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## Child observation and emotional discomfort: the experience of trainee psychologists

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### ABSTRACT

Young Child Observation (YCO) is a foundational component of psychoanalytic training in many parts of the world and has been adapted for various training courses in psychology, psychotherapy, education and social work. While the professional benefits of YCO are established, the experience of observers conducting observations outside of traditional psychoanalytic training settings is under-researched. YCO observers experience significant emotional discomfort; however, this has not been well documented, nor has its impact on observers and their professional development. This study addresses that gap by analysing the emotional discomfort experienced by 10 postgraduate psychology students from a single university, who completed a seven-week YCO and wrote self-reflective reports on their personal experience. Participant reports and notes from each completed observation were analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis. Three main themes were identified: Managing the Observer Role, The Struggle for Belonging, and Countertransference. Participants reported a range of experiences eliciting emotional discomfort, which, in the course of individual and supervision group reflection, led to personal and professional development. Findings from this study indicate that a short YCO enriches the quality of professional psychological training, even when this training is not explicitly psychoanalytic in nature.

### KEYWORDS

Young child observation; psychologist training; emotional discomfort; reflective thematic analysis; Esther Bick; psychoanalytic research; qualitative research

## Introduction

While infant observation has been a foundational aspect of psychoanalytic training in many countries, less interest has been shown in the experience of observing older children (Fagan, 2012). Despite this differential investment, the two practices share aims, procedures and theoretical assumptions, diverging only

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in the physical and logistical differences between observing dependent infants and increasingly autonomous children. They both provide opportunities for trainee psychologists and psychotherapists to acquire the skill of closely observing the emergence of selves in relational context, through the lens of psychoanalytic and developmental theory. Observation in this context is a nuanced practice, requiring particular attitudes and capacities in the observer. Esther Bick developed the technique of infant observation as a component of analytic training at the Tavistock Clinic (Sternberg, 2005). Whilst undergoing adaptations, the Bick model continues to underpin infant and child observation, which now features in the training of educators, social workers and psychologists (Edwards, 2009).

From the outset, Bick and others recognised the complex challenges inherent in formal observation of infants and their families; fundamentally, the dilemma of how to hold the privileged position of being intimately involved as participant-observers, without being enticed into social interaction, superficial conversation, advice giving, or untoward action. The required stance was originally described by Freud as 'evenly suspended attention' (cited in Houzel, 2010); meaning observation conducted without selective attention or guiding anticipation. How to be appropriately detached, while also being present remains a fundamental tension for trainees taking up the role of observer. As well as the demands of appropriately inhabiting the role, Bick (1964) noted an 'intense emotional impact' (p. 39) on observers, which must be reflectively processed to properly understand observation experience. Essential to this task is the seminar group, which provides a supportive space encouraging the 'free associations, ruminations and speculations of the observer and seminar members' (Reid, 2013, p.4). It is this immersive engagement with the reported observation that permits the exploration of largely implicit experience relating to the psychic life of the baby or child via the impact on the observer.

Given the relative lack of research into the practice of YCO, the emotional experience of observers is also not well documented or understood. While there are similarities among many naturalistic observation tasks, YCO entails its own range of emotional challenges. Adamo and Rustin observe that YCO should not be thought of as an 'applied version' of infant observation, and contend that it requires further progress in establishing its aims and refining its techniques to address the rapid developmental changes of its subjects. Despite extant contributions to the practice of YCO, e.g. Adamo and Rustin (2013), there are few studies investigating the observer experience of watching a young child traverse the challenges of this developmental stage. This is perhaps partly due to the disparate contexts in which YCO occurs. Whereas infant observation is integral to much psychoanalytic training, YCO is dispersed across various professional and training settings, with a wide range of approaches and agendas. YCO in the existing literature often has an emphasis on the benefits for children of having self-reflective educators and nursery staff,

but not on the benefit or otherwise to the observers themselves (Elfer, 2010; Harrison et al., 2017).

Given the broad use of child observation across training contexts, it is important to turn the lens back onto the experience of the observer to understand its impact more fully. Current literature is mainly concerned with establishing YCO's applied effectiveness as a training task, or maximising its effectiveness as an intervention for the well-being of children in care. While often entailing some exploration of the experience of the observer, this is usually an adjunct component of the study focus (Brace, 2020; Datler et al., 2010; Datler, Datler, Hover-Reisner, & Trunkenpolz, 2014). A recent systematic literature review (Xiang, 2021), exploring the experience of psychoanalytically informed observations in contexts outside of infant observation, noted the dearth of research into the effect of observations on trainees.

Sternberg (2005) researched students completing infant observations in four psychoanalytic training institutions, delineating many of the skills and capacities that observation promotes in trainee psychotherapists. Sternberg's participants described a wide range of feelings and emotions, from witnessing discomfiting family dynamics in the observation homes, to feeling anxious in their role and being worried about the welfare of the baby. That study addresses the importance of being aware of uncomfortable experiences and demonstrating how this awareness informs fundamental clinical capacities in psychotherapy settings. While there is some deep exploration and description of the observer's discomfort, which provides a useful comparator for the current study, the context of baby observation in psychoanalytic training is markedly different to that of the current study's participants.

