BABY OBSERVATION

EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE



Manuel Pérez-Sánchez

The Harris Meltzer Trust

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Manuel Pérez-Sánchez, psychiatrist, teaching analyst for the IPA, and student of Esther Bick, wrote *Baby Observation* in 1981. After this publication, he spent his daily working life refining the theoretical understanding and transmitting the clinical contribution of infant observation according to the Bick method. He has given conferences and seminars in various countries of Latin America and Europe, and taught regular courses at the Fundación San Pablo University in Madrid and in Portugal. With other colleagues he founded the Asociación Bick España,

Dr Pérez-Sánchez has published on baby observation in magazines, books, conferences, seminars, and international congresses that he has organized or participated in. Among his books, in addition to *Baby Observation* (also published in Spanish, English, French, Italian, and Portuguese), are *The Observation of Children* (in Spanish and Portuguese), *The Everyday and the Unconscious* and *The Bick Method* (in collaboration with Dr Hafsa Chbani). The most recent is *Learning from the Baby: Psychoanalytic Philosopher*, which includes all his ideas and concepts on the better understanding of the observation of

babies, such as original unity, autonomy, function and state, and astonished imagination. Dr Pérez-Sanchez has also been exploring themes relating to ethics and the skin, parenting, and fraternity; and lately, using the *Mahabharata,* the thinking of Bion.

Mrs Esther Bick was invited by Dr John Bowlby at the Tavistock Clinic in London to initiate the study of infants interacting spontaneously with family members in the family home in 1948, seventy-two years ago. The re-publication of Pérez-Sánchez' book describing his infant observations which were supervised by Mrs Esther Bick seems very timely given that the one or two year long seminars for infant observation babies have become an integral part of many psychoanalytic trainings on all continents. However, the task of visiting families for one hour per week to observe the infant with the family need not be reserved for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Parents, nurses, social workers, paediatricians and teachers have participated for many years in multi-disciplinary trainings given the name 'The Observation Course' initiated by Mrs Martha Harris who succeeded Esther Bick. These professionals all undertake observations of infants and young children in naturalistic settings of home and nursery school.

Martha Harris felt that through learning together about the infant's developing personality the various professionals would be able to develop a common language which promoted future

professional collaboration to meet 'the best interests of the child'. Some aims of infant observation include:

Helping students conceive vividly their child patients' infantile experience;
Increasing students' understanding of the child's nonverbal behaviour;
Helping students develop more understanding of the importance of the child's history when interviewing the parents;
Giving students a unique opportunity to observe and understand how an infant's personality develops from birth;
Having an opportunity to see different family contexts and different babies' ways of developing in those contexts.

Martha Harris describes how students who had undergone this rigorous and persevering study have almost invariably felt infant observation to be 'a central if not *the* central item in their analytic training' (Harris [1976] 2018, p. 124). She understands how being an observer for an extended period of one or two years involves an 'inward suspension of judgement, of "negative capability" ... a precondition for learning from experience' (p. 126).

What is most interesting is that without fail those students who are already parents before becoming an infant observer say, 'Oh, I wish that I had done these observations before I became a parent!' For this reason, I feel that this is a book will be extremely important for all those who about to become parents. It will enable parents to become more able to observe meaning in a child's behaviour through following the sequence of interactions, experience the importance of receiving and understanding the baby's projections and begin to understand the way in which the baby's personality is developing.

Manuel Pérez-Sánchez has presented a very vivid description of a baby's first year of life. Direct observational material is lent understanding through the combination of his and Esther Bick's thoughts regarding the weekly infant observations. We read how the baby progresses from a state of unintegration in which the anxious baby requires the containing presence of the parents and

uses primitive bodily methods of providing protection against anxiety in their absence. We then move to a more comfortable stage in which the baby has introjected the parents as providing a sense of internal security. We see how each step in the baby's development involves a reciprocal change in the parents' relationship to the baby.

Certainly through this book teachers and parents will be able to lend greater compassion and understanding to children's emotional need for the parents' attentive presence. Likewise, understanding the ideas presented in ths book fosters greater appreciation of children's restless lack of concentration and their meaningful non-verbal communication through gestures and play activities.

I unreservedly recommend this book as essential reading for those undertaking infant observation as well as for those who need to or simply wish to have a deeper understanding of infant mental life.

Jeanne Magagna
Tavistick Clinic trained child, family and adult psychotherapist;
editor of *The Silent Child: Communication without Words*

Some years ago, after having carried out an observation of an infant under the supervision of Esther Bick (London), I felt a strong urge to make this experience available to other people. I then performed the exacting task of writing up the material, including my supervision sessions with Mrs Bick. This initial enthusiasm led me to the idea of elaborating the material in the form of a book. However, difficulties arose from the very beginning. How could I find a form or framework into which I could insert the exceptional and vivid experience of the observation? I needed something which would respect the continuity and reality of the experience but which at the same time would be enriched by what I had learnt from those regular study sessions with Esther Bick.

