

MOTHER-INFANT OBSERVATIONS: A VIEW INTO THE WORDLESS SOCIAL INSTINCTS THAT FORM THE FOUNDATION OF HUMAN PSYCHODYNAMICS

Mother-infant observations attune the psychotherapist to the nonverbal interactions that shape the child's experience of the world. The origins of our interest in psychoanalytic mother-infant observations can be traced back to clinical work with adults, child analyses, ethology (the study of animal behavior), and theoretical questions about the development of the symbolic function in infancy. More recently, seminars and direct experience in mother-infant observation have been gaining popularity as components of psychoanalytic training. Indeed mother-infant observations are a kind of human ethological investigation that offer us a rare peek into the wordless social instincts that derive their origins in our ancient evolution.

Key words: Mother-infant observation; ethology; social instincts

As a Darwinian, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) saw the human animal as having an anatomy and a psychology that had evolved. His clinical work led him to the discovery that the adult personality was significantly influenced by the conflicts emerging between the infant's basic human instincts, which evolved in our prehistoric past, and the parental efforts at socializing children in their early years. I demonstrate here how mother-infant observations offer a window into our wordless social instincts that form the scaffolding of our human psychodynamics.

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By artificially separating the wordless social instincts from all the language involved in mother-infant communication, I am not denying the flood of language that inundates the infant at birth with a name, an elaborately worded cultural surround, and a speaking mother, but rather emphasizing the mammalian instincts that form the scaffolding of mother-infant interaction along with their bodies. Freud certainly recognized the importance of the body and the instincts and their roles in psychic development but the conflicts between the instincts and society's demands led Freud to emphasize the Oedipus complex, the role of the father, and language in the development of the child. Other psychoanalytic traditions, such as the French school, have also emphasized the importance of language.

The innate social instincts of eye-to-eye greetings, nursing, and cuddling are often accompanied by a mother's playfully lilting conversation and her baby's reciprocal babbling and cooing, but the underlying social instincts and the mother's and baby's bodies are the wordless innate facts of life.

After the development of Freud's clinical technique and his reconstruction of early infantile sexuality based on the analyses of adults, Hermine von Hug-Hellmuth (1871–1924) extended Freud's clinical insights to children by observing them, playing with them, and discussing with them their deepest, most personal concerns. She was the first child psychoanalyst and wrote the first full-length book on the subject in 1913 (*Aus Dem Seelenleben des Kindes. Eine Psychoanalytische Studie - A Study of the Mental Life of the Child*). Anna Freud (1895–1982) and Melanie Klein (1882–1960) came shortly thereafter and, working with different types of children, they arrived at different ideas about child analytic theory and technique. Anna Freud working primarily with neurotic children and Melanie Klein with more disturbed children, disagreed on the technique of child analysis, the nature of transference in child analysis, the timeline of psychosexual development, and more.

One of their central differences involved the Kleinian concept of "unconscious phantasy," which Klein and her colleagues could intuit, interpret, and conclude from the observable behavior of a nonverbal child even in the first weeks or months of infancy. The Anna Freudians could not go along with this proposition. They asserted that the brain and the symbolic function of an infant are not sufficiently developed for maintaining a fantasy (conscious or unconscious), so it would be an error to conclude that a fantasy exists when fantasy cannot be represented by the infant but only intuited by the analyst. The inability to speak, draw representationally, or play symbolically reveal the under-developed nature of the symbolic function in the young infant. This is not to say that there are no instincts, defensive behaviors, mental representations, fantasies, or unconscious phantasies, just that they are not worded, they are not verbally described to others, they are not symbolized within a shared lexical system. They may manifest as nonverbal behavior or somatic reactions. Kleinian interpretations of nonverbal behavior of very young infants are often compelling, and whether there is conscious fantasy or unconscious "phantasy" at the time,

there clearly is a behavior that could be symbolized by the parents and later symbolized by the child. One could even consider the distinct possibility that loving experiences, as well as traumatic ones, registered before the development of language, could be symbolized and described in words retroactively as memories. The symbolized memory of early infancy may not always be historically correct, and other factors might reshape the early infantile experience, to either set it in unobtrusive low relief or traumatic high relief, but the instinctual, somatic, and sensorial experience of pleasures and pains are sure to leave their marks on one's psychic experience.