Matharu and Perez (2018) focused specifically on developing a better understanding of the 'thoughts and feelings' of postgraduate child observers who were not ensconced in the culture of psychoanalytic theory and practice. The observation in question involved parent-infant dyads and lasted a year. Participants described feeling 'shock and confusion' (p. 289) at the beginning, despite having been provided with preparatory information. Throughout the observation period they described uncomfortable feelings, including distress at watching a baby cry inconsolably and leaving observations feeling depressed and helpless. A major theme of this study was the appreciation of the seminar group to contain and help them make sense of difficult experience. Similarly, in a study of pre-clinical social work students completing YCO, Hingley-Jones et al. (2016) found that the seminar group was an important source of containment and reflection during the observation, as the participants needed support to manage discomfort, such as concerns about being intrusive and feeling emotionally drained after sessions. However, the emphasis here was on the skill of 'learning to bracket personal concerns' (p. 258) in the name of maintaining a professional persona, rather than analysing the discomfort itself. Countertransference was assumed in the reactions of the participants, but the study did not

explore how the participants made sense of this in relation to the children they observed. Harrison et al. (2017) assessed the application of YCO to education and care settings, and for guiding educators on utilising their own experience to enhance the emotional well-being of children. Finally, there have been some useful case studies, for example Quitak (2004), who documented her experience of YCO in the context of social work training. Although she highlighted her personal discomfort, her freedom to surrender to the experience was constrained by the child-protection context, with its background agenda of assessment and intervention. Franchi (2014) also documented a single observer who attempted an observation without a seminar group, highlighting the risk to the process and the observer of being alone with emotional discomfort and disturbance and without connection to a containing reflective group.

A research gap thus remains in our understanding of the experience of trainee psychologists who complete short, psychodynamically framed YCOs, but who are unfamiliar with psychoanalytic theory. The purpose of our study is to establish the specific forms of emotional discomfort arising for observers during a seven-week YCO, and to what extent this experience engenders useful 'proto-clinical' reflection (Hingley-Jones et al., 2016).

## Method

### *Research question and context*

This qualitative study identified and analysed the emotional discomfort experienced by trainee psychologists conducting a young child observation. The participants completed a seven-week YCO observation as part of a postgraduate professional psychology training at an Australian University, prior to any exposure to psychoanalytic concepts. The second author, who designed and supervised this experiential module, is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and university lecturer. The aim of the module was to prepare trainee psychologists for experiencing, reflecting on, and understanding countertransference reactions to clients in subsequent clinical contexts. While much shorter than a typical infant observation, it embraced the same methodology and was supported by a weekly seminar group, where students reported and reflected on their observations.

Prior to observation proper, student observers attended a two-hour seminar and were introduced to the rationale and procedure of YCO, based on the Tavistock Model (Prat, 2008). Participants were also provided with two introductory papers on infant and young child observation (Elfer, 2012; & Prat, 2008), and a recommended reading list of relevant articles. Finally, participants were also shown the first 30 min of a video on infant and YCO (Rustin et al., 2002), and introduced to the University Child Care Centre, where the observations occurred. Students were each assigned a four-year-old child, who they were tasked with observing for one hour per week over a six-week period. Observers,

who were not introduced to their children or told anything about them, were instructed to closely observe their child but to avoid interacting and talking with them. As in Tavistock infant observation, students did not take any notes during the observation hour but made lengthy notes on each observation after leaving the childcare centre. After completing their six observations they each produced a reflective report on their observation experience and include their observational notes.

### *Methodology*

The data comprised self-reflective written reports completed by the students as a hurdle requirement, as well as the notes they wrote following each observation session. Reflexive Thematic Analysis or RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the participants' experiences. RTA permits a theoretically informed data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and also allows for coding descriptions to evolve and change as demanded by data subtleties and multiple meanings generated throughout the analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach guided the analysis process. This involved increasingly deep readings of the data and the generation of themes, which were framed by psychoanalytic theory: psychoanalytic concepts and assumptions informed the study, providing 'a lens through which to code and interpret the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 208).

While theoretically informed, the study was not theory-driven, as the themes were not preconceived but, instead, generated from the participants' experiential accounts. It was assumed that the concrete observations reported by the participants only partially represented what was emotionally salient for them at the time, and that their written accounts were imperfect records of their complex experience. An element of 'hiddenness' (Ivey, 2023) was presumed to characterise the data, which had been subjectively filtered by the participants before submission. The research task therefore was to glean the fullness of experience from the sometimes 'relative paucity of its expression' in the reports (Ivey, 2023).

The theoretical and philosophical position of the researchers was transparent in the coding process, and the first author engaged in reflexive processes, such as questioning interpretations and decisions during coding and keeping a countertransference log to maintain awareness of personal responses and biases.

### *Participants*

Following institutional ethics approval, former trainee psychologists from a university Masters in Applied Psychology course, who had completed a seven-week placement experience in Young Child Observation, were approached via email.

