



Infant Observation

International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riob20>

Searching for a family in parent-infant observation; a reflective account of a post-graduate student and their seminar leader

Mia Mostoufi & Rachel Acheson

To cite this article: Mia Mostoufi & Rachel Acheson (2021) Searching for a family in parent-infant observation; a reflective account of a post-graduate student and their seminar leader, *Infant Observation*, 24:1, 23-38, DOI: [10.1080/13698036.2021.1952095](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2021.1952095)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2021.1952095>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 09 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 783



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Searching for a family in parent-infant observation; a reflective account of a post-graduate student and their seminar leader

Mia Mostoufi  and Rachel Acheson 

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Parent-infant observation is an established aspect of preparation for psychoanalytic training or for enriching clinical skills. Despite the vast literature on this subject, there remains a paucity on the process of searching for a family to agree to be observed. This paper explores one post-graduate student's experience of this task as well as a seminar leader's reflections on working with this student and other groups of students at this stage. It is argued that each observer's search for a family to observe can provide rich material for reflection and represent a valuable learning experience for the individual.

KEYWORDS

Infant observation; students; experiential learning; student-teacher relationship

Introduction

Parent-infant observation has long been established as a vital aspect of psychoanalytic training but has also been adopted in other fields (for example in social work and medicine) as a way to enrich clinicians' practice. Through the systematic observation of an infant and their primary caregiver, as well as other family members, the observer has the opportunity to encounter primitive emotional states in both the infant and family, as well as in themselves, through their response to the events that take place. A large part of observation is the 'learning from experience' (Bion, 1962) that occurs when the observer reflects on how emergent material makes them feel and act. Through presentation and discussion in the seminar group, elements of transference and countertransference can be understood, allowing the student to gain a deeper understanding of both the infant and family unit as well as of themselves. The 'task' of infant observation, as defined by Rustin (1989), is to explore 'the emotional events between infant and mother' and the 'aim' is 'to describe the relationship between infants and others, including the observer, and to try and understand

CONTACT Mia Mostoufi  mia.mostoufi.19@ucl.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the unconscious aspects of behaviour and patterns of communication' (p. 7). The different elements of the experience make it an appropriate medium through which deeper understanding of psychoanalytic theory can develop, and interest and ability for future clinical work can be tested.

At the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF), parent-infant observation has long been included for post-graduate students in pre-clinical MSc courses. This course component not only allows students who are 'learning about' (Bion, 1962) psychoanalytic theory and child development the opportunity to apply this learning in a 'live' setting, but also to themselves become immersed in an experience that challenges academic defences and enhances reflective capacity. Parent-infant observation has been included as a module that runs over the course of one academic year and includes weekly 90-minute seminars during term time. Students' performance in the module is assessed through a reflective essay following completion of the seminars, and this contributes to the overall grade the student is given on the course. The observation is therefore an important part of the course for the students both in terms of the time spent on it and the summative nature of the assessment. Students who complete an observation of one year are supported by the course should they wish to continue for a second year, but this is not a required component of the course.¹

Previous research at the AFNCCF (Matharu & Perez, 2018) explored the experience of postgraduate students conducting parent-infant observation. They acknowledged that this experience was different to that of psychoanalytic trainees, as postgraduate students are more likely to be undecided on their future career path, less familiar with psychoanalytic theory, and unlikely to be in analysis. Through interviews with past students about their experience and conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the authors identified five aspects of the observer's experience: (1) the initial shock and confusion; (2) the unnerving and frightening search for a family to observe; (3) the supportive and normalising effect of seminar and peers; (4) constant different challenges throughout the observation experience; and (5) appreciation of the observation experience. The authors noted as important the fact that students placed great emphasis in the interviews on the difficulties of searching for a family to observe and that this was an experience they would rather have forgone. They saw this as different to the view of seminar leaders, whom they described as viewing the search as an integral part of the learning that takes place in the observation. The paper suggested that in order to support students to value the emotional learning experience of this search, it could be written about and reflected upon in seminars in a similar way to more traditional observation write ups, and then be included as part of their final paper. This has been integrated into teaching of parent-infant observation at the AFNCCF since 2019.