In 1942 some efforts were made to resolve the "scientific differences" between the Kleinians and the Anna Freudians, which by that time had become political differences in the British Psychoanalytical Society. The society called these efforts "controversial discussions." One of the central issues involved was the psychoanalytic status of unconscious phantasy. A review of the history of these discussions reveals a lot of bad behavior on all sides and an overwhelmingly political agenda that masqueraded as scientific debate while rocket bombs were literally falling on London. Ultimately the controversial discussions broke down with no scientific conclusion but a political one regarding training rights at the British Psycho-Analytic Institute (King & Steiner, 1991).

The debate was just a mess in the midst of war. Nonetheless, I maintain that an interest in resolving the questions about unconscious phantasy and the timeline of psychosexual development persisted and found expression in a great community-wide interest in infant observation. It was not just Anna Freud and Melanie Klein who were doing these observations; it was also D. W. Winnicott, Willi Hoffer, John Bowlby, Michael Fordham, their colleagues, and many more.

Predating the controversial discussions was Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's 1937 Edith Jackson Project, a psychoanalytic day-care center for children of poor working-class mothers. At the day-care center, one- and two-year-olds were fed, bathed, clothed, medically examined, and psychoanalytically observed. Anna Freud was interested in instinctual renunciation—the way children renounce immediate instinctual gratification of the pleasure principle and orient to the reality principle (Burlingham, 1989, pp. 228–229; Molnar, 1992, p. 216). In early February 1937, Anna Freud wrote to Ernest Jones: "[Paul] Federn told me that Frau Klein will come to Vienna in the spring. I hope she will be interested in the new Kinderheim [the Edith Jackson Project]. In any case I would be happy to show it to her" (Steiner, 2000, p. 83).

In 1938 the Nazis marched into Vienna and Sigmund Freud went into exile in London. Melanie Klein had been established in London since 1926. Freud died in September 1939 and the Second World War began that same month. Soon, London became a target of Nazi Germany's rocket bombs, and among the casualties were children orphaned by parents who had been injured or killed in the bombings or parents caught up in the war effort. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1891–1979) swung into action and set up three homes that offered shelter and stability for 191 children throughout the war. They

suffered 593 air raids, including one that left an unexploded 1,000-pound bomb in a next-door neighbor's garden. The nurseries offered a homelike atmosphere, medical treatment, Montessori education, intensive liaison work between the children and their families, and a bomb shelter in which to sleep.

In addition to the basic care and education they provided, Anna Freud and her colleagues observed the children psychoanalytically in order to explore psychological and interpersonal dynamics related to jealousy, attachment, separation, feeding and eating problems, favorite objects, aggression, toileting behavior, sleep disturbances, regression, masturbation, identification, greed, fears, exhibitionism, fantasy, and death. A recurring theme in their investigations was the importance of the mother-child bond and the vicissitudes that bond suffers under wartime conditions (A. Freud, 1973, vol. 3, pp. 4–5, 55, 313, 353–354, 535–536).

John Bowlby (1907–1990), another Darwinian, was medically trained and deeply interested in ethology, the study of animal behavior. His special areas of interest pertained to human mother-infant attachment and loss, maternal deprivation, child development, attachment theory, and ethological and evolutionary concepts. While in medical school he began psychoanalytic training and qualified as a psychoanalyst in 1936. During the Second World War he worked in a child psychiatric unit, was a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Medical Corps, and came into contact with members of the Tavistock Clinic. He treated soldiers suffering from “war neuroses” and children separated from their parents in wartime conditions. He studied 44 delinquent children and found a high incidence of profound parental separation (six months or more) prior to the age of 5. After the war he became deputy director of the Tavistock Clinic in London (John Bowlby, *Wikipedia*).

