

**Child Psychoanalysis  
Online Lecture Series II**

***Esther Bick on Infant Observation***

Caroline Sehon, MD, FABP  
carolinesehon@gmail.com

**November 21, 2019**

*“The most mature adult carries with him, quite unconsciously, ways of functioning and relating to people which are essentially infantile. To understand these ways we must return to the world of the infant.”*

Stanley Ruscynski, 1993

# HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

- Freud
- ❖ observed his own grandson (Fort-da play)
  - ❖ Little Hans' parents to observe their son
- Anna Freud
- ❖ seminal papers on observation
- Melanie Klein
- ❖ observed her own son, Fritz
  - ❖ Child analytic play technique → development, Ucs processes & interpretations with adults
- Esther Bick
- ❖ Psychoanalytic Infant Observation Method

# Esther Bick

[1902-1983]



## Special Contexts when child work can be very helpful

- ◆ non-verbal realm
- ◆ frightened patients
- ◆ patients at an impasse (resistance)
- ◆ psychologically naïveté

## How to develop your adult therapy skills...

- ◆ assess nonverbal communications
- ◆ learn to interpret preverbal (via Unconscious)
- ◆ tolerate child's concrete projections
- ◆ Find ways to limit non-analytic interventions

How can we understand why it is so difficult to notice the nonverbal?

“...it evokes a world that is best forgotten – a world that, on the one hand, is associated with the yearnings, frustrations and helplessness of infancy, and, on the other, with infantile gratifications that in the course of development have had to be repressed. ...to put themselves in close touch with the nonverbal world is unconsciously experienced as a threat that must be warded off. One of the best ways of doing this is to ignore its existence.”

# Challenges in the Countertransference

- ◆ unconscious conflicts in relation to our internal parents
- ◆ primitive nature of child material & mode of expression



## “OBSERVATION”

All our senses

External vs. Internal reality

## “LISTENING”

All our senses

Ordinary vs. analytic listening

# Analytic therapist's use of vision and hearing

- ◆ visualization ~ freely hovering attention
- ◆ we take in what we see without privileging any specific bodily movement or facial expression
- ◆ evoke in us responses that draw on unconscious visual and auditory memory
- ◆ both are essential parts of the analytic instrument

*Is an analyst in the act of listening what his patient speaks not registering, in a way and at the same time, the tone and the music of the latter's voice, the silence, the language without words of the body, the noises coming from outside of the consulting room or even his own thoughts, corporal sensations and anxieties? When the patient receives the analyst's interventions, isn't he himself perhaps impressed by an infinite amount of subtle non-verbal perceptions 'observed' by him, the patient?*

Effective therapy with children requires the therapist to be attuned to the child's:

- ◆ internal life
- ◆ level of ego functioning
- ◆ psychic reality

Child therapy skills are very useful when working with adults in these special contexts:

- ◆ intense transference regression
- ◆ very immature ego functioning
- ◆ severe character difficulties

# Context of intense transference regression

- ◆ withdrawal

vs.

- ◆ abstinence

# References

1. Bick, E. (1968). Chapter 9: The Experience of the Skin in Early Object Relations. In: *THE TAVISTOCK MODEL: Papers on child development and psychoanalytic training by Martha Harris and Esther Bick (2011: 133-138)*. London: Karnac.
2. Harris, M. (1976) *The Contribution of Observation of Mother-Infant Interaction and Development to the Equipment of a Psychoanalyst or Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist*. In: *THE TAVISTOCK MODEL: Papers on child development and psychoanalytic training by Martha Harris and Esther Bick (2011: 117-132)*. London: Karnac.
3. O'Shaughnessy, E. (1964) The Absent Object. *J. Child Psychother.*, 1:34-43.
4. Ruzcynski, S (1993) Chapter 11 'Thinking About and Working with Couples' in *Psychotherapy with Couples*, Karnac Books, London