

On Containing Multiple Injuries and Loss in an Extended, Alternative Family

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In collaboration with DR Karyne Messina in its original English version.

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The seminar we led was part of a 2 year training program on "Observational Studies Program: "Seeing the unseen in Clinical Practice" at the Washington School of Psychiatry¹ in Washington DC, U.S.A.

The Method we use in this program is the one developed by Esther Bick, in London at the Tavistock Clinic, England since 1947.²

Throughout this method of weekly observations, we pay attention to the development of patterns in the making between the infant and his/her environment during the developmental process³.

We are very grateful to one of our graduates, Sandra Delgado, a psychologist from Brazil, for giving us generous permission to use her wonderful observations. We chose

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¹ Founded in 1936 by a group led by Harry Stack Sullivan, the Washington School of Psychiatry has a history of teaching and interdisciplinary research , training in psychodynamic theory , psychoanalysis, social and biological sciences , and the study of the contribution of culture to development the human mind.

² Esther Bick this method of Infant Observation at the Tavistock Clinic, London 1947. DR John Bowlby was in charge of the Child Psychiatry Department at the Tavistock and he asked her to organize a child psychotherapy-training program that then included a two year seminar on Infant Observation.

For further information, it is recommended the paper below.

Esther Bick, 1964: "Notes of Infant observation in Psychoanalytic Training" International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol.45, p. 558. y Margaret Rustin: "Closely Observed Infants" (1989).

³ This is an element of utmost importance for clinical work. Small details add up and repeating in a very subtle way that only the eye of a good observer can register

this particular observation because unlike any others that we supervised over the past years, it had a different quality that we found to be unique.

She observed Adam, an infant who entered this world with many people eager to greet him. Although his family constellation was different and in some way unusual, his conception was very well planned by his two lesbian mothers, his biologic, gay father and his partner; all of whom were very good friends. Consequently, Adam had four parents and eight grandparents, as well as many other relatives. All of them wanted to be part of his "little" life. In addition, Sandra, our student-observer, felt included and welcomed in this alternative, extended family from the very beginning.

Early on we noticed how the dynamic of this family was marked by an idea of total inclusiveness. Everybody had to be a part of what was going on with this infant, everybody had to have a role in the family, and nobody ever seemed to be left out. As seminar leaders we found this phenomenon to be quite intriguing and curious. The easy-going and welcoming nature of everyone was also quite seductive.

We wondered about the downside, could they always be so happy and carefree? There seemed to be little conflict. For example, Emma the biologic mother tried very hard to allow Susan, her partner, to have a fair share of Adam's feeding, sometimes pumping milk even when she was at home. She did this, to allow Susan to feed and hold the baby very close to "her heart". The same welcoming spirit seemed to be present in the fathers' home as well where Adam visited one full day and night each week from birth. Also, as part of this extended family there were two cats owned by the mothers and two dogs owned by the fathers. These animals were also very well cared for by everybody.

They all seemed to be one, big happy family which appeared to be an extension of their amicable relationship as fellow band members in a group conducted by Tom. This spirit of friendship and cooperation appeared to continue even after Tom gave up his legal rights as a parent of Adam in order to make it possible for Susan to adopt him. This had been agreed and planned before Adam was born. Thinking about this decision the group felt that they were following the DC law of parental rights but that deep down this would never affect the deep relationship that the fathers had with Adam. Some of the students felt suspicious, but the sense of basic trust and inclusiveness neutralized that reaction. As a group we decided to wait before making any assumptions⁴. We hope to convey this early sense of cooperation and easiness in excerpts from the observations that follow:

⁴ Esther Bick and Martha Harris insisted to be very open minded and non critical during the observations allowing to be taken by surprise by what comes before our eyes. These ideas were developed by Wilfred Bion of receiving the

Adam at 3 weeks old:

