

Up against the wall

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” ...to pay attention to the smallest of details and link them together, that’s when there is a discovery.” (Bick 1964, in Haag, 1991, 138).

Abstract: This article explores aspects of unexpected behaviour in one and two-year olds, lasting only for a few minutes at a time. Infant observation (Bick 1964) in an adapted form serves as a research tool. The intention is to try to compare a small number of similar observations to try to make sense of a common pattern. The discussion of the findings has a psychoanalytic perspective. The reactions of the children’s peer group and of staff within the nursery context are a particular focus of the paper.

Keywords: Infant observation, nursery, under 5s; containment, holding environment, non-verbal communication

Introduction

Reading Geneviève Haag quoting Esther Bick (see the quotation above, Bick 1964 in Haag, 1991, 138.) reminded me of some of the phenomena from my own observations which corresponded with observation details presented to me by my nursery teacher students, during their training in a modified version of the Tavistock model of infant observation.² I

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² An application of infant observation in a modified version has for many years been a central part of a 30 ECTS course in Under Threes (Småbarnspedagogikk- Nursery Teaching Qualification Course) in the third and final year of the bachelor’s degree programme in Early Childhood Education at Stavanger University, Norway. The intention of including this observation method as part of the training is to enhance the students’ sensitivity in their future work as nursery teachers and to deepen their awareness of children’s way of seeing their world. The issue of how relationships are developed and sustained between staff and children under three is a core theme.

had been struggling for a long time to make sense of the observation phenomena and had almost given up. However, my interest in what one might call unexpected behaviour in one and two-year-olds in nursery persisted. The observations stirred and challenged me both intellectually and emotionally. I had become aware of a pattern in the day-to-day context concerning this age group and their non-verbal reactions in certain situations that I interpreted as stressful or disturbing for them. I felt inspired by the Bick quotation above and I decided that I might be on to something interesting and perhaps worth writing about.

The unexpected

My own nursery-based observations (Abrahamsen 1997, 2004, 2009, 2013, 2015, Abrahamsen et.al 2012) and those of my students have repeatedly made me aware of the way one and two-year-olds withdraw from their playmates or nursery staff, in order to place themselves physically with their back firmly against the nearest wall in situations that seem to involve stress or anxiety. The children's reactions are sudden but not very long lasting. They stay completely still, apparently concentrated and solemn, but their gaze seems vacant, almost "not there". However, in the observations, I have done myself or read of others, the children never cry, nor do they seem to search for help from the staff. In sharp contrast with this, both my own and the students' observations have often shown us children crying against a wall, but then always with their face *towards* the wall. In these situations, very often some other child brings them a dummy or a toy for comfort or tries to contact one of the staff for help.

The position with their *back* firmly against the wall usually lasts only a few minutes. The children then return to whatever they were doing before the withdrawal or start on something new completely. My hypothesis is that this back position against the wall is not an invitation to play, nor do the children seem to want any help from their surroundings. I have never observed other children joining them or trying to imitate them (Løkken 2000). This has made me wonder if other toddlers understand what this is all about and that their

leaving the child in question in peace is part of their understanding? Perhaps as adults, we do not have the needed non-verbal competence to interpret these situations. In agreement with Daniel Stern (1985), I would like to suggest that we might need a 'bilingual' competence in order to understand *intuitively* what is happening in these situations.

Stern (1985 p. ix) refers to his own personal experience when he was seven years old watching an adult trying to deal with an infant of one or two years. At that moment, it had seemed so obvious to Stern what the infant was all about, but the adult seemed not to understand it at all. It occurred to Stern that at that particular time, he was at a pivotal age. He knew the infant's 'language', but he also knew the adult's. He was still 'bilingual' and had wondered at the time if that facility had to be lost, as he grew older. Unfortunately, that is true for most of us. Lacking this 'bilingual' facility, might also mean that we miss whatever significant meaning attached to the non-verbal reactions in the observed toddlers.

