made is subject to the group’s scrutiny (Magagna, 1987).

Bick's original initiative occurred in the context of the so-called Controversial Discussions that took place in the British Psychoanalytic Society in the early 1940s, when there were opposing claims among analysts from different theoretical allegiances about the nature of mental processes in preverbal infants. Detailed observation material was used to support theoretical views. Of course, others besides psychoanalytic psychotherapists had been observing babies and young children for much longer. Freud's own writings are steeped in references to the contemporary Movement for Child Study, which was boosted by Charles Darwin's observations of his own son, used to support his investigations about the origins of emotional and mental life in the species, and which provided a model for other parents' diary accounts.

In introducing her observation method, Bick's original emphasis was on gaining understanding of infants and young children, particularly their non-verbal communications, and on how relationships evolve within a family. But over the years other learning experiences have been recognised, especially dealing with the 'intense emotional impact' of being close to a new mother and baby (Bick, 1964; Briggs, 2002). Wittenberg (1997) states that the 'enormous richness' of infant observation only gradually dawned on its practitioners. Over the last 20 years attention has been given to how exposure to the maelstrom of feelings experienced by observers can facilitate the development of capacities essential for psychotherapeutic work. This has paralleled in some psychoanalytic traditions greater emphasis on noting and using countertransference (or feelings evoked in the psychoanalyst/psychotherapist) in the therapeutic process. These feelings are regarded as, possibly and in part, communications of emotional experiences from the patient. This is thought to reflect ways in which babies may communicate anxiety or intense emotional experience to their mothers, requiring them to modify, process and digest it, providing containment, according to Bion (1962), or, in Winnicott's (1984b) terms, a 'holding' function until they are able to manage or think about the experience themselves.

Its potential for understanding more about the roots of mental-emotional life within the intimacy of first relationships suggests that infant observation might itself contribute to psychoanalytic practice, but it has wider applications. As captured in the volumes edited by Miller, Rustin, Rustin and Shuttleworth (1989) and Reid (1997), infant observations have opened up a host of new areas of enquiry, sometimes generating unanticipated information, for example, about families' ways of managing in difficult circumstances or dealing with loss or unexpected trauma. Less surprising has been the finding that observation itself can have a containing or supportive function for many families, and that seminar groups can learn a great deal about cultural differences (see [Chapter 4](#) of this volume). While fascinating follow-up studies are beginning to explore the relative stability of infant characteristics established in the first two years (Diem-Wille, 1997), in recent times the settings in which infant observations take place have been extended to include planned observations of babies in hospitals (Cohen, 2003; Mendelsohn & Phillips, 2005) and of infants in foster care and at risk of

developmental difficulties of various kinds, where other methods may be too intrusive (see [Chapters 8 and 10](#) of this volume; Briggs, 1997). With few adaptations it has now been used to observe, for example, the elderly (McKenzie-Smith, 2009; see [Chapter 15](#) of this volume), citizens attending a London mosque (see [Chapter 16](#) of this volume) and institutional processes themselves (Hinshelwood & Skogstadt, 2000).

Each of these areas invites research looking into how infant observation affects all those involved in it – psychotherapists in training, the observed families, individuals and institutions – and suggests further fields to which the approach may be informative. This raises questions about what methods or models of analysis are appropriate for getting to know about babies’ subjective experiences and about affective processes in wider contexts.

Philosophical and methodological debates about what observing infants can tell us

First let us consider the mental life of the baby. What young babies can be assumed to know and experience has long been debated by philosophers and psychologists. More relevant here are questions about how we can find out. As Music ([Chapter 3](#) of this volume) describes, the empirical tradition in developmental psychology has been particularly inventive in recent years in designing experiments to differentiate definitively between theoretical possibilities. The assumption is that there is a reality to babies’ knowledge and experience, aspects of which can be concretised and captured. At the other extreme is the view that claims about babies are always relative and to some extent socially produced through interpretive processes or discourses that are themselves governed by historical and political factors (Burman, 1994). These affect, for example, prescriptive notions of good parenting.

Interesting but different kinds of views are held by psychoanalysis. As we have noted, from its inception psychoanalytic thinking has been influenced by current views about infant and child development (Steiner, 2000). Yet, in the psychoanalytic community, there is no consensus on how far the baby of ‘actual’ infancy, as known by parents, observed at home or observed in the laboratory, appears in the patient in the consulting room. For some psychoanalysts, research concerning infants’ development provides reference points – pegs against wild claims. For others, the research and clinical domains bear no relation to each other and dialogue is seen as irrelevant or even harmful to psychoanalysis. Some psychoanalysts appear contradictory. Winnicott, for example, with a background in paediatrics, is well known for taking his medical experience into his theories of the mother–baby relationship and his understanding of the psychoanalytic role. Yet Winnicott (1984a) apparently stated that he learned more about infant states of mind from disturbed adults than from actually looking at babies!

A contemporary debate on this topic between the French psychoanalyst André Green and the psychoanalyst and developmental researcher Daniel Stern captures this tension (Sandler, Sandler & Davies, 2000). Stern (2000) believes that it is