In addition to this material or methodological difficulty in the elaboration of the experience, other preoccupations arose as well, and some of the questions I asked myself were the following: Could I really do justice, in the exposition of the material, to the extent and precision of Mrs Bick's work? Or worse, could there be the danger of my distorting her ideas, taking into account that they were transmitted verbally? Was it useful to publish this

experience or would the book be seen by other people simply as providing a license to make 'wild' and inexpert observations. And although the family observed in this story would remain anonymous, had I been careful and precise enough in recording their emotions and reactions, their interest, devotion and love for their children, or had I distorted some of the material, was I partial in the description of their personal characteristics? For example, a certain feeling of uneasiness took hold of me when I thought of some situations where my description might appear to be critical of the father or mother. I felt some concern since the overall picture I had was of people dedicated to the care of their children, although sometimes hampered by their own difficulties. In the end, given that very few alternative studies of Mrs Bick's technique were available at that time, I felt I couldn't take the responsibility of publishing this material and therefore abandoned my project. However, the work I had done was of great use to me and enabled me to give seminars at the Institute of Psychoanalysis of Barcelona and at the University of Barcelona. Now, years later, I have decided to take up this project again. I have been stimulated to do this by the work carried out with the students who followed the seminars, as well as by an exchange of ideas and work in collaboration with Nuria Abelló. She has given seminars on Baby Observation at the Institute of Psychoanalysis of Barcelona for ten years and also at the University of Barcelona. I have tried with what follows to describe that first experience as exactly as possible, according to how I remember its development.

On studying an infant week after week, it might be thought that a logical framework for one's ideas might be one in which each developmental step forms a chapter. In order to do this, one could follow, for example, the development of the child from the well-known point of view of Freud and Abraham's phases of libido organisation or Melanie Klein's positions. However, that did not form part of our experience during the observation of babies and would have forced the material in an unnatural way. We therefore believed that rather than deciding in advance what form the work would take, we should go back to the experience itself, observation after observation, and let the structure derive from that. We have therefore divided the observational material

into chapters each corresponding to one month of the child's life, up to the end of the first year, with the titles and notes highlighting the most significant aspects of each observation. We accept and admit the fact that the experience is incomplete and that it cannot pretend to be more than an approximation to the work of Infant Observation. After having established my reasons for returning to my original idea of publishing this material, I overcame my qualms about carrying out the project, and was able to initiate the paper. I offer it very simply as a homage to Esther Bick.

Esther Bick, a psychoanalyst, and disciple of Melanie Klein, included this technique as a part of the training course for Child Psychotherapists at the Tavistock Clinic in London in 1948. Later on, Infant Observation, as it is also called, was included in the curriculum of the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London in 1960, as part of the course for first-year students. In 1960. Mrs Bick wrote 'Notes on infant observation in psychoanalytical training' (Bick, 1964). In this work she considers Infant Observation 'important for many reasons but perhaps mostly because it would help the students to conceive vividly the infantile experience of their child patients, so that when, for example, they started the treatment of a two-and-half-years old child they would get the feel of the baby he had been and from which he is not so far removed. It should also increase the student's understanding of the child's non-verbal behaviour and his play, as well as the behaviour of the child who neither speaks nor plays. Further, it should help the student when he interviews the mother and enable him to understand better her account of the child's history. It would also give each student a unique opportunity to observe the development of an infant more or less from birth, in his home setting and in his relation to his immediate family, and thus to find out for himself how these relations emerge and develop. In addition he would be able to compare and contrast his observation with those of his fellow students in the weekly seminars.'

We consider that this experience can be of help to anyone who works in the field of human relationships and with families, such as social workers, nursery school staff, teachers, paediatricians, child psychiatrists, etc. One of the aspects that Esther Bick refers to is the fact that Infant Observation can be a useful learning

process in the area of scientific data collection and thought. From the very beginning of her seminars she emphasised how difficult it is to 'observe', that is, to collect facts free from all interpretation, because as soon as those facts must be described in the form of language, each word is loaded with a penumbra of implications. Her exact words are:

> What we also find is that the students learn to watch and feel before jumping in with theories, and learn to tolerate and appreciate how mothers care for their babies, and find their own solutions. In this way the students are slowly able to discard rather fixed notions about right and wrong handling and become more flexible about accepted principles of infant care. What is borne in upon them is the uniqueness of each couple, how each baby develops at its own pace and relates itself to its mother in its own way. (Bick, [1964] 2018, p. 120)