Learning from experience through infant observation

The importance of close attention to children's emotions is widely emphasised through early care research and wider literature over the last decades. Few people now doubt that experiences in infancy and childhood are of fundamental importance for ongoing healthy development and wellbeing. However, enabling close attention to children's emotional experience in nursery is demanding. The staff members are often very busy with a detailed and complex timetable. There seems to be insufficient time or space for systematic and direct observations that might enhance the staff's capacity to reflect and learn from their observations, both seen and heard. This might result in their lack of awareness of the children's reactions and emotional communications.

Application of Infant observation in a modified version as part of the Early Years' teachers' qualification course at Stavanger University has been one way of trying to change this unsatisfactory situation. The training has indeed proved to create increased accessibility to the children's perspective amongst the trainee nursery teacher/observers. Infant

observation proper, developed by Esther Bick (1964) at the Tavistock Clinic, London, is a training tool, a learning experience. The observation period involves going to see an infant from birth and watching the child grow in the context of her or his family for one or two years. The observer visits the family for one hour once a week, at an agreed, regular time. The notion of the observer's role can perhaps be described as "a modest guest", (Abrahamsen 1997, 2004) an unobtrusive, non-interfering person present. The acquiring of an ability to observe without intervention and in an open-minded way is a vital part of the training 'to see what there is to be seen and not to look for what they think should be there' as Reid puts it (1997, p. 1). The observers take no notes during the actual observation; they record their experience from memory afterwards. The written-up observations are presented in small weekly seminar groups (5-6 students), aiming at providing dialogues between the observers and the seminar leader for reflection and the mental digestive process of the presented observation (Waddell, 2006).

In the modified version of the Tavistock model of infant observation used at Stavanger University, the observation setting is within Norwegian day nursery context not the children's home. Norwegian day nurseries include children from 1-5 years old, often divided into age-specific groups: 1-3 years and 3-5 years. The duration of the students' observation period is once weekly for 8-10 weeks. Each student observes the youngest child among the 1-3 years old in his or her different nursery. As observers, the students enter into a non-active relation with the children, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. This is of course an ethical issue and can only happen 'behind the shelter of other adults, who do take responsibility and accept an active relationship with the children' (Isaacs, 1930, p. 9 cited by Adamo and Rustin, 2014, p. 5). After each observation, the students write up the fullest description possible of what they saw, heard and felt for later discussions in the weekly seminars.

The potential of infant observation as an inductive research approach is increasingly being recognized (Miller et.al 1989, Briggs 1997, Abrahamsen & Mørkeseth 1998, Rustin 2002, Magagna et.al 2005, Sternberg 2005, Elfer 2006, Urwin 2007, Hollway 2007, Urwin & Sternberg 2012, Datler et.al 2012, 2014). Infant observation research includes many and

varied studies that have been carried out to increase and generate knowledge of the capacities and the development of relationships between infants or young children and their caretakers in nursery care (e.g. Datler et.al 2010, Vassenden et.al 2011, Abrahamsen et.al 2012, Elfer 2014).

Observation extracts

For the purpose of exploring patterns of unexpected and sudden behaviour in one and two-year-olds in situations which I have interpreted as stressful or disturbing for them, I present four extracts from weekly observations carried out by my students as part of their training as nursery teachers at Stavanger University. The extracts concern three one-year-olds and one two-year-old (three girls and one boy). The observations represent four different contexts; however, the children's withdrawal reactions are almost identical. The observation extracts are anonymous. The focus is on the subtleties of the emotional processes in day-to-day nursery contexts.

1. "My key person"

Anne (1 year and 9 months) had a key-worker, Sara. Sara is on her way to pick up Gabriel (1 year 8 months) who has just woken from his nap. Anne takes hold of Sara's hand and tells her that she wants to come as well. Sara nods and smiles at her, but there is no smiling back from Anne. Her face has become solemn. When they reach Gabriel's cot, Anne lets go of Sara's hand. Gabriel reaches out for Sara, and she takes him into her arms, cuddling him. 'Did you have a lovely nap, Gabriel?' Sara asks and smiles at him. Gabriel nods. While this interaction is going on Anne stands quite still in front of them, solemnly watching the two of them. Sara carries Gabriel into the cloakroom while telling him that he has to get dressed before he can play with the other children. Anne follows them, watching them closely with a solemn face while Sara gets Gabriel dressed. All of a sudden, she draws near the wall behind her and places her back firmly against it while she continues watching them with a neutral, almost vacant look on her face.