Through this change of practice, it was notable how little has been written on the experience of searching for a parent and infant to observe. Only brief references are made in the key texts on the subject (e.g. Miller et al., 2002; Thomson-

Salo, 2014), and only one journal article on the subject was identified (Desnot, 2008) in research for this paper. This omission is in some ways understandable as authors naturally prefer to focus their efforts on understanding what happens when parent, infant, and student are together. However, given Matharu and Perez's (2018) findings that postgraduate students struggled with this task and would have preferred not to have to do it, one could also wonder if observers do not wish to explore this experience further due to the uncomfortable feelings it confronts them with. Ultimately, the historical neglect of this area has led to a lack of discussion within the field as to how the search process is managed by institutions and supported by seminar leaders.

This paper seeks to explore the experience of a postgraduate student at the AFNCCF and their seminar leader in the search for a family to observe. While neither of these experiences can be generalised, their accounts may highlight some of the common challenges experienced, as well as how they may be understood and overcome. This paper will alternate between the experience of the student and that of the seminar leader followed by brief concluding remarks.

Beginning the seminars

Student experience

My initial reactions to finding out the details of undertaking a parent-infant observation were a mixture of confusion, apprehension, and, most prominently, outrage. These emotions were driven by learning that I would be responsible for finding the family I would be observing. This shocked me; by default, I had assumed that an institution with such strong community and professional ties would be able to arrange an observation for its students. My anger compounded with beliefs that finding my own observation family was completely unreasonable and nearly impossible, given what I viewed as the large intrusion of coming to a stranger's home each week, for such a long duration of time. I was in disbelief that my university would sanction me to occupy such a vulnerable period for mother and baby, and, reciprocally, the suggestion that a mother would agree to, or even welcome this imposition. The notion that some mothers may be altruistically motivated by or gain from their experience of being observed as voiced through qualitative research by Perez et al. (2018), was entirely unknown and unfathomable to me. My initial reactions only escalated after contextualising observation in something I was familiar with, recruiting participants for research. Comparatively, I felt observation was overly intrusive and borderline unethical given that there was no ethics board or compensation to ensure the families were not taken advantage of. My ardent response to infant observation was fuelled by my lack of familiarity and, more than that, disbelief in what I viewed as an antiquated perspective and unempirical discipline,

psychoanalysis. Whether I was accepting of the psychoanalytic practice or not, I would be required to carry out a parent-infant observation to complete my degree. In a sense, psychoanalysis, and observation, became my unwanted child; it was an unwelcome burden, out of my control, that would consume my time and energy. Aside from real concerns of how I would be able to find an observation family, compounded by underlying scepticism of the process and validity of the practice, even if I were to find an observation family, I was unsure what the process would teach me.

Throughout the first few seminars, with my initial reactions to observation lurking, I was surprised that instead of learning about the context of how and why we observe, our seminar leader focused on exploring our progress and prompting discussion around what it felt like to be asked to complete this task, acknowledging that it may provoke reactions such as anxiety or frustration. I was taken aback that a seminar would focus on such raw emotions, operating on instilled beliefs that this was unprofessional and inappropriate for an academic setting. Seminar discussions were riddled with discomfort and irritations, alongside painful silences extended by the refusal to discuss emotional content. Instead, I was vocal about my sceptical position of psychoanalysis and observation: I shared criticisms, such as the emphasis on observing a *mother* and infant dyad, feeling the task was reinforcing gendered roles that I as a young woman in society wanted to reject and avoid perpetuating.

Seminar leader experience

When I first meet with a new group of students embarking on parent-infant observation, I often experience feelings of excitement, anxiety, and trepidation. I liken these feelings to those I experience when about to meet a new patient referred for psychotherapy, where I can be filled with hope and enthusiasm, whilst also keeping in mind that the venture is certain to include moments of challenge and difficulty. As the group begins to meet, I observe how each student feels about their participation in the observation through the different ways they communicate within the group. In these early meetings, I may also be able to get a sense of how each student will manage the initial task of finding a family who will agree to being observed. This may be apparent in part based on the student's attitude towards the task, but also from what is apparent of their internal and external resources and resourcefulness.