What we have provided here is an account of our observation of the baby we shall call Charles which covers the first year of his life. We actually observed him for three years, once a week for the first two years, and once a month during the third year – that is, from the moment of his birth up to the time he started going to kindergarten. All and each of the observations, without exception, were written up immediately after having been carried out; nothing was written down and no notes were taken during the observation itself. These written records, were then supervised by Esther Bick. Infant Observation, as it is normally known, is not an appropriate name as what is being observed is a family into which an infant has been born; therefore, the recording of the data tries to be as faithful and complete as possible in picking up not only events, the behaviour, gestures and attitudes of the baby, its mother, its father, or those of any other member of the family, but also in picking up whatever they say, whether it is important or special or repetitive or banal. It is only later on in the course of the seminar under the guidance of an expert that the interpretation of the recorded material takes place.

As our main purpose is to learn from this experience as well as describe the technique we have used and collect data, we have not found it pertinent to examine in great depth the wide literature

that exists on observation of children in different contexts, using different techniques based on different theoretical assumptions. This, to do justice to the subject, would have required a careful and systematic study of each of the various techniques involved. However, many serious studies have been carried out – and others are under way – by authors of recognised prestige, whom all of us know. These range from researchers belonging to the field of general psychology to those in psychoanalysis and we dedicate our most respectful admiration to them.

The theoretical basis of our study follows the line of thought developed by Melanie Klein, which evolved from Freud, via Abraham and which derives from her hypothesis of the precocity of all emotional life and of all mental mechanisms and activities. We have also borne in mind the contributions made by other followers of the Kleinian line of thought, with a special mention of Bick and Bion. Meltzer (1973) says that Freud and Abraham, the pioneers of psychoanalysis, in studying the phases of libido development, in their zealous and painstaking work with adult neurotic and psychotic patients, only succeeded in constructing a very abstract 'diagrammatic child': the psychoanalytic child. He later adds that the direct observation of children by psychoanalysts has started to bring the baby to life.

We shall summarise a few of the ideas on method and technique outlined in the paper by Esther Bick referred to above. The observer pays a weekly visit to the family until nearly the end of the child's second year of life, in our case, and with the intention of carrying on with the experience until the third year. The visit generally lasts an hour. It has been found that the best way for the family doctor, an acquaintance or a friend of the family to introduce us is by giving a simple explanation to the parents, saying that the observer wishes to have direct experience with small children as part of his professional training. The objective is to see what a child is like from the very beginning, when the mother is with him, for example, when she feeds him, plays with him or holds him; if he's sleeping, we can also observe what position he is lying in or maybe his mother will take advantage of the opportunity to speak to us. No notes are taken during the visits as it interferes with one's free-floating attention and prevents the observer from responding sensitively to the mother's emotional

needs. For this reason it is advisable to write down the observation immediately after it has taken place, so as to record it as exactly as possible.

The main problem the observer has, according to Bick, is twofold: one part involves the actual conceptualisation of the observer's role and the other the conscious and unconscious attitudes of the observer himself. As far as the question of the role is concerned, it is necessary for the observer to feel himself sufficiently inside the family so as to experience the emotional impact, but not to feel obliged to act out any roles thrown upon him, such as giving advice, showing approval or disapproval. He should also be able to accept, without intervening, the anxiety of seeing that the mother is not carrying out her maternal function properly. That does not mean that on certain occasions he shouldn't make himself useful, for example, by holding the baby, or take the other children a gift, from time to time. In other words, he should feel himself to be privileged and a therefore grateful participant-observer. The problem of attitude, however, is a bit more difficult. The observer who arrives at the home of parents with a new born baby, however wide his experience with children or with different scientific methods of observation, is confronted with a situation of intense emotional impact, and in order to be able to observe, he has to maintain a certain detachment from what is occurring. He has to find a standpoint from which he can carry out his task while introducing as little distortion as possible into what is happening in the family environment. That is, he has to stay in the background, refrain from showing great enthusiasm or from calling attention to himself. It is best not to ask, but to wait; not to take any initiative, because in doing so, he is acting out a role. Rather than actively establishing his own personality as a new addition to the family organisation, he should permit the parents, in particular the mother, to fit him into her household in her own way. But he must avoid falling into roles involving intense infantile transference and therefore countertransference. For example, one of the elder children may try to monopolise him as an ally against the couple formed by motherbaby; or he may find himself influenced by the baby to become a substitute mother. In other words, if he becomes involved in the family organisation as the

other members of the family do, his observations would be as little objective as those of a father or mother observer supplying information about their children. In addition to this, he would find himself invaded by the tensions of the situation. It is not an easy role. He has to allow certain things to happen and to resist others. Through the material that we are going to describe we shall have the opportunity of seeing several consequences of such breaches in the technique.

