"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 Ruszcynski (1993)
Esther Bick [1902-1983]
History of Infant Observation as a Teaching Tool

- Originated at Tavistock Clinic (60 years)
- Observation of infants & caregivers
- Regular time, once-weekly for 1-2 years
- Group discussion of experience
- To train analytic sensibility and skills
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."

Child therapist’s use of vision and hearing

- visualization ~ freely hovering attention
- without privileging any specific bodily movement or facial expression
- responses evoked draw on unconscious visual and auditory memory
- essential parts of the therapeutic instrument
Boundaries of Observer Role

- Monitor internal pressures to step outside role
- Expect to be invited to join in a family role
- Immerse in emotionally intense experience
- Practice self-restraint from advising
- Learn to study countertransference
Challenges in the Countertransference

- unconscious conflicts in relation to our internal parents
- primitive nature of infantile material & mode of expression
Pushes and Pulls

Unconscious & Conscious Forces

- Identification with baby's helplessness
- Concern for mother's overwhelmed state
- Activation of observer's own internal objects
- Learning from enactments
Development of Infant Psyche: Containment
According to Esther Bick (1968)

"...in its most primitive form, the parts of the personality are felt to have no binding force amongst themselves and must therefore be held together...by the skin functioning as a boundary. But this internal function of containing the parts of the self is dependent initially on the introjection of an internal object...capable for fulfilling this function... The need for a containing object... (leads to) a frantic search for an object - a light, a voice, a smell or other sensual object - which can hold the attention...as holding the parts of the personality together. The optimal object is the nipple in the mouth, together with the holding and talking and familiar smelling mother."
Infant Observation, Vignette I

Baby K

- Young mother with strong dependency strivings for husband
- Denial of baby's dependency needs
- Mother's idealization of baby to protect against burden of dependency
- Misattunement with challenges at containment
Infant Observation, Vignette I (continued)

Baby K

- Countertransference clues are hypotheses, not facts
- Observer stressed in resonance with baby's distress
- Observer calms as father arrives to support mother
- Noted growth in capacity and confidence in mother
Infant Observation, Vignette II

Baby Charles

- Rich observational data highlighting infant's turmoil
- Self-harm by baby: scratches on face, discoloration of eye
- Outpouring of rage uncontained by mother
- Non-verbal signs of possible psychic collapse
- Mother-infant relationship at breast
Infant Observation, Vignette II (continued)

Baby Charles

- Unique relations to each breast: "feeding vs. fiddling"
- Hands as if his mouth at the breast
- Baby's hand relates to mother's hand as mouth to breast
- Inspires multiple hypotheses
Uniqueness of mother-baby pairings

- mother's psychology, experience, support, desire for baby
- baby's constitution, temperament
- visual/vocal; kinesthetic/tactile channels
- work at establishing goodness of fit
Group Context of Infant Observation Seminar

- gathering data over time: pattern recognition
- respect for uncertainty without premature foreclosure
- Study of observer and group countertransference
- Investigation towards meaning-making and skill development