At the AFNCCF and within the MSc on Developmental Psychology and Clinical Practice (DPCP) which this student group was enrolled on, it is common for students to begin their course with scant understanding of what a parent-infant observation entails, and indeed what observation itself means within this context. I find it important to keep in mind that members of the group have not directly chosen to partake in this experience, and as discussed above may experience feelings of shock and confusion in relation to the task (Matharu &

Perez, 2018). Some students may be vocal in early seminars on their reservations about the task, while others appear to suppress critiques to appear as a 'good' student and instead betray anxieties in other ways. For example, their reservations about the observation may come to the seminar through displacement, as instead of discussing their own feelings they describe the doubts and criticisms expressed by friends and family. Others still may come with quite idealised views or manage anxiety by rushing into the experience without developing a good enough understanding of what they are embarking upon. At this early stage, I consider my role as seminar leader to be part educator, part emotional container and part facilitator. All groups need time to be dedicated to outlining the concept of parent-infant observation and to considering the anxieties this arouses in them, as well as to how such a thing is done within the AFNCCF.

Working with anxiety

Student experience

I can reflect on expressing anger and outrage towards being asked to find my own observation family as being easier to reckon with than facing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty that betrayed my underlying fears. This could be viewed as a defence of displacement: my anger acting as a diversion from focusing on my more vulnerable emotions (Freud, 1905). While my critiques of observation have been echoed in the literature (Groarke, 2008; Hindle & Klauber, 2006), my fixation on the intrusiveness of the task for mother and infant served as a further defence against my own apprehension of undertaking an observation. Anna Freud (1937) discusses projection as 'the expulsion of ideas or affects from the ego and their relegation to the outside world' (p. 55) such that they are a relief to the ego. I projected my discomfort towards the exposing task, onto the experience of mother and baby, i.e. observation would feel intrusive and uncomfortable for them. Thus, I relieved my ego from having to acknowledge these anxieties.

Initially, my peers in my seminar shared my concerns about the observation task and my resentful disillusionment with the daunting process. Few of us had found an infant quickly, and we were losing patience with the endeavour. We shared discomfort around, what felt like, intruding on a vulnerable period and the almost exploitative nature of the task: the observed family tangibly gained nothing while we both learned from and put this experience towards our degree. We discussed our concerns with the shortcomings of the practice, such as how observations often only include heterosexual and white families, excluding more diversified voices and family structures. These critiques both reflected a genuine sense of discomfort and an unknown collective defense diverting from our shared ambivalence and frustration. I felt strengthened in

the united front of our group vocalising our protests. This echo chamber of shared criticisms and resistance, operating in a way akin to the systemic principle of cybernetics, the idea that communications generate and sustain the interactions of a system (Hedges, 2005), only strengthened my initial position. Outside of my academic circle, this echo chamber was only amplified; and, on the occasions that my opinions were challenged, I chose to dismiss those challenging me, perceiving them as asinine.

While on the surface it appeared that I was forthright with my feelings surrounding observation, my underlying anxieties and fear, were repackaged into neat critique points that were entirely removed from myself and my true reactions towards the process. I denied and displaced these emotions to instead be situated within the observation itself. Kestenbaum (1983) describes the function of an intellectualisation defence stating, 'its defensive power lies in the individual's use of normal thinking, perception, and attention to focus on neutral, intellectual contents or stimuli and to avoid attending to non-intellectual, immediate, and emotionally charged stimuli' (p. 676). My emotional responses became buried and protected within intellectual critiques of observation. The validity of these critiques further disguised my use of them to avoid my own responses and shut down my curiosity to the alternate explanation of my resistance to the process. My identification and vocalisation of these intellectualised critiques in my seminar only buttressed my initial position of scepticism and resistance to the process of observation. My mounting resistance hindered a sense of the inherent value or purpose behind observation; to me, the task lacked meaningfulness. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) connect that the value or meaningfulness of a task, is appraised according to an individual's perception, and likened to the psychoanalytic idea of cathexis, establishing one's motivation to perform. As I did not judge my infant observation as having meaning or value, I did not have the intrinsic drive to invest or cathect in the process or to challenge my strengthening defences.