Bowlby observed that children separated from their mothers, for extended periods of time, during the first five years of life, developed emotional difficulties, depression, intellectual limitations, aggressive behavior, or delinquent behavior. From this and other studies he concluded that humans have evolved an innate need to attach to a primary caretaker and it should be a relationship that is stable over a period of at least two years to avoid debilitating emotional difficulties.

Bowlby's work on attachment and separation is the foundation of Attachment Theory. It is linked to the prior ethological work of Konrad Lorenz pertaining to imprinting and critical periods. Lorenz observed the way newly hatched goslings imprint on (or eagerly follow) their first caretaker during the critical period of early life, whether the object of imprinting is a goose or Lorenz himself. A critical period is a specific period of time when something must happen for the animal's innate social instincts to be properly met to avoid developmental impairment. For Bowlby, the first few years of human life are a “critical period” for the child's attachment to the mother and if it is disrupted, dire emotional consequences result. Bowlby's book *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (1951), addressing issues of maternal deprivation in early life, was of such significance that it was published by the World Health Organization. His work on attachment and the vicissitudes

of early maternal separation gives us a greater understanding of the origin of emotional problems, delinquency, and criminal behavior. It also has obvious policy implications for children separated from their parents when they go to hospitals, orphanages, war nurseries, or when a parent is sent to prison. Bowlby's work has more recently been cited to bolster opposition to the US policy, under President Trump, of separating immigrant children from their families at the borders.

In 1948 Bowlby, as deputy director of the Tavistock Clinic, invited Esther Bick (1902–1983) to head the child psychotherapy training program at the Tavistock Clinic (Bick, 2013). It was there that she introduced infant observation as a component of the psychotherapy training program. Infant observation was intended to “increase the student's understanding of the child's nonverbal behavior and his play, as well as the behavior of the child who neither speaks nor plays” (Bick, 1964, p. 558). Instructions were for the observer to be present but unobtrusive, avoid intervening, and refrain from taking notes. The observer was to observe the mother-infant interaction the way an analyst listens to the analysand, the difference being that much of what was observed was nonverbal. The observer was to look for behavioral patterns and changes in those patterns: “He can see changes in the couple's mutual adaptation and the impressive capacity for growth and development in their relationship, i.e. the flexibility and capacity for using each other and developing which goes on in a satisfactory mother-baby relationship” (p. 563). Observers would describe behavior as free of theory as possible. For example, the mother “held the baby very awkwardly, and seemed tense and anxious at having the baby so close to her body” (p. 563). They described nursing, bathing, soothing, holding, caressing, the mutuality of gazes, the baby's discovery of its hands, tension and tension release, and other behaviors. Focus on theory-free observation, according to Bick, “teaches caution and reliance on consecutive observations for confirmation” (p. 565).

It is not difficult to see the disciplined observation of the infant as a kind of ethological investigation into the nonverbal aspects of the human animal. And when patterns are recognized in behavior, we can also see the temptation to attribute symbolic meanings to these pre-verbal beings. Nonetheless, it is compelling to consider traumatic experiences, in the pre-verbal stages, as possibly shaping the later development of unconscious phantasies.

Anna Freud's student Humberto Nágera (1927–2016), who also studied with Melanie Klein, maintained that Klein “was not fully cognizant that some of the things that she attributed to the cognitive abilities of infants that were a few weeks old are simply not possible at that stage of development. It's not that what she said is wrong. If she moved the timetable upwards, she probably was right, but certainly not at the age of development that she was thinking of” (quoted in Benveniste, 2015, pp. 367–368). Fantasies are limited by the infant's ability to represent subjective experience in words. Thus, it is predominantly a period of somatic experience. The expansion from somatic experience to verbalization has not yet taken place. Perhaps the somatic and behavioral will subsequently be clothed in

words in a way similar to what we might imagine or theorize, or perhaps temperament or factors of resilience will intervene, resulting in unexpected fantasies and surprisingly new behaviors.