Sara has finished dressing Gabriel. 'Right you are', she says and gives him a hug before she puts him down on the floor. He immediately runs into the playroom. Sara smiles at Anne and goes up

to her. She squats in front of her and says, 'Let's go into the play room, eh?' Anne immediately starts to cry in a very miserable way, her mouth is wide open and her face red and wet with tears. She seems bewildered and does not make eye contact with Sara. Sara reaches out and takes her onto her lap holding her tight. Anne rests her head against Sara's chest and goes on crying for quite a while holding on to Sara.

2. Teddy

It is story time. Kate, one of the staff, has four children on her lap and legs while reading to them. Ida, 1 year 7 months, picks up a big teddy bear, which another child has left on the floor. She wants the teddy to sit on Kate's lap as well. Kate tells her that there is not enough room for the teddy. Ida reluctantly puts him back on the floor. The story time ends, and Ida retrieves the teddy bear, but Benny (same age as Ida), who had been playing with it in the first place and had left it on the floor, protests. She has a look of appeal on her face while she gazes at Kate. She points to the teddy and says, 'Mine'. 'No, Benny,' says Kate, 'you have to learn to share'. Benny looks even more miserable. Her eyes flickers and she seems to become very hesitant and unsure of herself, looking back and forth between Kate and Ida. She then draws back a couple of steps and places her back firmly against the nearest wall while looking intently at Kate with a solemn face. However, Kate sticks with what she said earlier on and adds, 'If you can't share, we will have to put the teddy away'. Benny maintains her position against the wall, looking solemn, but she does not protest any more. Ida retrieves the teddy and gives it to Trudy, one of the other adults. Benny immediately leaves her position by the wall and goes up to Trudy. 'Mine', she says and points at the teddy bear. Trudy, who is not aware of what has just passed between the children and Kate, acknowledges what Benny says and explains to Ida that it is Benny's teddy and now she wants it back. 'Can you please give it to her?' she asks Ida. Ida looks at Benny and gives the teddy to her. Benny grabs hold of the teddy and hugs him tightly to her chest.

3. Playing on the mattress

Hanna, 2 years 3 months, has just woken from her nap. She is still in her underwear. Ellen, one of the staff, has gone into another room to get Hanna's clothes. She returns with the clothes under her arm and tells Hanna and six other children that she wants them all in the playroom and that she will dress Hanna there. The children look pleased. They seem to enjoy being in the

playroom. Big mattresses and many plump cushions cover the floor. There are also two wall bars and a slide. Ellen goes into the kitchen but leaves the door open. She meets up with another member of staff and they start chatting. Ellen has her back to the playroom and her focus is no longer on the children. Most of the children jump and tumble on the mattress for a few minutes. They laugh and make quite a lot of gleeful noises. Then two of the boys start climbing the wall bars and jump down onto the mattress while some of the children are still tumbling on it. Hanna, who has not yet got dressed, is on the mattress with three other children tumbling around her. She keeps looking at Ellen's back, but also at the other children's movements. After a while, she starts whimpering and then, suddenly, she cries out. The other children stop tumbling and look at her, but they soon start tumbling again. Hurriedly Hanna crawls away from the mattress, walks quickly to the nearest wall, and places her back firmly against it while watching very solemnly the other children from this position and stops crying. After a few minutes Ellen returns from the kitchen and calls out to Hanna to get her dressed.