These seminars demanded that I forgo the typical structure of academic learning and reckon with the unfamiliar and intimate process of observation. The difficulty I had enduring these seminars was the first indication that I struggled with what a parent-infant observation asked me to do: to learn from experience, rather than to learn about a subject (Bion, 1962). I craved a context and foundation to guide me in this pursuit, unaware that this was intentionally not given to me to facilitate organic discovery from experiential learning which would be inhibited by knowing too much. Learning from experience in observation has been said to have a profound emotional impact on the observer and requires them to learn from their own emotions (Hollway, 2012). My early resistance to acknowledging and exploring my emotions towards observation would prevent me from allowing myself to actively engage and be vulnerable to learning from the process of infant observation.

Seminar leader experience

The seminar group that Mia was part of was typical of those at the AFNCCF in that the participants began the module unfamiliar with observation and psychoanalytic thinking and were not in analysis. While it felt clear to me that I had a capable group of students, with strong academic backgrounds and considerable motivation to learn, they were familiar with a more didactic style of teaching, and struggled with the more open, experiential format of the seminars. They related to me in the beginning as the 'expert', and while I was conscious to resist being pulled into this role, I responded in some form by introducing the module and sharing advice based on past students' successes at finding observation families. In our early seminars I felt they were stuck between their wish to engage with the module, learn and 'do well', and their impulse to reject parent-infant observation as something foreign, unscientific, and unethical. As their seminar leader, I was attempting to help them be curious about their responses to this task, and for us to develop a space where there was no one 'right' answer or way of doing things, but rather many ways of thinking and responding. Although I was aware of my own desire to convince them of the value of this experience, I felt that what they needed was my support and that of each other to bear the anxiety that this unfamiliar task provoked in them, and to find their own path to developing a relationship with this concept.

Their anger at being required to find their own family to observe was apparent, and many insinuated their surprise that the course (or perhaps I) did not arrange this for them. While this could be thought of as an infantile fantasy that their needs will be seamlessly met by their environment, it is also the case that on the DPCP MSc the AFNCCF does provide research projects and placements for students, and so this module is exceptional in asking students to do this themselves. By not providing in this way felt I was experienced by them as withholding and insubstantial, and in response to this I had moments of feeling anger and indignance. Although I viewed the experience of searching for a family to observe as full of potential learning, and that it was helpful for a seminar group to think together about the practical and emotional challenges this presented, neither of these views were as yet of value to the group. As time went on, I experienced feelings of stupidity and worthlessness, as well as mild paranoia as I noticed myself imagining how the students may talk about the module outside of the seminar.

I began to experience hopelessness about how we could move forward. I sought support from the module lead and reflected on my own experience of being a postgraduate student at this stage. This helped me to stay in touch with the anxiety and vulnerability within the group and to identify the feelings of anger and inadequacy as projections of their own unbearable feelings. Just like my patients in therapy, these students were using their characteristic

defences to manage difficult feelings. I could not expect them to welcome or feel grateful towards me for being the person to guide and support them through this; my role was to help them to keep thinking and keep searching. I also reflected on my wish to feel I was a good seminar leader, and to be liked and respected by the students I taught. Though I felt able to receive their projections, I also worried how this struggle may be understood more widely, and how I may then appear to colleagues within the AFNCCF. Although I was able to reassure myself that other staff on the course would be well used to the typical postgraduate student trajectory within parent-infant observation and would not take complaints at face value, the fact I still had these worries is a reflection of the strength of the transference-countertransference relationship that developed between myself and this group.

As their seminar leader it was apparent which students in the group were developing as the weeks went on and which seemed stuck. Whether successful or not in finding a family to observe, it was noticeable to me which students were investing in the process, and benefitting from the discussions in the group, or if they were merely attending seminars and repeating the views and recruitment strategies they began with. Some members found a way to engage with the thinking in the group and slowly they found families who agreed to being observed. Each time a group member was successful in their recruitment this inevitably provoked mixed feelings of pleasure and jealousy in others, but, overall, the group was enlivened and soon all members, aside from Mia, had found an infant to observe.