Other than having submitted the relevant assignment, there were no inclusion or exclusion criteria, nor any incentive offered for participation. Potential participants were provided with information about the study and a consent form, submission of which indicated permission to access their previously completed reports for research purposes. There were 10 participants, six female and four male.

### *Data collection*

The data comprised ten 3000–3500-word reports, plus the raw notes written after each observation session. Altogether, a document of approximately 10,000–15,000 words was retrieved for each participant.

### *Ethical considerations*

This study received ethics approval from the authors' University Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: HRE21-104). Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and were required to return a signed consent form to access their reports. All documents were de-identified before being sent to the student researcher, with only participants' sex made available. The parents of the observed children had previously signed consent forms for the observation to take place and for reports written by the observers to be used for research purposes. The children mentioned in the reports were also de-identified.

### *Data analysis*

All ten documents, comprising a reflective report and the accompanying observational notes for each observation session, were analysed by the first author, using the six-stage process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as described by (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The research focus was on explicit or implicit participant indications of emotional discomfort during their observation experience. Researcher notes on initial impressions and reactions were kept throughout the analysis as a way of monitoring researcher influence and countertransference. Initial coding then began by reading for indications of emotional discomfort, as determined by the research question. However, other items were also noted, such as references to positive emotional experiences, childhood memories, and reactions to group supervision interactions. The data were swept for these affective expressions, and excerpts of data and corresponding codes were collated manually in a Word document table. When multiple codes seemed to be telling 'stories' about the patterns in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019), these codes were attributed to a 'central organising concept' and candidate themes were generated. The initial coding and candidate

themes were referred to the second author, who checked these against the original data.

Cycling between part of the data and the whole of the data set elucidated how particular observations fit within the overall picture of the data and this recursive process resulted in several versions of thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006) before the themes were finally defined and refined. Finally, data excerpts providing illustrations of the themes were selected and included in the findings below.

## Findings

Data analysis revealed three major themes and several secondary themes. Table 1 shows themes and related subthemes.

### Participant themes

#### Theme One: managing the observer role

Every participant reported discomfort related to understanding, negotiating and/or maintaining their observer role. Defining the nature of the child-observer relationship was one of the more confounding and stimulating aspects of the observation experience: ‘The relationship with J was one of the most surprising and challenging aspects of the placement. I consistently wondered what it was ...’ (P1); ‘At some stage during the observation, I realised there was a relationship building between me and M ...’ (P7); ‘At times (the) lack of involvement and detachment felt almost unethical.’ (P8).

#### What is this relationship?

Observers reflected that the experience of observing ‘their’ child had been a more profound experience for them than they could have imagined, both in terms of the personal impact and what they discovered was relevant to future professional practice: ‘I really hadn’t anticipated the emotional impact of the experience’ (P1); ‘The placement opened my eyes to the possibility of

**Table 1.** Findings: themes and subthemes.

Main Themes	Subthemes
1. Managing the Observer Role	<i>What is this relationship? What is my role?</i>
2. The struggle for Belonging	
3. Countertransference	<i>Confronting my own infantile self Preconceptions Challenged – What is a Child? I don’t always like you Nothing to see here</i>

working with younger children – something that I never thought I would enjoy as a psychologist' (P10).

Prior to commencing, observers were preoccupied with how the observation would impact the children. The fear of being intrusive, of not having children's express permission, and of making the children uncomfortable ran throughout the reflections: 'I was worried that I may be intrusive and may change, interrupt, influence the interactions that I was observing, or negatively affect C'. (P5)

There was a strong emphasis for some observers around private moments involving toileting or nudity. This was particularly pertinent to male observers, who also wondered whether their intentions would be questioned if they followed or observed their children in the bathroom:

I am suddenly conscious that I am the only male in the kindergarten and ... feel quite self-conscious about following this little girl into a room to change. I maintain my distance and do not enter the room. I wonder what the other adults are thinking of me. I feel a bit like a 'creep' and wonder if the adults think I'm some sort of pervert (P3).

Questions concerning children's awareness and interpretation of the observers' presence were also the source of discomfort. Despite the absence of overt interaction, all the children at some point indicated they were aware of their observers. For some observers the moment of recognition provided relief from the worry of intrusion:

I know she is aware of my presence as she infrequently glances at me and makes eye contact ... I get the impression that she knows I am here to observe her and is ambivalent about it. I feel a bit relieved by this ambivalence (P5).

For others it increased the tension, as was the case for one observer during a messy breakfast:

There was quite a bit of milk lost, and he looked directly up at me, stunned. I was shocked that the first person he checked to see if they had seen him spill the milk was me. I thought (or felt) that I was invisible ... However, now that J had looked up to see whether I had noticed the spill, I felt quite conspicuous and a bit vulnerable ... (P10).

Being seen or not, and the feelings arising in this shifting territory, was a mutual but differently experienced aspect of the observation and will be further explored under the theme of countertransference.