4. Peek-a-boo

Tom, 1 year and 3 months, is playing outside the nursery together with Marit, one of the staff. Other children and some of the staff are playing nearby. Tom crawls under the slide, but sticks his head out and peeps at Marit, who is standing beside the slide. She smiles at him and says, 'Peek-a-boo Tom'. He smiles back at her and repeats the game several times and she responds every time. Then Marit gets distracted, paying attention to the other children nearby. Tom tries to get her attention back by repeating the game and trying to make eye contact with her, but to no avail. He stays under the slide for some time but stops his peek-a-boo game.

Tom crawls back out again and watches Marit and the other children for a while. Then he seeks another staff member, Torill. She is sitting by the sandpit together with a small group of children. She makes room for him and asks him if he wants to play too. Tom nods and she gives him a spade, smiling at him. Tom moves closer to her and starts digging. Three older children appear on the scene wanting Torill's attention. Tom moves even closer to her, but the older children have her attention now, and gradually Tom is 'squeezed' out of the circle around Torill and of her attention. He sits watching them and stops digging. However, he does not protest, nor does he try to get Torill's attention by turning to her. After some time, Tom stands up, leaves the sandpit, and walks slowly towards the main building nearby. On his way, he stops a few times and looks around. It seems as if he is searching for something, but then he trudges on. When

he reaches the building, he places himself firmly against the wall of the building. He looks straight ahead, and his face has become very solemn and still. His arms are hanging straight down with his palms touching the wall on both sides.

Looking for patterns

The four observation extracts differ in context but the children's patterns of behaviour are more or less the same. My interpretation of the emotional atmosphere in the different contexts is that there are many similarities such as confusion, frustration, stress and what looks like a steady increase of uncertainty and anxiety in the children.

All four observation extracts show us that the members of staff are present and apparently available for the children most of the time. Nevertheless, neither Tom, Benny, Anne and Hanna turn to the adults for help and support in situations that one might interpret as disturbing or anxiety-provoking for them. Mostly the distance between the children and one of the staff and between the children and the nearest wall are nearly the same. All four children, however, seek the wall and not the adults.

It seems of interest that none of them demands individual attention from the staff, although Tom's attempt to keep up his peek-a-boo game with Marit and his moving closer to Torill, in the fourth observation extract, might have been an attempt for renewed attention and support when the other children got their attention. Nevertheless, he does not persist in his attempt to get Torill's attention by the sandpit. Perhaps he is patiently hoping for her to engage him again, maintaining his sense of security and wellbeing. However, her attention remains with the older children and his unspoken request for support and bodily contact is not met. Torill's earlier attuned presence is no longer available to him. Feelings of loneliness and discomfort and of not being secure enough seem to arise and he stops digging with his spade. Perhaps he is no longer able to gain the experience of her emotional support. Tom is no more than 1 year and 3 months. He is the youngest of the four children and will in most situations require continual attention, closeness and care from one of the adults, perhaps preferably, his key-person. Without this, feelings of getting or being lost might overwhelm him, and the situation by the sandpit becomes increasingly painful for him. This may be the

reason why he shortly afterwards leaves Torill and the older children, seemingly without any reactions from them, perhaps still being preoccupied with each other. All alone, he walks slowly to the wall of the main building nearby. On his way, he stops a few times, looks around, perhaps hoping and searching for renewed and mutual contact with either Torill or Marit, but neither of them appears to recognise his seemingly silent attempt to reach out to them. Instead he places himself firmly against the wall of the nursery building, standing completely still with a solemn expression and with his arms hanging straight down on both sides, touching the wall.

Hanna in extract 3 is the oldest of the four observed children, but only by a few months. She has just woken from her afternoon nap. While waiting to get dressed she starts playing on a mattress together with six other children. However, the exuberant jumping and tumbling on the mattress gets increasingly boisterous and a bit wild. Hanna gets noticeable watchful of the other children's movements and starts whimpering. She keeps looking at Ellen chatting in the adjoining room, perhaps hoping for her to turn round and make eye contact with her. It seems that she is trying to convey a request for help, but she does not call out to her. Then gradually Hanna's anxiety seems to increase. Perhaps the whole play situation gets too unpredictable and disturbing for her, not safe enough for her to go on playing. Still being in her underwear and perhaps not adjusted properly to being awake, might have put her in a vulnerable and unprotected situation both physical and emotionally. She suddenly cries out and leaves the mattress in a hurry. She retreats to the nearest wall with her back firmly against it. In this position, she watches solemnly the other children playing and her crying subsides before Ellen calls out to her to get dressed.