Trying to search

Student experience

As the search continued, my peers began to find infants to observe. In the way that a mother can instantly connect with her baby, forgetting the pains of pregnancy and labour, my peers quickly moved on from their concerns and critiques. Soon, I was the only one left with no infant, bitter and resentful with no one to ally myself with.

My approach to the initial stages of looking for an observation family was centred around online forms of contact. While I felt I was putting in a great deal of effort in the early weeks, I did not make much progress; messages were mostly unreturned and ignored or met with brief apologetic responses. Broaching this in my seminars, I was asked how I felt about this lack of progress and rejection. However, I felt resilient to these rejections from online encounters. This was not a rejection of myself, but, rather, an expected response to asking for such a big commitment from a new mother and complete stranger. While my peers were starting to pivot strategies and look to recruiting in-person in hospitals or similar settings, I had little faith in this approach. I was adamant

that it would not be fruitful, and, more than that, insensitive to approach mothers just days after birth.

The success stories around me were those who had found an observation family via a personal connection. This made logical sense to me; there was a degree of familiarity and comfort that would remove the anxiety of a stranger occupying your home week-to-week. I became confident that a personal connection would give me the best chance to find a family to observe and, having lived in London for a few years, I was optimistic and had renewed energy for the search. However, after reaching out to everyone I knew with no success, I was out of leads. I had reached a breaking point where it seemed like there was nothing else that I could do, leaving me feeling helpless, like an infant. I stopped putting effort into the search. There were no more frustrated conversations or vocal critiques in seminars; I had shut down and shut the parent-infant observation out.

My refusal to undertake anything other than passive forms of search further emphasised my emotional resistance. I was closed off and guarded by my computer screen, protecting myself from the vulnerabilities of being rejected in-person while maintaining to myself, and perhaps, less successfully, my seminar leader, Rachel, that I was still working hard and committed to the process through my online outreach. Anna Freud (1937) discusses how the ego, once developing from childhood, can bypass more complicated defences such as denial,

Instead of perceiving the painful impression and subsequently cancelling it by withdrawing its cathexis, it is open to the ego to refuse to encounter the dangerous external situation at all ... and so, in the truest sense of the world 'avoid' the occasions of 'Pain'. (p. 100)

Rather than cope with the pains of potential rejection, I avoided all chance of this and took solace in removed online interactions that protected myself from vulnerability.

At the time, I could not bear to accept that I might feel uncomfortable or nervous approaching individuals face-to-face and opening myself up to a more personal rejection. This was not in line with how I viewed myself: a confident and competent person in social interactions and academic tasks. I denied this reality that brought up painful implications that I may not fulfil this image of myself and focused my attention elsewhere. These intellectualizations that my online rejections were not really rejections or that personal connections were the only attainable avenue, allowed me to escape from reckoning with my anxieties of approaching potential families face-to-face and what my refusal to do so might indicate about myself.

The brief glimmers of optimism that my London network would help me secure an observation family further indicated that my resistances to engaging with the process were grounded in a fear of failure rather than in response to my

objections to the task, which served to defend against these fears. The failure of my London network to connect me with an observation family felt like an invalidation of how deep my roots were in the place I called home, a personal rejection of me. Rejection by someone or something significant to the individual, as my home in London was for me, has been closely tied to feelings of shame, graduating to feelings of intense hurt which can be channelled inwards to a depressive state. Thus, this rejection from London, compounded with defences against fears of failure and cumulative rejections that, if acknowledged, threatened to uproot myself sense of self, submerged me into an apathetic state where I withdrew from the process.

Seminar leader experience

In groups where members are at different stages, I have found it important to support non-observing, 'stuck' students, to think about what may be happening in the observations their peers present. This can include finding subtle ways to signal to the group that I value these students' contributions, and, in doing so, support their feeling that they are part of the learning taking place. For the student who has allowed their worry and difficulty to be undisguised, this can increase their confidence and enjoyment in the seminar, and they can then progress with their search with a different attitude (conscious and unconscious). For the student who defends against their vulnerabilities, this approach can provide them with an arena within the group in which to experiment holding a different position, and so experience being a curious, thoughtful presence, rather than an angry, contemptuous one.