In the autumn of 1952, Anna Freud wrote “Some Remarks on Infant Observation” (1968), in which she offered a systematic evaluation of the psychology of the infant in terms of the Freudian theory of drives and the metapsychological agencies of the psyche. Her paper was addressed to first-year medical students in Cleveland, Ohio. These students were the first to receive their training under a newly instituted program. Instead of starting their medical education in a dissecting room with a cadaver, a scalpel, and the smell of formaldehyde, each student was introduced to a pregnant mother during her visit to a prenatal clinic. The student met with the mother several times during her pregnancy, attended the birth, and remained in contact with the mother and child throughout medical training, allowing for the opportunity to observe physical and mental growth.

Psychoanalytic infant observation may have also been a method of confirming or disconfirming some of the positions articulated in the Anna Freud–Melanie Klein controversies: the level of development of the ego in early infancy, the timetable for the appearance of the superego, the elaborateness of the symbolic function in the preverbal infant, the nature of object relations, the capacity to mourn, and so on. In “The Concept of the Rejecting Mother” (1954), Anna Freud wrote, “The facts of infantile sexuality, the Oedipus and castration complexes, the problem of ego and superego development and the role of aggression having been established, psychoanalytic study then turned to the child’s first year of life, i.e., to the beginning of mental functioning and the first emotional contact of the infant with its environment” (1968, vol. 4, p. 589). She was contextualizing infant observation in relation psychoanalytic knowledge and establishing it as the frontier of psychoanalytic investigation.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud made a child observation of his own when he witnessed an 18-month-old boy playing with a wooden spool on the end of a string—throwing it away from him and pulling it back again as he symbolically came to terms with the comings and goings of his mother. This is the well-known game of *fort-da*. It is no secret that this little boy was actually Freud’s oldest grandson. What is less known is that that grandson, W. Ernest Freud, was also the only Freud grandchild to become a psychoanalyst and that his special area of professional interest was infant observation, particularly the psychological aspects of neonatal intensive care. He completed his adult psychoanalytic training at the British Institute in 1953 and child training in 1958, studying closely with his aunt Anna Freud and being analyzed by Willi Hoffer. He was also in seminars with Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and others of that generation. W. Ernest Freud (1914–2008) worked closely with Anna Freud and Humberto Nágera on the infant personality profile and was leader of the infant observation seminar at the Hampstead Clinic in London. From 1969 to 1970, W. Ernest Freud was a coleader

of an infant observation seminar at the Institute of Psychoanalysis with Esther Bick and Bianca Gordon.

W. Ernest Freud wrote numerous articles on infant observation, including “Assessment of Early Infancy: Problems and Considerations” (also known as “The Baby Profile—Part I”) in 1967; “The Baby Profile—Part II” in 1971; and “Notes on Some Psychological Aspects of Neonatal Intensive Care” in 1980.

In 1975 he wrote “Infant Observation: Its Relevance to Psychoanalytic Training,” in which he demonstrated the importance of infant observation as a component of analytic training. He presented the basics of psychoanalytic infant observation, including the close attention to all aspects of the mother-infant dyad and the injunction to avoid giving advice, guidance, and reassurance. The Hampstead Clinic form of psychoanalytic infant observation took place in its well-baby clinic, where mothers were provided with evaluations, advice, guidance, and reassurance independent of the infant observer. It was directed by the analytically trained pediatrician Dr. Josephine Stross. Mothers and babies were initially seen in weekly, and later monthly, visits during the first year and then every other month during the second year. The pediatrician, together with a child therapist and a student in training, interviewed and observed the mother and infant pair (Dyer, 1983, p. 260). Some children were even followed longitudinally over a period of years.