### ***What is my role?***

The pull to interact with the children was strong for some observers, occasionally testing their tolerance limits:

The other major feeling I had to work with was guilt. Having observed W's rejection by peers, I had to deal with the thought that I too had 'rejected' social interaction with

him. There were a number of times when I felt like abandoning the role of observer and taking on the role of nurturer (P4).

This discomfort was noted more frequently in relation to other children seeking observers' attention. The designated observer-child dynamic, despite its tensions, provided a frame in which a certain level of frustration could be tolerated. In contrast, several participants specifically mentioned feelings such as sadness or guilt when they were unable to attend to other children attempting to engage with them: 'I felt so guilty ignoring this little boy, afraid he may feel rejected and not wanting him to experience this pain on my account' (P8);

Today it's been a lot harder to remain detached from the children. I have felt bad for not engaging children who have approached me and genuinely wish to engage. I feel rude and sad at my cold response to them (P3).

Other sources of frustration in the centre also challenged observers and prompted feelings such as anger, annoyance, and self-consciousness. Two observers felt rebuked by a staff member who told them to sit down, as their standing position while observing was 'off-putting'. Both experienced a jolt to their sense of security in the centre: 'I felt in this moment like I'd been reprimanded, and I noticed in myself some feelings of defensiveness' (P2); and P3: 'I am upset by this reprimand and feel a burden to the staff suddenly'

P3 ponders whether his being male was part of what was 'off-putting' to the female staff member. In a subsequent session, he struggled with the impulse to tidy up after his child, worrying that he might otherwise appear 'negligent' to the other adults. These experiences highlight the fragile sense of belonging which observers must negotiate during their placement, which, like many aspects of the observation, is also reflected in the experience of some of the children.

### *Theme two: the struggle for belonging*

Uncomfortable sensations, emotions and memories aroused in the daily buffeting of who is in and who is out at the childcare centre, was one of the most discussed aspects of the observer experience. Emotional discomfort commonly concerned observers watching their children struggle to find their place in the group, and being reminded of their own struggles for belonging: 'The themes of acceptance and rejection, and inclusion and exclusion, became markedly apparent to me across all six sessions.' (P2). Observers were attuned to the perceived experience of social isolation for their children: 'I felt sad and upset for her during the second session following a number of circumstances that I perceived her to feel like she was on the outside of the group ...' (P6). P9 observed:

He glances over at me while he has teary eyes. I feel very sad for him in this moment, I feel bad that his friend does not want to spend time with him and I can feel the sadness radiating off both of these boys.

This 'countertransference' experience regarding inclusion and exclusion sometimes extended to children that participants were not tasked with observing: 'Likewise, I felt a strong sense of compassion for the children who appeared to be "outsiders", and at times almost felt overwhelmed by sadness for them.' (P2).

This observer summarised the fraught experience of holding onto one's place in the group following a particularly intimate moment of play, subsequently tinged with exclusion:

I had strong feelings around exclusion and inclusion, and how every moment of every interaction for these children was defined in some way by either finding a place on the inner, or feeling on the outer, and trying to remedy this – themselves experiencing it or making others feel that way (P9).

A layer of psychological complexity was added for observers who were subject to direct challenges to their belonging, usually by being excluded, rejected or ignored by their children: 'It made me feel a little invisible and at times a little disappointed that the little boy didn't make many attempts to play with me or engage with me' (P8). P2 reflected,

M and I were left alone for a minute or two, for the first time. M looked at me, walked over, and said, "Hello." I responded the same, with a smile. "Do you know my name?" I replied, "Yes, your name is (M)". She smiled. I continued, "Would you like to know my name?" She shook her head, saying "no", and walked inside for lunch. ... Why wasn't she interested in who I was, or why I was there watching her? ... Where was the child-like curiosity?"

### *Theme three: countertransference*

Despite their lack of psychoanalytic knowledge, all the participants speculated on the presence of countertransference and its impact on their observations, consistent with their task of noting their emotional reactions and what these responses may suggest. Countertransference was often flagged by participants while writing observation notes, but it also sometimes emerged more subtly through conversations in supervision groups or over the course of self-reflections culminating in the final report. The first subtheme is based on the phrasing of Participant Two's summary of her observation experience.

### *Confronting my own infantile self*

P2 identified that she had a 'significant personal response' to the task of absorbing her child's experience over the observation period. The task confronted her with '... the difficulty of having lost my mother at 12, having little to no memory of being a child or feeling "childlike", and feeling "unmothered" from a young age.' P8 was drawn back into her own painful childhood feelings of powerlessness and lacking agency as she witnessed the vagaries of

popularity playing out among the children: 'I remember the power of peers when I was a child and the immense control other kids had over you, especially the popular ones and how I so badly wanted to fit in and be liked by everyone.'