I was impressed by Mia's engagement as displayed in her thinking about the observations of her peers. It confirmed my view that she did not lack ability and could make use of the seminar space well. However, I found her increasingly resistant to thinking about her search in seminars, and with the rest of the group presenting their write-ups we had limited time to discuss her situation. Each time I raised the topic I felt she was doing her best to placate me in the hope that I would move on and leave her alone, which I inevitably had to do. I found myself concerned about how actively she was searching and wondered at her apparent lack of worry about her progress. Mia appeared confident and articulate in the group, and I imagined that struggling with an academic task may have been unfamiliar to her. I felt that on some level she must feel anxious, but I was torn about how much this could be discussed in the group. As with a patient in therapy I needed to find a way to support her to acknowledge her difficulties sufficiently so she could begin to move forward. The danger was that confronting her with this too directly, particularly in a group of her peers, could lead to a further mounting of defences.

Confrontation of 'stuckness'

Student experience

My struggle to orient myself and find a parent-infant dyad to observe was riddled with masked emotions and carefully concocted beliefs to further prevent these emotions from being expressed. Reflections on this outward presentation illuminated my underlying difficulties and frustration with observation. Winnicott (1949) discusses the reasons why a mother may harbour hatred towards her baby: The child may not be her own mental conception, or he may interfere with her personal life, with the knowledge that she cannot fail him, or there will be grave repercussions. Returning to the notion of my unwanted baby of psychoanalysis, and subsequently of parent-infant observation, these explanations of hatred mark my experience of resisting the burden of, but understanding my degree was directly tied to, accomplishing my observation. Winnicott (1949) elaborates, stating that parents must not be in denial about hatred towards their infant, citing that hatred plays an important developmental role. While initially my feelings of anger masked anxiety and fear, I quickly defended against these vulnerable feelings which I felt were not appropriate for an academic assignment. On reflection, my initial worries regarding the observation as an intrusion on a vulnerable period of mother and baby may have been realised in the unwelcomed vulnerability observation exposed in me.

My inability to withstand this vulnerability and subsequent intellectualisation of the task and denial that the rejections I faced impacted me, bred apathy, causing me to withdraw entirely from the process. These defences prevented me from identifying and working through my feelings of hatred throughout the process: hatred towards a difficult task, hatred that I did not understand its value, hatred that it did not come naturally for me, and hatred that I could not find an observation family when everyone else could. It was not until I was forced to acknowledge and accept this hatred that I was able to move towards acceptance of my experience and embarking on a parent-infant observation.

Seminar leader experience

On this occasion I decided to reach out to Mia's personal tutor on the course and discuss my concerns. On reflection I think I chose this path, rather than discussing it myself with her outside of the group, as I felt we needed a third person in our relationship in order to break up some of our pattern of relating and to offer another perspective. While another group member can sometimes provide this, it had not happened on this occasion, and keeping Mia's academic requirements in mind, I was wary of our dynamic going unchecked for too long.

Perhaps we were both stuck in different ways, and I grew concerned that as a seminar leader I could 'act out' by becoming angry with her, or 'act in' and withdraw my commitment to trying to help her.

Allowing change

Student experience

After months of searching, my lack of progress in finding a family to observe was becoming worrisome. In response, Rachel arranged for my personal tutor to discuss with me my difficulty in finding an observation family and the implications of failing to complete my observation. In this meeting, initially my presence paralleled that of my seminars: closed, resistant, and ardently convinced that nothing would change. While Rachel held a thoughtful and supportive stance as my seminar leader, within the seminar group I was able to use this stance to evade direct confrontation on my lack of progress. Within our meeting, my personal tutor was able to capitalise on established rapport and safety within the context to challenge me more directly and reconnected me with the reality of the lack of engagement with this aspect of the course. Though challenging, her contrasting approach broke through my apathy, and in its place a sense of vulnerability emerged. I felt my emotions about the process, that I had subconsciously worked so hard to suppress, flood to the surface, and with them came tears. In a haze of emotions, I found myself agreeing to what I had refused to do in the past weeks: to recommence my search and take a more active approach to recruitment. I left the meeting feeling disheartened and embarrassed that I, typically a very reliable student, was in a sense scolded for not completing my work.