W. Ernest Freud addressed the role of the observer, observation technique, desirable attitudes, basic concepts, defenses, and more. In his summary he posed the question of whether the time had come for a radical reappraisal of psychoanalytic training programs to consider the value of introducing infant observation into the existing curricula. In fact, at that time infant observation had already become part of the curricula at both the Hampstead Clinic and the British Psychoanalytical Society’s Institute of Psychoanalysis, and Ernest was leading seminars on this topic in both programs (W. E. Freud, 1977, *CV*–3). In his article he noted that candidates at most institutes typically learn about infantile life based on analytic reconstruction, following mental processes back to their origins. He then suggested that it would be a valuable addition to provide candidates with infant observation seminars and experience so that instead of learning about infancy from books and adult reconstructions in analysis, they could actually witness ongoing progressive development and become sensitized to the mother-infant dance of psychic regulation, which, of course, has its correlates in analyst-analysand interaction. Beyond all that, infant observation also attunes the analyst to mother-infant tension regulation, non-verbal communication, development of early defensive strategies, temperament, mutual engagement, empathy and disregard, and emotional attunement and misalignment, all of which offer the psychoanalyst in training a deeper understanding of so much that they have already learned in theoretical seminars at a more intellectual level.

W. Ernest Freud also had the unfulfilled hope that someday there would be an infant who would be psychoanalytically observed and then followed up with additional observations throughout the rest of the life cycle to see how observations of infantile

dynamics may or may not be expressed in later years. Interestingly enough, when W. Ernest Freud was born, in 1914, his mother, Freud's daughter Sophie, kept a baby-diary. I had it translated and published it in *The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna, and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis* (2015). I have always hoped that one day an experienced infant observer would study this baby-diary and see what might be made of it, as perhaps the first example of a "psychoanalytic baby observation."

Christine Anzieu-Premmereur's article "Infant Research and Its Application to Psychoanalysis" (2019), is an excellent introduction and historical overview of infant research. She addresses the work of the early pioneers and also more recent contributions from researchers such as Colwyn Trevarthen, Judy Shuttlesworth, Daniel S. Schechter, Björn Salomonsson, Alicia Lieberman, Judith Kestenber, Martha Harris, Marina Altmann De Litvan, Beatrice Beebe, Marie Rose Moro, to name just a few. There is a great deal more that can be said about infant observation, but my main point is that mother-infant observations can provide a view into the wordless innate social instincts that form the foundation of human psychodynamics. Christine Anzieu-Premmereur discusses the reciprocal action between mother and baby and notes that for the baby, "it is the meeting between the instinctual needs and the external object that instantiates the beginning of mental development" (p. 12). Because we have language we tend to think we have overcome our more primitive social instincts, but I maintain that those instincts operate just under the surface of our worded world and that while it might be difficult to see in our day-to-day lives, the largely nonverbal interaction of mother and infant gives us a view into the social instincts that support the development of the individual and the community.

To make this point I offer a few mother-infant observation vignettes. They are not detailed micro-observations but, rather, brief accounts that demonstrate typical nonverbal dynamics of mother-infant interaction. I am not a trained infant observer, and these are not my observations, but because of this, they make my point all the better.

Gloria gave birth to little Clint in early March. He was not very active during his first five weeks of life and was described as a small blob with a squinting face and tiny hands that grasped tightly onto his mother. Soon thereafter he started looking around "with intelligent focused eyes" and moving his arms all about. (Observation 1)

Clint's older sister, Gigi, began watching her little brother carefully and taking a special interest in him. At seven weeks Gloria would push Gigi's hand away when she tried to touch her little brother. So, Gigi began to caress her mother and then surreptitiously touch Clint's hand and fondle his fingers. In time Gloria permitted Gigi to touch Clint. Gloria would sit down with Clint and nibble at his neck while Gigi stroked his back. Once when Gigi nibbled his fingers, Clint softly whimpered and Gloria pushed her away and cuddled her infant close to her. Gigi pouted, twisted her arms behind her head, and rocked a bit. But after a short time, she reached out again to gently touch her little brother. (Observation 2)

When Clint was ten weeks old, his mother was observed lying on her back, holding Clint above her with one hand and tickling him all over with the other as he smiled in delight. His sister, Gigi, looked on and occasionally reached out to touch her little brother. (Observation 3)