The observational material has been put in chronological order, so as to follow a line of continuity. To make for a better understanding it is advisable to read it from the beginning because many of the mother's statements and judgements, information given by her or any other person, as well as behaviour which is described in the material, can often be much more eloquent than interpretations made subsequently. On many occasions we have grieved that we lack the precision and style of a good writer, who can do greater justice to the facts with a beautifully written description. We have left out some of the material as it seemed repetitive or inexplicit, although our main reason for doing so was to avoid tiring the reader or making excessive demands on him. Some theoretical and technical explanations are found in the notes so that the reader who is not familiar with some of the concepts on which the interpretations are based may understand them.

As a conclusion, I would like to say a few words of appreciation to those many people I have in mind, who, in one way or another, stood by my side or who encouraged me to undertake this project. I would especially like to thank Charles and his family, with whom I shared and experienced the development, from its beginning in the fragility of emerging emotions, of a firm family relationship. After that, I am much indebted to Esther Bick, who taught me this technique and who accompanied me, step by step, with her enthusiasm, her understanding and her acute judgement; in addition, Ruth Riesenberg, who initially read part of the original manuscript and was able to pick up the essential quality of the work and who served me as a guide; Terttu Eskelinen de Folch for the suggestions she made after reading these first pages; Nuria Abelló, with whom I have exchanged so many ideas on Baby Observation, and the

students who so enthusiastically participated in the seminars. And last but not least, I must also mention other people who collaborated much more closely with me and to whom I would like to express great recognition: my teacher Dr Pere Bofill, who gave me such stimulating inspiration, and my family, who gave me warmth, affection and support and in the bosom of which this project began – my parents, my children and in particular my wife, Dr Victoria Subirana, not only for her constructive criticism from a professional point of view, but most important of all, for her emotional support.

Barcelona, 1980

CHAPTER ONE

One month: the baby's state of unintegration and primary functions of the mother

The purpose of this paper is to describe an infant observation. We look at the baby's relationship with his mother, family and environment, in an attempt to understand what is going on from a psychoanalytical point of view. The exercise is one which enables a study to be made of the emotions present during the first stages of life – as they emerge in this case – in order to obtain some knowledge of the primitive stages of psychic development. This is one way of furthering our understanding of those obscurities which psychoanalysis tries to explain through its theoretical formulations, formulations derived from analytic work with both adults and children. Our interest focuses on the different levels of emotional relationship. We begin by describing the observations – which appear in inverted commas – just as we experienced them and after that we draw certain inferences. As with all emotional experiences, that of observing a mother with an infant and her environment is subjective, partial and incomplete. However, what we shall try to show is that we are dealing with the mind at work, a situation where reflection predominates over action.

The beginning of the experience

The object of the first interview with the parents, which can take place before the baby is born or immediately afterwards, is for the family and the observer to get to know each other and decide whether the observation will be carried out or not. If the interview takes place before labour we can collect abundant data about the anxieties and expectations during pregnancy, which can be of great help in understanding subsequent behaviour during child care.

The experience begins at the hospital:

> I go there four days after the baby's birth. The mother, a woman in her thirties, is in bed; she looks agreeable as well as calm and confident. I had phoned her the previous day to propose an interview and she had gladly accepted. On meeting me, she shows willingness and interest, and has no trouble settling on a time-table or day on which I can begin. The father, of about the same age, also pleasant-looking, is with the mother and shows a certain distrust; he asks how long the observation will last and, in an ironic tone of voice, whether it will continue until the boy does his military service. In order not to force the situation, I make it clear to them that there is no obligation to continue if they do not wish to do so; it is the mother who intervenes to 'clear the way'.

That is the beginning of the experience, with two rather different attitudes, that of the father and that of the mother. While the former shows lack of interest and distrust, the latter shows willingness and enthusiasm. In practice, it has been seen that the initial fear that the observer will be an intruder soon disappears. It is the mothers who are willing to accept the presence of an observer. Many of them, even from the beginning, show explicitly or implicitly, that they are happy to receive regular visits from a person to whom they can talk: about their baby and its development, about their own feelings towards the baby, or about various other concerns. A receptive and friendly attitude on the part of the mother also brings about a similar feeling in the observer. This opens the way for the creation of an adequate observation space where we cast away any judgemental opinions, implicit or explicit. We shall see the way that this phenomenon becomes more general and affects even the father, who, as a result of not