In the way that my original motivation to complete my observation was only to satisfy the requirements of my programme, it was not until my degree came under peril that there was a force powerful enough to shake my fully-fledged defenses. A threat to what I most valued, my education, had violently brought my suppressed emotions into consciousness. More than that, my self-conception as the 'perfect' student was devastated. Anna Freud (1937), states that, 'The more completely we succeed in bringing both the resistance and the defense against affects into consciousness and so rendering them inoperative, the more rapidly shall we advance to an understanding' (p. 44). This statement encapsulates my experience: Only when I was forced into awareness of my emotions and feelings of hatred towards the task was I able to accept and overcome them, allowing me to renew my engagement with the process of observation.

At the same point in time, the rest of my seminar was presenting their observations, and, as a group, we were having in-depth conversations unpacking what moments between mother and baby could indicate about their

relationship and emotions. I was immersed in these conversations and amazed at how clearly I could interpret interactions from only an observational account, and I found myself motivated by my peer's experiences, able to build upon the collective ideas we developed, and surprisingly looking forward to further seminars. The inspiration to engage in these increasingly lively and insightful sessions began to enlighten me to the value of observation as an endeavour. Akin to a mother learning from fellow mothers in a parenting group, my active engagement in the later seminars supplemented my learning in the absence of my own observation family. I was able to gain insight and knowledge through the observations of my peers, not only regarding the moment-to-moment interactions unfolding for baby and mother, but also the observer; this illuminated the active way in which observation instils learning, compared to the more passive formats of lectures and readings. Usher (1993), discusses the value of experiential learning in the classroom environment, emphasising the subjectivity that comes from the observer perspective alongside evolving intersubjectivity of others that propels theorising and meaning-making of these moments. Throughout my seminars, the power of experiential learning, even in the absence of my personal experience, transformed my perceptions of observation by proxy of my peers' experiences and increased my confidence that I too could succeed at the task. This experiential learning allowed me to loosen my critical gaze towards infant observation and reengage, grounded in a sense of its value and my ability to complete the task, eventually leading me to an observation family.

Reflection

Seminar leader

Returning to my earlier comment that meeting a parent-infant observation group can be like meeting a new patient, I have found that the process of supporting students through the different aspects of this experience presents many similar challenges to the therapeutic process. The seminar leader consistently working to support each student to reach the next stage of their developmental process within the observation group parallels in some ways the work of a therapist in helping their patient to work through neurotic conflict and move forward developmentally. Mia's resistance to the task presented me as her seminar leader with a challenge. Ultimately, I consider that my continuing to think about her, the seminar group becoming a more facilitating environment for growth, and the intervention of a 'third' in the form of her personal tutor were all significant factors in allowing her to engage with her search in a meaningful way. Her journey was from a position of anxious denial to engagement with the emotional learning experience parent-infant observation provides, which begins with the search for a family. To achieve this, Mia needed to

reflect and understand her own internal state, and I have no doubt that being pushed to do this was helpful preparation for beginning observation, and for future clinical work. As a seminar leader this experience affirmed my belief in experiential learning, and the value in applying psychoanalytic thinking within a learning environment. I was also immensely pleasurable to see Mia develop, despite the pain involved, and for us to come together in a creative way in the writing of this paper.