Emma and Susan lived in a comfortable townhouse in Washington. The observer arrived 5 minutes early; both mothers greeted her very warmly. Emma let her in, and introduced her to Susan and Adam. He was wearing an outfit with a giraffe pattern. He was lying on Susan's legs and seemed a little sleepy; his eyes were not completely closed yet. Emma commented that she had heard of our training program through Adam's father. There was not much questioning about the observer; however, they did ask her about her country of origin due to her accent. This observation was very detailed in terms of facts since both mothers shared a lot of information about the pregnancy with Sandra. They also said Tom was asked to come to the hospital as soon as Adam was born. During that visit, our student observed: "As soon as I sat on the sofa, Jerry (the oldest cat who was very much a part of the family), came to my side. He licked my hand and caressed my arm with his head. I caressed his hair and body. Emma took Adam softly and put him in a Baby Bjorn facing her, brought me a glass of water and sat in an armchair beside the sofa. I could only see the back of Adam's head but I noted he was gazing at Emma. I then saw some new pictures of Adam on the table, and asked Emma if I could take a look. She agreed. There were several pictures of Adam. In some he was wearing a one-piece outfit that was a pumpkin costume for Halloween. They chatted about other pictures of the baby as well. Emma also mentioned that Adam was already able to hold his head up for a while, and said he was starting to roll over as well, especially when he was in the crib on his belly. Emma brought Adam's mat and placed it on the floor. She detached her shoulder straps so she could take Adam out of the carrier in front of her chest. Emma then laid Adam down on his belly, saying again that he didn't like that position and would roll over. Sandra thought to herself and commented later, "It seemed to me that his mothers wanted to share with me all of his progress." She continued, "A little later in the same observation, Adam began to cry. Emma picked him up and hugged him, rubbed his back and spoke to him in a very soothing manner. He stopped crying. Then she stood him up on her legs facing her, moving his back slightly from front to back. She caressed his chin and he smiled. She asked me if I wanted to hold him, and I agreed. I laid Adam on my

patient in each analytic session "Without memory or desire "allowing ourselves to be taken by surprised by the patient's communication on each "new encounter".

legs, holding his back with my hands; he seemed to be very relaxed and soft. He held his head up and gazed at me. I smiled". Sandra reported some anxiety about holding the baby, since she knew the boundaries of the observer⁵. However, it was hard for her not to be included in this way. As the observation continued, Sandra learned on that day that Susan planned to quit her job to be at home with Adam full-time which was very pleasing to her. During this entire observation, Sandra felt curious and connected to Emma, Susan and Adam. She also wondered whether the group "inclusiveness" was somehow "imposed" on her as well as everyone else in Adam's life. We thought that there was an intense desire to erase differences, and a way to deny the biological differences in this family. A few minutes before the end of the observation, Tom arrived and welcomed Sandra into "the family".

At the end of the observation Sandra asked Emma whether they felt comfortable with her coming every week for 2 years and Emma told her that she appreciated having someone visit. Time and day were then settled. After leaving Sandra said she felt that it was an intense and enriching experience for her to be a welcomed part of Adam's life. At that point, the pressure to belong seemed quite intense although it also seemed quite seductive.

After hearing about this first observation, as seminar leaders we felt inexperienced in observing this kind of family and tried very hard to help the group stay away from theorizing about object constellation and identifications, but rather tried to help them think about this observation with curiosity and open-minded interest as we usually do in any observation. However, one of the things that was most striking to us was the special effort made by the mothers, as well as the fathers, to have everyone in Adam's life participate in his upbringing while denying differences which seemed to have a manic quality. We thought that this might have been a defense against mourning and psychic pain. It was as if the motto was: "We are all the same; all important to Adam and no matter what, this is the way it is going to be for Adam as his life unfolds which will include his eight grandparents, their friends and even Sandra." They also seemed to make a special effort for him to have all types of experiences with many people, e.g., by the time Adam was only 6 months old, the mothers had traveled with him to New York City, Miami and Pennsylvania to visit his various sets of grandparents.

We all wondered whether the inclusiveness was in some way related to the possibility that they as lesbian women and gay men had been excluded from various aspects of

⁵ During the observations, it is important not having an active behavior and take care of the frame in the same way one keeps in mind in analytic clinical work. In this case, the observer did not do any acting out because she retained her ability to reflect on what she was doing and open to explore her anxieties with the seminar.

society. Were they overcompensating because they had not been included easily in their own environments due to their sexual orientation? We also wondered how this need to include everyone would affect Adam in his attempt to integrate all of these characters in his mental apparatus. Since there is almost no bibliography written about observations done in families like Adam's, we felt a little lonely and somehow under pressure to be "creative". We decided to strictly follow the Esther Bick⁶ method and tried to process what was actually observed and presented to us by Sandra, as we would do with any Infant Observation.

During this time, it was not easy for us as seminar leaders to harness our impulses to theorize and make quick hypotheses about what was a very new situation for all of us. At other times we struggled with our inability to understand, and hold our "own birth" of this new experience with our seminar group. Another important fact was that this group was part of the launching of a very long well-prepared Training Program. Not only was this our "Birth" in this new family constellation but it was also the "Birth" of our new infant observation program.⁷

Adam at six months old:

Sandra arrived at the mothers's house. She observed: "When I got to their home, a man opened the door; he was holding Adam in his right arm. I greeted Adam and him, but I was not sure who he was, at that moment (she had not started observing at the fathers' house yet)." She continued, "He didn't ask me any questions, and therefore I assumed he knew why I was there. Adam smiled at me. As soon as I got into the house I realized that the man was Tom, one of Adam's fathers, even though he looked very different compared to when I saw him before. He used to have a mustache and a goatee, and now his face was clean-shaven. I did not mention anything. We went to the kitchen, and Susan greeted me. The foursome was together in the moms' home to play music together. Tom sat in front of the kitchen balcony; he sat Adam on his lap with Adam facing him. Tom was drinking a glass of water. Adam observed

⁶ The seminar leaders should help the group to work through the numerous projections that arise as the observer is presenting an observation. The group is then in a position to help the observer to contain her own anxieties usually very painful and primitives.