Benny, 1 year and 7 months, in extract 2, gets into a tricky situation with Kate, one of the staff, fighting for her teddy. Kate tells her off, and this seems to make Benny bewildered and unsure of herself. She does not seem to understand what is happening. Perhaps Kate's rather stern attitude in answering Benny's plea for help was not, what she had expected. Instead, she might possibly had hoped for protection and support, and perhaps help to clarify the misunderstanding about the teddy. As it turns out, she gets none of that. In the end, she seeks the nearest wall placing her back firmly against it. She seems miserable and confused, but she no longer protests. Her face has become solemn, but she keeps looking at Kate. Is

she perhaps hoping for her to yield and give her the teddy back? She is obviously extremely upset, but she seems not easily diverted by Kate's statement of learning to share. Kate seems to trust her own mind about the ownership of the teddy and in the end, she retrieves her teddy, but by a mistake.

In the first observation extract, Anne, 1 year and 9 months, seems confident enough in her relation to her key person, Sara, to take hold of her hand, wanting to come along to pick up Gabriel after his nap. However, she lets go of Sara's hand the moment they reach Gabriel's cot. Anne seems to work hard in trying to contain the emotional situation of watching the tender interaction between Sara and Gabriel. One might assume that it is demanding for her having to share her key-person with other children, especially in a tender and loving situation, but she does not try to elicit Sara's attention and secure it for herself. She stays quietly right in front of them, watching them closely. She then follows them into the cloakroom, watching Sara helping Gabriel getting dressed. While this is going on, Anne seems unable to endure further. She appears to get gradually and increasingly anxious while looking at Sara holding Gabriel in her lap, and seems unable to contain her feelings any longer. She suddenly withdraws from her position at the floor. She seeks the nearby wall and places her back firmly against it. She does not appeal for Sara's attention, but watches closely the pair of them from this position. Her face has become almost vacant.

Sara seems to be aware of Anne's discomfort, perhaps noticing the girl's solemn face watching her while seeing to Gabriel, cuddling him. However, the moment Sara reaches out to her after seeing to Gabriel, Anne is able to give way to her feelings. She starts crying, but she is not able to look directly at Sara. Perhaps her mixed feelings of both misery and longing for her key person holds her back. She might still be struggling with the loss of Sara's attention while attending to Gabriel, and perhaps becoming unsure of her own position in relation to Sara. However, she holds on to her key-person while crying with her face close to Sara's chest.

In my attempt to make sense of what seems to me to be a pattern of unexpected behaviour in the four children, I shall try to apply a psychoanalytic focus. Esther Bick (1964, p. 563) states, '... patterns of behaviour are significant if repeated in the same or a similar situation in many subsequent observations'. In the observations extracts used in this paper, the

context is not the same, although the children's reactions and the emotional atmosphere are more or less similar in all four situations.

Theoretical considerations

Geneviève Haag (1991, 2000) draws our attention to unborn and newly born infants. She points out that in uterus, especially at the end of gestation; the most important contact surface is the back, which fits closely against one or other of the curves of the distended uterine cavity. The new-born's wish for back contact is also evident. Stripping infants to the skin in the first weeks of life will very frequently provoke crying, trembling and clutching. Moreover, the first phase of the Moro reflex that occurs when a sudden change in the environment provokes an abrupt abduction of the infants' outstretched arms means that this movement brings the whole surface of the infants' back onto a supporting surface.