### *Preconceptions challenged – what is a child?*

A powerful theme concerned preconceptions of what the observed children would be like, and the discomfort that ensued when they proved otherwise. When children defied expectations observers often expressed concern, confusion, surprise or boredom in response. They grappled with trying to understand what was going on in the minds of children behaving in unexpected or seemingly aberrant ways. A common source of consternation was the perception that children were changeable or unpredictable. P1 wrote in an early summary that his child, '... lacks cohesion and emotional connection', and that he often carried a 'disconnected and emotionless appearance.' Similarly, P2 described her child as 'distracted, disengaged and non-participatory', and worried that the behaviour suggests 'maladjustment.' She was struck by the child's changeability: 'There is an emotional lability to M, in that she can fluctuate rapidly between a state of solemn silent observation, to an occasional outburst of laughter, which sometimes seems maniacal.' P3 echoed the discomfort about his child's unpredictability, describing her behaviour as 'distractible and chaotic' with a 'detached interpersonal style', and noted that the impact of feeling disconnected from the child 'made it hard to pay attention and concentrate' during observation sessions. P8 reported feeling 'bored' when her child contradicted her expectations about 'how a child should behave and be disciplined.' Much speculation concerned the children's attitudes, motivations, and intentions. Most observers were confronted by some negative reactions to their children, hence the sentiment expressed in the third countertransference subtheme below.

### *I don't always like you*

Observers' negative feelings toward their children emerged in a range of scenarios:

It occurred to me as it had before when observing M that there was sometimes a lack of softness in her, compared to the behaviours of other little girls around her; there was not a lot of tenderness nor quiet consideration, but behaviour that appeared more selfish ... I feel myself judging her a little bit on how she was behaving (P2).

P3 noted several unpalatable characteristics of his child:

L's abruptness and rough play (wishing she would be gentler); or her sloppy and chaotic eating manner (wanting her to eat more carefully so as not to spill the

food); or her disregard for order (wanting her to clean the mess she created prior to escaping outside); or the regular removal of her shoes and socks.

P5 struggled to feel emotionally engaged with her child: 'I think that C generally did not choose to prioritise others' emotional needs above the activities that she was engaged in ... I did not find her particularly warm emotionally'. P6 disliked the way his child treated others: 'L pretended to hit V over the head again. This made me feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, like I was responsible for her behaviour.'

Discomfort concerning children toileting was particularly powerful for some observers:

... she raced off to the bathroom and washed her hands so quickly that I suspected they weren't washed at all. I recall then that I've often noted her unwillingness/failure to wash her hands, and I think to myself that perhaps she's a grubby child and that her hands are always dirty (P2).

P7 recalls being 'aware of a subtle feeling of disgust or disapproval' (P7), while P4 reported:

He ran to the toilet; I stood behind the glass and observed him. I was surprised that he didn't actually wash his hands. He just ran in a circle, touched a tap and ran back outside to the breakfast table.

### ***Nothing to see here***

The final countertransference subtheme relates to childhood sexuality. Most observers did not report directly on the sexual behaviour of their children, but the reflections of the two participants suggests that this aspect is particularly difficult for observers. P9 felt so uncomfortable when she noticed her child playing with his genitals that she did not initially record her reaction. During the supervision group she realised she omitted this detail from her session notes, and pondered why she left it out of the day's observation: 'I felt creepy observing the child when they were exploring their sexuality because I felt that I was invading their privacy.' This made her feel that '... my role as the observer at that time was inappropriate' (P9).

P6 also felt uneasy about his role after the supervision group highlighted seemingly sexualised dynamics in his observation notes. He reports he '... made more of an effort to avoid overtly observing her ... I don't feel entirely comfortable in the role of observing a young girl following our group conversation.' P6 added that after the conversation he felt 'glad I'm not attracted to children.'

Given the significance of countertransference in observers' experience, it is useful to reference one participant's experience in more detail. This takes the form of a mini-case study below. This participant (P4) was chosen because she powerfully highlighted the impact of countertransference in the observer-child relationship.

### Countertransference case study

The participant began with a strong need to make a connection with her child, but was struck by his 'aloofness' and came to believe the child was 'resentful of my presence.' She found herself more attentive to other children, who appeared more sociable and accessible. Following the third session, the observer recalled during group supervision that she had been 'secretly watched' by her own parents and had felt 'embarrassed and angry' when they laughed at something she had done. In an apparent parallel of this event, the observer becomes convinced that she is doing the wrong thing by observing her child, and that he does not want her to be there: 'After around three minutes W turned around and looked directly at me as I was sitting behind him in a corner. I immediately looked away and felt guilty, as if I was doing something wrong.' (Second observation). In the third observation she records, 'I felt as if he wanted me to leave him alone.' Later in this observation she notes, 'I began to feel guilty and sad that W did not want me around. The thought of leaving entered my mind as I thought it unfair to keep observing him if he didn't like it.' P4's experience of guilt then intensifies: 'While I was walking past the entrance, W turned around and stared at me. He was urinating in the toilet. I walked away and felt very guilty and horrible for invading his privacy.'

In the fourth observation, P4 develops the tactic of pretending not to observe her child to ease what she assumes is his discomfort:

I didn't want W to feel like I was there to observe him and grabbed a book lying around so it would look like I was reading (especially after last week's observation where I felt he was actively avoiding and hiding from me).