Student

Though initially marked by copious defences against my anxieties surrounding infant observation, key moments and participation in the process allowed me to develop a reflective gaze upon both my internal states and external environment. Slowly, I became able to recognise and withstand reckoning with the impact of my defences, developing a capacity for close self-observation that would allow me to better manage and release my unconscious resistances and biases. Equally, I was better able to observe how my environment influenced my emotions and conceptions, recognising that the 'echo chamber' of earlier seminars fuelled my defiance towards the task, yet that the same group eventually aided my self-transformation, with the support of Rachel. Professionally, pursuing further clinical work, the awareness and clinical skills derived from the process of searching for an infant observation will directly aid me. Capacity for observation is essential to working with clients regardless of theoretical leanings. Furthermore, it is paramount to stay connected to one's internal states in therapeutic work and maintain awareness of how they may impact the work. In bolstering my self-reflective capabilities, I will be better able to harness my reactions as helpful insights and challenge myself to stay resilient through difficult situations that seduce me to retreat to my defences.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues that the experience of searching for a family to observe is an emotionally meaningful one, and that if engaged with on this level, it can represent a valuable learning experience for the observer. For a seminar group to do so builds the groundwork for an open, reflective, and bounded space to exist, which is of benefit once observers find willing families and begin the next stage of the observation. This task may arouse latent vulnerabilities in students which should be recognised and explored by the seminar leader and wider institution to foster engagement in the task and protect against overuse of unconscious defences. Postgraduate students or those not on psychoanalytically oriented courses may be particularly vulnerable to this as they are less likely to be familiar with infant observation at the outset or have support from their own analysis. We would suggest that the

value of this experience be recognised by institutions, both in seminars through the formal presentation of the searching for a family to observe, and in any assessments set. Further to this, we would encourage those involved in this field to contribute to advancing understanding of this aspect of parent-infant observation.

Note

1. From September 2020 Parent-Infant observation has only been included as a module on the Psychoanalytic Developmental Psychology MSc. As of September 2021, this course will transform to a two-year MSc in Early Child Development and Clinical Applications, which will include a two-year Parent Infant Observation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes of contributors

Mia Mostoufi is a postgraduate student at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and University College London, completing her MSc in Developmental Psychology and Clinical Practice. She completed her BSc in Psychology at King's College London; she is due to begin training as a Clinical Psychologist at University College London in September 2021.

Rachel Acheson is a child and adolescent psychotherapist trained at the Independent Psychoanalytic Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Association (IPCAPA). She works clinically in an adolescent crisis team in London and teaches parent-infant observation at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families.

ORCID

Mia Mostoufi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3294-2137>

Rachel Acheson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4541-2426>

References

- Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. Karnac Books.
- Desnot, D. (2008). Finding a baby: Log book of a search for a baby and his family. *Infant Observation*, 11(2), 195–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698030802242906>
- Freud, A. (1937). *The ego and the mechanisms of defence*. Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1905). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious, standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*. Hogarth Press.
- Groarke, S. (2008). Psychoanalytical infant observation: A critical assessment. *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 10(4), 299–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642530802577042>
- Hedges, F. (2005). *An introduction to systemic therapy with individuals*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hindle, D., & Klauber, T. (2006). Ethical issues in infant observation: Preliminary thoughts on establishing an observation. *Infant Observation*, 9(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698030600593781>
- Hollway, W. (2012). Infant observation: Opportunities, challenges, threats. *Infant Observation*, 15(1), 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2012.654653>
- Kestenbaum, G. I. (1983). Toward a definition of intellectualization. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 6(4), 671–692.
- Matharu, G. K., & Perez, A. (2018). ‘A new experience and a new concept’: A study on post-graduate students’ experiences of parent–infant observation. *Infant Observation*, 21(3), 284–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2019.1593876>
- Miller, L., Rustin, M., Rustin, M., & Shuttleworth, J. (2002). *Closely observed infants*. Duckworth Publishers.
- Perez, A., Isaza Salcedo, M., De Barbieri, M., & Tooki, S. (2018). Why do mothers volunteer for infant observation and what do they make of the experience? A qualitative study. *Infant Observation*, 21(2), 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2018.1523036>
- Rustin, M. (1989). Encountering primitive anxieties. In L. Miller, M. Rustin, M. Rustin, & J. Shuttleworth (Eds.), *Closely observed infants* (pp. 7–21). Duckworth Publishers.
- Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: An “interpretive” model of intrinsic task motivation. *Academy of Management Review*, 15(4), 666–681.
- Thomson-Salo, F. (Ed.). (2014). *Infant observation: Creating transformative relationships*. Karnac Books.
- Usher, R. (1993). Experiential learning or learning from experience: Does it make a difference? In D. Boud, R. Cohen, & D. Walker (Eds.), *Using experience for learning* (p. 169). SRHE & Open University Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1949). Hate in the counter-transference. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 30, 69–74.