When her brother was 13 weeks old, Gigi was successful in pulling him away from their mother and cuddling him on her own belly. But when Clint then reached out to his mother and vocalized some distress, Gloria quickly picked him up, kissed his head, and brought him to her breast. Clint suckled a little and then looked at his sister, whose hands were placed behind her head with her elbows in the air. Ten minutes later Clint was back in Gigi's arms. A short while later Clint again whimpered in distress, was picked up by his mother, and brought back to the breast. (Observation 4)

When he advanced to broader locomotion, he grew restless to get moving. On all fours he could not take more than two steps before collapsing, crying, being scooped up by his mother, and drawn to her breast. He'd then settle down and soon try again. (Observation 5)

As Clint continued to grow, the theme of attachment and separation was naturally elaborated as his social world expanded from his sister, to brothers, and other family members. Gloria had been a highly successful mother, raising several competent children before Clint came along. But what marked this mother-son relation was the fact that Gloria was by now an older mother and overly solicitous with her fretful son. Their mutual involvement eventually led to both son and mother becoming especially anxious with any separation, followed by warm reunions. Was Clint exceptionally anxious and in need of an overly attentive mother, or was his mother too old and tired to facilitate the needed separation and limit setting? It was clear that this was a mother-son dance of mutuality, but in what direction was it going?

Clint had just been weaned when Gloria became pregnant yet again. Clint regressed into "a real baby stage," clinging to his mother. If she moved away from him a bit, he would whimper and want to be carried by her. Once when she walked without holding him to her breast, he had a terrible temper tantrum. And if she caressed anyone else, he would become frightfully jealous, whimper, and push himself between the two. (Observation 6)

When Gloria's new daughter, Sarah, was born, Clint became jealous. He would whimper and draw his mother's hands away from his newborn little sister. (Observation 7)

Gloria was a warm and sensitive mother, but because she was an older mother she could not support or promote Clint's independence. As he grew older, she continued to give in to his demands to be held by her, as if he were an infant, and to sleep with her at night, even when he was 8 ½ years old. (Observation 8)

These mother-infant observations took place at a site where intergenerational observations became possible. When Clint's older sister, Gigi, entered her adolescence, she became very sexually active. And when she had a son of her own, she was as competent at motherhood as her own mother, Gloria, had been with her. She was relaxed, tolerant,

affectionate, and playful. Interestingly enough, when Gigi's son, Fred, was just a few weeks old, Gigi was observed lying on her back, holding Fred above her with one hand and tickling him with the other hand, just as she'd seen her mother do with Clint. Gigi had tried to do this with her little brother Clint as well, but she was too small at the time to do it effectively. Now she performed it to perfection. (Observation 9)

When weaned, Fred became depressed and sought assurances from his mother. Gigi also seemed to miss the smooth, efficient coordination of their nursing relation and felt disrupted by the new situation, but she held the line and facilitated the needed separation. And then, while Fred was still depressed over the new weaning situation, Gigi began dating again. Fred met each of her suitors with whimpering and screaming and even resorted to trying to push them out. Nonetheless, with a competent mother and supportive family relations, including strong male role models, Fred grew to become self-confident and assertive with his peers. (Observation 10)

Pamela was a mother of a different sort. She was a loner without close female companions. Around males she was "typically uneasy and tense." As a mother she was cold, intolerant, brusque, and rarely played with her infants. Her first daughter, Joanie, was anxious, clingy, and fearful of her mother leaving her behind. Following weaning, Joanie became unusually depressed. When she entered adolescence, she anxiously approached young suitors but ran away when they showed any interest. With her first child, Joanie appeared surprisingly attentive and tolerant, far more than her own mother had been with her. She carefully supported her baby while walking and appeared to be a very considerate mother. That said, she didn't have the "maternal proficiency and concern" shown by other mothers, like Gigi, described earlier. And yet in some ways Joanie's mothering reflected the way in which she had been handled as an infant. She at times had difficulty cradling her baby in her lap and he would often slide off. Only then would Joanie gather him up and place him back in her lap, and then he would slide down again a little later. (Observation 11)

Embedded in these fairly standard mother-infant vignettes we find the vicissitudes of attachment, the dance of mutuality, the struggles for separation, and, not insignificantly, the intergenerational transmission of anxiety, emotional disregard, care, playfulness, and so on.