Later in this session, a reflective window opens up on the countertransference that had been unconsciously structuring her observational process: 'W went to look in his bag in the coat room. I stood and observed him from behind the glass and felt like I was in my parents' shoes. I was surprised at the thought.'

The grip of P4's observer countertransference partially recedes when she recognises the previously unconscious identification with her parents. This self-insight was strengthened by a 'shocking' experience in the subsequent seminar group. She suddenly remembered that, when she was about six years of age, she had been intensely absorbed in 'highly imaginative play' when she realised her parents were watching and laughing at her, leaving her feeling humiliated and angry.

### Discussion

The unpredictable and emotionally confronting journey of infant and young child observation is an established foundation of psychoanalytic training.

Exposure to 'anxiety, uncertainty, discomfort, helplessness ... and being bombarded by feelings' (Sigrell et al., 2014, p. 21), is understood as inevitable and necessary for trainee psychoanalytic psychotherapists completing this part of their education. The personal strengths and capabilities engendered by the process correlate with clinical skills required for treating clients (Sternberg, 2005), though it has not been established to what extent these capabilities can be cultivated in short-term observations outside of psychoanalytic training.

Observers in the current study reported the intense emotional impact anticipated by Bick (1964), but lacked the supporting context and theoretical structure provided by the Tavistock context. A short placement in a childcare setting is very different to visiting the family home of a child every week for a year, while undergoing personal analysis and intensive supervision. Our participants completed a short YCO as a stand-alone placement experience in a post-graduate psychology course, and had no prior exposure to psychoanalytic theory or training.

Despite this, the participants' experience and reflections on the insights they acquired, strongly affirms Bick's advocacy of learning from emotional experience, rather than theory. The forms of emotional discomfort participants reported are consistent with previous research findings relating to both infant and YCO in other training settings, as all of these involve sitting with uncertainty and awkwardness about the observer role, feeling like an intruder, and worrying about the observed child finding a place in the group (Adamo et al., 2013; Matharu & Perez, 2018; Wittenberg, 1997). Participants also reported significant emotional experiences seemingly unique to observing young children in a childcare setting, and not been well documented in previous research. Examples include feeling unwelcome by threatened childcare staff, exposure to intense child group dynamics, and having to observe sexualised child displays. The latter is particularly relevant to male observers and has not previously been reported in the research literature.

The participants generally underestimated the impact the experience would have on them and reported some initial task confusion, despite preparatory exposure to various resources, including a Child Observation Placement Guide, relevant academic articles, an introductory seminar, and a demonstration video. Participants' confusion suggests an initial disjunct between their intellectual grasp of the task and the emotional reality with which it presented them. As Matharu and Perez (2018, p. 297) found in first-time observers of infants, 'the emotional experience can only be understood once it is lived.' First-time observers tend not to anticipate being emotionally affected themselves, but instead express great concern about the ethics of the observation process and its impact on the children (Hingley-Jones, Parkinson, & Allain, 2016). This was evident in our participants, but discomfort dissipated as they began to reflectively integrate their own psychological realities into their observations. The

shift from concern about the child to an awareness that the role of observer requires emotional vulnerability and engagement is intrinsically important, marking the point where real observation learning begins.

Participants did indeed report intense vulnerability and discomfort, stemming from the 'intrusive' sensation of 'observing, receiving and having to contain' (Wittenberg, 1997, p. 23) the psychological tumult of the infant and, in this case, the young child. Psychic intrusion relates to 'intruding' feelings experienced by the child, which are not understood and cannot be directly communicated and which therefore land in the emotional sphere of the closely attending observer (Wittenberg, 1997). Young children have more sophisticated ways of expressing their distress than infants, but are nonetheless unable to manage without support from the receptively attuned minds of others (Shaw, 2021). The observer who strives to be available will receive the unprocessed feelings of the child at both conscious and unconscious levels, inducing various kinds of discomfort and disturbance. This emotional registering of 'unhomed' feeling attests to the notion of intersubjective experience, which transcends the skin boundaries of observer and observed (Maiello, 2007). The presence of this kind of discomfort is essential to the YCO task if it is to provide the intended experiential learning (Orjiubin et al., 2018). However, it has not been previously established if a short-term YCO allows sufficient relational connection between observer and observed to generate the requisite emotional dynamics.

In fact, observers evidenced frequent exposure to indigestible feelings in the children, and reported being deeply affected by the observational impact of them. These feelings often related to experiences of rejection, uncertainty and confusion brought about by parental separation and the shock of having to navigate a new environment in the childcare centre. Consequently, observers both witnessed and felt the developmental challenges faced by children as they transitioned from home to the broader social world (Adamo & Rustin, 2013). The observers found themselves confronted with the vicarious shock of this transition and were concerned about how the children were coping with complex social dynamics involving inclusion and exclusion, control and submission, aloneness and togetherness. Some observer discomfort was registered explicitly as the stirring of their own painful memories and recognition of being left out, wanting to be liked, and feeling alone. Fagan (2012, p. 81) describes the exhausting daily psychic work of young children, who have to navigate new relationships, changing dynamics in existing relationships, emerging Oedipal conflicts relating to inclusion and exclusion, a world replete with both conscious and unconscious fears and desires, and a constant 'back and forth motion' (p.81) in psychic and physical capacity. This leaves them in a state of 'wobbliness' which is experientially encountered by the observer, who is consciously or unconsciously reminded of their own childhood experience of the same turbulent period.