Haag also refers to Szanto (1981, in Haag 1991, p. 137) who regards the infants' seeking for maximal contact of the back surface to be a means of regaining a feeling of safety when some sudden disturbance has created an impression of falling, of being un-held whether in bodily or in emotional terms.

In relation to this, observations of one and two-year-olds in nursery have often shown how they seek contact of their back surface by 'backing' themselves onto the lap of the staff member who is sitting on the floor with them. With the help of these 'backing up' movements (Elfer 2014, p. 305) the children seem to connect themselves to the member of the staff for short periods, perhaps renewing strength and safety before they are able to return to playing and exploring in a confident way.

Donald Winnicott's (1985) well known concept 'holding' includes physical holding of the intra-uterine life which gradually widens in scope to mean the whole of the adaptive care of the infant, including handling. Holding relates to the mother or father's capacity to identify with the child. Winnicott also extended the concept to include the function of the family. He claims that all the details of parental care before and after birth go towards making up what he calls a 'holding environment' for the infant and young child suited to their needs.

Necessary characteristics of the environmental provision meets, according to him, both physiological and psychological needs and is reliable. By the help of the holding concept, Winnicott describes how the environmental provision is indispensable to emotional development in early infancy.

The psychological and physical holding of an infant's needs, throughout his or her development, continues to be important; 'Holding is the base for what gradually becomes for the infant, the self-experiencing being' (Winnicott 1988, 7). In other words, the basis of personality develops well if the infant is "held" well enough; the reliability becomes a *belief* (my italics) based on the experience of the reliable object. Such an emotional resonance in parental care also links to the Bionian (1962) concept of "containment", the containing process of feeling held in mind or remembered by the object, present and, later absent, but held in the mind of the child.

One might echo Martha Harris (2011, 18) that the holding in the womb, then the sensitive holding in the parents' arms is a boundary, a protection that helps the child to include more and more experiences of the world. Internalization of experiences of moments of being 'understood' and 'held', can then be drawn upon in times of bad experiences, of failures to understand.

Mending failures

Winnicott (1988, p. 97-98) argues that if a child knows about and has experienced failures "mended" and then encounters "failures not mended", he or she may provoke conditions in which failures mended once more give a sense of security, an experience of reliability in his or her relation to mother or father or caregiver. Faulty holding may produce distress in the child and give a basis for the feeling that the environment is not reliable and useful for reassurance. According to Winnicott (1985, p. 44), the child may then try to complete the 'holding process,' on his or her own.

The observation extracts of the four children placing their back against a nearby wall seem to create a pattern, even if their actual situations are not the same. One may interpret their

behaviour as the immediate need for support and protection both emotionally and physically. Is it possible to assume that these children unconsciously try to manage their emotions on their own by withdrawing with their backs against a nearby wall? Did the observed situations create an experience of not being held emotionally in the adult's mind?

Moreover, is it possible that the four children's reactions might be considered as an innate tendency towards growth in their emotional development? Is the capacity to be alone, with the back against the wall facets of the process of the internalization of the maternal function of 'holding an emotional situation in time' (Winnicott, 1985, p. 43-46)? Are the children trying to help themselves to re-experience feelings of safety and thus not becoming too overwhelmed and disorganized? Perhaps the position against the wall is giving them a re-establishment of dependence on the environment enabling them to feel secure enough to renew the use of their relationships to the adults and other children for explorations and play.

If this is the case, one might look upon their behaviour as a developmental tendency in the individual child, an outline of a gradual progress towards relative independence, which of course may easily be lost and then perhaps has to be re-gained repeatedly. In other words, a very delicate and perhaps painful balance emotionally.

According to these theoretical perspectives there seem to be a good reason to suggest that a behaviour pattern that started at a very early date might reappear at a later stage when something threatens the child, such as a "failure not mended", subjectively felt. Obviously, in our case, it is not the wall that is important, but the wall's symbolic meaning to the children's mental state in tolerating the sudden anxiety evoked by the *subjective experience* of no mother or father when a failure of holding is un-mended by their environment.