In these few short vignettes we are reminded of the brilliant work described by Selma Fraiberg (1918–1981) and her colleagues in their classic article "Ghosts in the Nursery" (1975). This article is a jewel in psychoanalytic literature, as it brings the theories of infantile sexuality, object relations, and the repetition compulsion into contact with the gutsy realities of community mental health. It demonstrates sensitive clinical interventions with young mothers in desperate conflict with their new roles. The clinicians involved sensitively accompany these young women through the early stages of motherhood. They help in practical matters and, along the way, demonstrate how this new role in relation to their infant is unconsciously awakening conflicts with roots in their own childhoods. In

other words, a mother's negative attitude toward her infant may reflect the young mother's own experiences of her mother's relation to her when she was an infant. In making conscious the old traumas, the old conflicts, and the old hurts, these young mothers find renewed strength to mother their infants doing everything they liked that their own mothers did with them and doing things differently when it came to all the things they did not like about the way they were raised.

In the early mother-infant observations, we get a chance to see interactions that are to a great extent nonverbal and therefore give us a privileged view into our social instincts that may well have preexisted our evolution as *Homo sapiens*. They may well have also preexisted the development of our language and our psychodynamics. What I mean by this is that our social instincts, embedded in our animal evolution, form a scaffolding upon which we now hang words. Social instincts clothed in language are psychodynamics. But we often cannot see the social instincts so clearly because of how unique languages and cultures obscure them. In mother-infant observations we get a peek into the social instincts before the clothes go on, that is, before the language and culture goes on and elaborates the psychodynamics of attachment, separation, orality, anality, Oedipality, genitality, friendship, and love.

As we walk into the nonverbal world of mother-infant relations, we can see relationship dynamics expressed in bodily engagement. Esther Bick warns us not to project our fantasies into the behavior of the infant but to simply describe the behavior. We observe in a disciplined manner so as not to project our fantasies—or, worse yet, our theories—into the nonverbal behaviors. But this discipline need not stop us from speculating as to how these nonverbal behaviors and interactions might be retroactively organized (symbolized) into experience after the symbolic function becomes further developed. We can wonder about how the somatic becomes reconfigured as verbal symbols and carried forth into the life of the developing individual.

When we speak of the somatic, we often imagine the static body and its erogenous zones or perhaps the body functioning in relation to all of its physiological needs. Some of those needs are not independent of others, however, so the somatic body and the physiologic body need to be considered along with the innate social instincts, such as bonding, attachment, nursing, eye-to-eye greeting, dominance and submission posturing, aggression, copulation, and so on. But after early infancy where can we find our naked social instincts? Where can we find our social instincts unobscured by language?

Now, I have a confession to make. The mother-infant observations of Gloria and Clint, Gigi and Fred, Pamela and Joanie, and Joanie and her baby are all mother-infant observations of chimpanzees, made by Jane Goodall and her team at the Gombe Stream Research Center in Tanzania. Chimpanzees and humans share a common ancestor that lived 6 million years ago. Chimpanzees have evolved very slowly, and because of this, modern chimpanzees bear a striking resemblance to their 6-million-year-old ancestors. But from those chimpanzee-like apes, 6 million years ago, there also emerged a fast-evolving

line of chimpanzee cousins called the *hominin* line from which *Homo sapiens* descended. We share almost 99 percent of our DNA with chimpanzees, so it is not surprising that we would also share genetically encoded social instincts such as mother-infant bonding, attachment, weaning and separation dynamics, dominance and submission postures, rivalries, jealousies, alliance building, play, friendship, cooperation, territoriality, alpha male dynamics, and more. While chimpanzees may vocalize during such social encounters, the social instincts themselves, which are common to many other mammals, are essentially wordless.