Not surprisingly, evocation of their own histories and the stirring of childhood memories, thoughts and feelings was experienced by participants, who observed the developmental period coinciding with the emergence of their own conscious memories (Fagan, 2012). Indeed, participants reported poignant visceral responses relating to their own childhood memory stirrings. P2 stated that she felt she was 'confronting my infantile self' as she watched her child. This echoes what Sigrell (2014) identifies as an essential experience in the development of psychotherapists, who must confront their own infantile selves in preparation for meeting the formative infantile aspects of their future clients.

Dramatic shifts in the relationships between the children were also emotionally confronting for the observers, who found their loyalties and sympathies challenged as each child fought for a place in the system. This was a source of worry and confusion for participants, who were surprised to feel aversion or dislike toward children who behaved in ways variously described as 'maniacal', 'rude', 'bullying', 'disengaged', 'unhappy', 'domineering', 'powerful', 'controlling' and 'cruel.' The observers found themselves unprepared for the intensity of these negotiations, described by Winship (2001) as 'primary group process' in which 'raw and primitive manifestations of object relations' (p.264) are played out, which observers must try to assimilate. These unpleasant experiences jolted observers out of the idealisation of children and childhood, which develops as an adult defence against remembering the anxiety of being infants and children themselves (Wittenberg, 1997). As P1 reflected, 'I realised I had wanted to see a happy and playful child ...' This emotional jolting offered opportunities for observers to reflectively encounter and re-evaluate many of their previously unconscious assumptions and desires, and to see children more as they actually are. As Waddell (2006, p. 1112) enjoins, the blocking of the observation by preconceptions must be constantly monitored to stay open to 'new developments and possibilities.'

As established by the original Tavistock model, the assimilation of discomfiting encounters and the ability to stay open to the experience is dependent on participation in a containing seminar group. Thinking about and processing observational experience in a supportive group helps prevent defaulting to unconscious defences (Orjiubin et al., 2018). While the psychoanalytic culture of traditional observation was missing in our study, the seminar group was included. A psychoanalytically informed group leader framed the material brought by the observers and provided feedback and support. The participants' reports evidenced the value of these meetings, both as learning opportunities and an antidote to observational reactivity, assumptions and blind spots. These groups were not simply supportive, however; they were often a source of further perplexity, as observers grappled with feedback they had received or witnessed. This is the very function of the group, which exists, not to erase discomfort, but to encounter the psychic conflict between comforting certitude and the destabilising apprehension of new or dissonant experience (Orjiubin

et al., 2018). The group helps the observer understand that their observations are not brute facts, but are personally inflected and always open to further interpretation.

Participants reported that when they brought material to the supervision group, their perspectives evolved and their insight increased. Perhaps the most remarked-upon discovery in these reflections was of unconscious forces within and between the children and the observers. This was participants' first exposure to their own countertransference in action, and many embraced the opportunity to explore its presence and account for its influence. Countertransference is an indispensable and intrinsic component of professional intimacy, something with which all psychotherapists must contend, regardless of theoretical orientation (Hayes et al., 2018). When P2 poignantly commented, 'I feel I have almost become a child again myself' (while observing the vagaries and insults of being a newcomer to the childcare centre), and P4 admitted, 'I was struck by my own need to make a connection' (when his child seems disinterested in him), they become intensely aware that they cannot ignore or quarantine their own experience. They began to understand the potential of what Waddell (2006) instructs is a fundamental task of infant observation (which applies equally to YCO), '... garnering the details of the emotional impact on the self as a guide to the potential meaning for the baby' (p.1112). Here, there is potential for confusion between unconscious countertransference in reaction to the children and conscious attempts at empathy for them. This is demonstrated by Franchi and Toth (2014) in their case study of an observation of pre-schoolers, completed without a seminar group. The authors regretfully note that the observer in this case suffered a lonely and disturbing journey without a small group to metabolise her own experiences and those of the children she observed.

This containment provided by other observers and a seminar leader was absent in the above-mentioned study, but present for our participants. Containment, defined as the capacity to hold awareness of one's own emotional state while taking in and bearing the emotional state of another (Brace, 2020) is an elemental factor in successful observations, as well as in psychotherapy and caregiving. In training and professional contexts, successfully providing containment of another is dependent on management of countertransference; we must leave room for the other psyche in our awareness, within and beyond our personal reactions. While our participants did not comment on this specific exchange with their children, their reports nonetheless provide evidence of this. P4, for example, reported the emergence of a childhood memory of being observed by her parents without her awareness and then mocked when she reacted to the intrusion. Prior to this recollection, P4 had struggled to engage with the observation task and attend to her child. After the seminar session in which she became reflectively aware of the memory and its relevance, she was able to shift her perspective and connect with the

child in a way formerly precluded by her unconscious identifications and projections.