The Viennese Study

As part of the study 'Toddlers' adjustment to out-of-home day care', three Austrian researchers Datler, Datler and Funder (2010) refer to observational phenomena rather similar to some of the phenomena I describe. The researchers present a single case study of

a one-year-old boy, Valentine, and his painful transition from home to day care and his tendency to retreat repeatedly to narrow niches when being sad and longing for his mother. He also places himself with his back against the wall 'when a feeling of powerlessness and loneliness seems to arise', as the authors put it (Datler et al 2010, p. 73).

'Valentine stands up and places himself with his back against the wall, watching the other children play. His facial expression is serious and his arms droop down loosely by the sides of his body. After a short while, he sits down and grabs hold of (pieces of) the wooden track.....' (ibid-p. 73).

However, in their analysis of the observations, the authors do not refer to Winnicott's concept of 'holding' but refer tentatively to Esther Bick (1968) and her theory of the provision of a 'second skin formation'³ in infants. In Bick's footsteps, they consider the idea that the niches Valentine sought might have the function of a 'third skin' (Datler et al, 2010, p. 81), and perhaps be seen as a widening of Bick's concept⁴. The researchers suggest that the little boy, Valentine, attempts to provide for himself feelings of stability and feelings of being enveloped and perhaps protected.

Both Valentine and the Norwegian children seem to be seeking the experience of "being held" and protected, both emotional and physical, in stressful and perhaps overwhelming situations for them. We might interpret their behaviour as an attempt to get to feelings of comfort and protection in their own way by the help of their internalised earlier experience of moments of being understood and 'held' by their primary caregivers.

All of the children are without their mother and father for many hours during the day. Valentine had just started his painful separation process while all the Norwegian children had been in day-care for some months at the time of the observations. Even so, is it possible

³ Esther Bick's (1968) paper "The experience of the skin in early object relations" outlines her understanding of the function of the skin as a primary container, felt by the infant to hold together the parts of the self that have not yet come together. Usually maternal containment supports the growth of the infant's psychic skin. In faulty containment, the infant may try to use muscular tension to hold the self together: "the second skin – formation", as a defence against disintegration (see also Rustin 2009).

⁴ Personal communication with Professor Dr. Wilfried Datler.

that both Valentine and the Norwegian children in the observation extracts have a more or less similar emotional experience of wanting to be held reliably in someone's mind in their apparent painful and disturbing situations? They all seem to be seeking a mental state of connectedness and background presence. However, one may assume that a possible re-establishing of dependence on the environment would rely on the stability of the individual child's internal objects and each child's capacity for trust and confidence, but also on the environment's emotional atmosphere expressed by the staff.

The analysis of Valentine's reactions and my analysis of the four Norwegian children's reactions have many similarities and are in my opinion, in some ways compatible. However, although there is a considerable overlap between them, the two analyses cast complementary lights on the same theme by using different theoretical approaches.

Concluding remarks

Discoveries of children's unexpected behaviour such as that described in the four observation extracts above may be tiny in scale and yet have a great significance in each child's emotional well-being and development. This should not be underestimated. Being understood emotionally by their surroundings is an indispensable aspect of healthy child development. Infant observation, although in a modified version, may therefore helpfully be looked upon as 'research into the emotional life and growth of the child', (Miller 2012, p. 182).

In my experience, noticing and reflecting on unexpected phenomena in children's behaviour in nursery may, more often than not, lead to a greater awareness of the interactions and relationships in general in this setting. From a psychoanalytic perspective, infant observation sheds valuable light on issues that are often beneath the surface, such as nonverbal, emotional communication between child and staff.

This can in turn foster a more conscious emotional attention and understanding of relational processes in nursery. One might hope that a deeper understanding and awareness can give

rise to more spaces for emotional growth in the day-to-day relationships between young children and staff, in the students' future nursery work.

Discovering how much children respond positively to the experience of having close attention on them makes one painfully aware of how unmet emotional needs might lead to confusion as well as anxiety, as is evident in the observation extracts (see also Sorensen 1997).

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