Fifty thousand years ago the human brain, which had been evolving rapidly for 6 million years, underwent a remarkable development of its symbolic function that transformed the human animal into a painter, a sculptor, and a toolmaker with unprecedented sophistication. It also permitted the human animal to become a consciously spiritual being, performing funerary rituals, engaging in ritual cannibalism, worshiping amulets, and graphically representing the spirits of animals. Upon this spiritual foundation came the developments of ritual sacrifice, planting and harvesting festivals, and the new year festivals of the urban revolution. Underneath all of this resides the scaffolding of our human psychodynamics comprised of our primate social instincts, even the Oedipus complex.

Yes, I know that Freud had a “thing” about his mother, that the Oedipus complex was presented in a phallogentric framework, and that in the twenty-first century many analysts feel they have gone beyond Oedipus to the point of throwing the concept on the trash heap of silly ideas from the past. But I beg to differ. When we learn to think in metaphor, it is easy to recognize the Oedipus complex in child behavior, the dynamics of socialization, in self-reflection, clinical material, mythology, contemporary literature, politics, anthropology, and more. So, where do we find the Oedipus Complex in primate social instincts? The answer is in the innate social instinct of “copulation interference”. When a female chimpanzee copulates with a male, her children will climb onto her back and try to push the male off of her. The male, interestingly enough, is generally good natured about the little intruder and carries on with his intention implicitly recognizing the generational difference. Without a verbal system to elaborate this innate social instinct, we call it copulation interference, but when this primate social instinct is clothed in language, it becomes an Oedipus complex defining the social implications of gender and generational difference, expanding psychological space, shaping the superego, and elaborating the world in language and human culture.

In 2008 I enlisted the assistance of my wife, Adriana Prengler, FIPA, in a small “research project”. We were living in Venezuela at that time. We approached parents, sunbathing with their young children at a Caribbean beach club, and asked their cooperation in a little study. (Incidentally, while I would never consider conducting such a “research project” so informally on a beach in North America, it’s just a fact that things in the tropics are done differently and we were met with good natured openness and curiosity

by everyone we approached.) We asked the name of their young child, age, gender, and the following question: “What is the reaction of your child when he/she sees you and your spouse hugging and/or kissing?” We collected data on 30 children. Eighteen of the children intervened between the parents, and 9 of those actually pushed out one of the parents. This is a phenomenon that also becomes rather apparent in family photos with small children when parents stand “too close” to one another!

With all of the current interest in creating links between psychoanalysis and other scientific disciplines, isn't it time to revisit the long-neglected relationship between psychoanalysis and primatology? And isn't it time for an interdisciplinary conference comparing mother-infant observations of humans with those of chimpanzees? Are there any differences? How does language make a difference?

Early in her career Jane Goodall was criticized for recognizing what were thought to be human qualities in the behavior of chimpanzees. I am now ready to take my lumps for recognizing chimpanzee social instincts in the behavior of humans.

Mother-Infant Observation References

Observation 1 – Peterson, D. (2006). *Jane Goodall: The woman who redefined man*. p. 344.

Observation 2 – Goodall, J. (1988). *In the shadow of man*. p. 102.

Observation 3 – Goodall, J. (1988). *In the shadow of man*. p. 101.

Observation 4 – Goodall, J. (1988). *In the shadow of man*. p. 104.

Observation 5 – Peterson, D. (2006). *Jane Goodall: The woman who redefined man*. p. 349.

Observation 6 – Peterson, D. (2006). *Jane Goodall: The woman who redefined man*. p. 442.

Observation 7 – Peterson, D. (2006). *Jane Goodall: The woman who redefined man*. p. 495.

Observation 8 – Goodall, J. (1986). *The chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of behavior*. p. 66.

Observation 9 – Goodall, J. (1990). *Through a window: My thirty years with the chimpanzees of Gombe*. p. 38–39.

Observation 10 – Goodall, J. (1990). *Through a window: My thirty years with the chimpanzees of Gombe*. pp. 112–114.

Observation 11 – Goodall, J. (1990). *Through a window: My thirty years with the chimpanzees of Gombe*. pp. 33–40; quote from page 39.

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