In a similarly mutative process, P2 spoke of having no memory of being a child, or of feeling childlike, and subsequently found her child to be 'disengaged' and 'disinterested.' She also expressed great frustration when her child did not initially express interest in her. In an apparent projection of her own disconnection from her child-self, she struggled to connect with the child in front of her. P2 spoke of the 'disarming' power of the seminar discussions, which alerted her to this unconscious process and made it possible to think about what was happening, rather than merely reacting to it. Brace (2021) describes as crucial the need to 'think about which feelings belong to whom' (p.139) in the observer role. For these participants, the group provided a container for the observers' feelings, which allowed room for thinking, and increased the observers' ability to contain the feelings of their child.

In-depth analysis of the individual psychology of the children, which would occur in a seminar group under the traditional model, was beyond the scope of the current YCO. However, examples of this did occur when the behaviour of the child was directly illustrative of a psychoanalytic concept, such as the sexualised behaviour witnessed by P6. Likewise, there was no analysis of the dynamics between members of the seminar group itself. Fagan (2012) however, points out the potential for the seminar group to mirror the childcare group by activating sibling dynamics among the observers. P6, in the example above is perhaps hinting at a sense of rivalry when he worries that other observers felt they had 'missed out' after his observation received so much attention from the leader. Fagan notes that our own sibling relationships frequently add to what are often the 'intense dynamics of the seminar group' (p. 80). YCO in a childcare centre setting therefore offers a unique opportunity to explore dynamics among the observers, particularly as they relate to the dynamics among the observed children. This has not been previously explored and warrants further study as a learning opportunity for trainee psychologists, who are inevitably impacted by its undercurrents.

A strength of the study was its participant gender mix (six women and four men), meaning a range of gendered experiences were collected. Our findings relating to male observers appear unique in the YCO research and offer important insights about male observers entering female-dominated contexts, such as childcare centres. The gendered experience of male observers is an under-reported and poorly understood aspect of both infant and YCO. Our male observers reported a level of concern common across all participants about intruding on the privacy of vulnerable children. However, they also worried about how their presence and intentions would be interpreted by other adults in the centre, whereas none of the female participants reported this. Likewise, the only observer to report sexualised behaviour by a child was male.

Jackson (1998) outlines specific challenges and difficulties for male observers through every stage of parent-infant observation, much of which can be extrapolated into the YCO context. She concludes that the male observer 'has a far more complex task than that of his female counterpart' (p. 99). One of the issues she highlighted was the potential for male observers to be the targets of female children's oedipal attention. P6 appears to have encountered this with a female child, who courted his attention by smiling, looking away and displaying herself for his approval by stretching her body out in front of him and rubbing her tummy. While P6 was supported to think about this in the seminar group, his perception of being unwelcome in the centre, combined with this confronting material, resulted in rather persecutory fantasies that compromised his freedom to fully attend to his child. Other case studies of male observers have explored this Oedipal dynamic, but only in the context of an infant-at-home (Zuppari, 2017), and in the case of Yeo (2018), without addressing the observer's experience. Ours would appear to be the first study to highlight this gendered dynamic in YCO. Male observers are likely to be in the minority in nurseries and childcare centres and, potentially, be subject to different projections, expectations, and fantasies to those of female observers.

Unlike the traditional model (in which trainees must find families and homes in which to complete observations), YCO in childcare centres presents a more practical option for post-graduate trainees to conduct short observations. The childcare centre offers a contained space and, with the collaboration of centre management, makes it relatively easy to seek parental consent for observation to occur. However, it also presents multiple challenges, some of which may negatively impact observers' experience. As mentioned above, an atmosphere in which observers are viewed as spies or unwelcome rivals, or where the institution is dysfunctional or unsupportive, has the potential to derail the process by putting the observer under too much strain (Fagan, 2012). In this context, some kinds of discomfort are counterproductive and antithetical to professional development. The observer needs to be contained in a safe psychological space to benefit from the learning opportunities presented by YCO.

## Conclusion

In this study young child observation, though informed by psychoanalytic theory, was not conducted in an analytical training context. The participants were largely naïve to many of the concepts that inform traditional observations and, at seven weeks in length, the observational task was markedly shorter than that in the original Tavistock model.

Despite these differences, the reflections of the participants suggest that many fundamental concepts came alive for them during observations and weekly seminars. They all reported increased awareness of their own

psychological presence in the observation process, as well as an appreciation of the relational implications of this for their future work with clients. This was the first direct experience of countertransference for the trainees, and the opportunity to discuss and think about this was found to be both revelatory and pertinent to their professional development. The participants were also exposed to the concept of containment (Brace, 2021), another fundamental capacity required of anyone working with the emotional life others.

Importantly, these benefits were contingent on participants' observing and tolerating various manifestations of emotional discomfort, while having the support of other observers and a skilled leader to help process their experience. This study provides strong support for the claim that a short YCO may provide valuable experiential learning opportunities for training psychologists.

### Disclosure statement

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

### Notes on contributors

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