⁷ Professionals trained in the Esther Bick/Tavistock method in London and with alumni in the USA in the City of Washington in 2004 founded this program. It became the first Infant Observation Program in the USA.

him intently, and touched his father's face with both hands with great pleasure and curiosity. When Tom left the glass on the balcony, Adam grabbed it with both hands, and brought it to his mouth, in the same way his father did. Even though he didn't tilt the glass to drink the water, I thought it was amazing how he was imitating his father. Emma then came into the kitchen. She was upstairs, and apparently she was pumping a bottle of milk (she was still breastfeeding Adam by expressing milk to give to Susan while she was at work). However, this time she was home and yet brought a bottle with her. She greeted me and gave the bottle to Susan, but to my surprise she put it in the refrigerator. Emma sat at the piano and I sat on the sofa. Adam touched his father's face looking at him in the eye, with both hands, and Tom smiled at him. It felt like an intense moment of "discovery". This visit continued in much the same way, with all participants sharing their thoughts associated with this healthy baby. At the end of the visit Sandra reported that they all seemed to be proud of Adam's development. She painted a picture, so to speak, in our seminar group of a boy growing up in an alternative family where he was cared for and loved very much by everyone involved in his life.

During the group discussion there was a feeling that Adam was searching and recognizing something different in Tom, his biologic father. It was as if beyond the family pressure to seek equality for everyone in their search for a "piece" of this baby, Adam's himself was searching in his father's eyes for a deeper way of relatedness, almost as if he were trying to take in his whole self. Several months went on and we discussed in the group how Adam was integrating and differentiating his parents. Each of them had a distinct way to hold him, touch him and hold him in mind.

When Adam was 13 months and 2 weeks Emma asked Sandra about her trip to her native country. Sandra mentioned a few places she visited. Emma then said she got some news when Sandra had been away. She continued while making a sad face with a slight smile saying, "You might not like the news." Eager for the new information, Sandra said, "Well, tell me". Emma then revealed the startling development: She said has been searching for a new job, and had just accepted an offer for another position, in Hawaii. "Hawaii?" Sandra asked, as if she did not understand. From that point on, the seminar group thought Adam's life would surely change. Sandra's sense of his well-being changed as well. The dad's feelings of sadness and anger, with which our group members identified, soon became apparent as our inner worlds were jolted. The serene and tranquil life of Adam we felt all along would never be the same. As seminars leaders we had a lot with which to contend. Moving from a state of initial paralysis, our job of containment became much more intense and difficult as we dealt with so many multiple losses. It felt to some as

if a well-tended and beautiful flower had been yanked from the ground without thought or care. Moreover, what was it like for this wonderful child, how was he managing? What words would he have used if he could have spoken? Were there warning signs such as Susan's embarrassing revelation in Observation 46 that they had given the cats away? The group was quite shocked, and this was the beginning of some experience of change that neither the group nor the observer could articulate in words.

Following Bion's⁸ concept on the relationship between Container-Contained, the seminar leaders had the role to contain the group and help to recover a good mind set to contain the observer. This is fundamental in Infant as well as Young Child observations.

This is the way to work through massive identifications with parents and Baby when there is a sense that a family breakdown can easily occur.

As we began helping our seminar group recover from this very difficult experience, Sandra shared more, moving observations.

We would like to share just one vignette from an observation before the mothers left the area when Sandra saw before her eyes the "real ending" of Adam's life as it was till that time. As she was walking during Christmas week from her car to the mothers' home she could see how all the houses in the neighborhood were lit with beautiful colored lights for the holidays; all houses except Adam's house. As she approached his home from the distance she saw a huge sign saying "Sold".

After Emma, Susan and Adam moved to Hawaii they agreed to leave Adam for a period in Washington a few times a year. Sandra agreed with the fathers to do a follow up and observe Adam at their home. Tom called her and this vignette is four months after their departure.

At that time, Sandra encounters a very different 19-month-old toddler. He was staying with his fathers for a month. Both of them were struggling with his unhappiness, sleeping problems and difficulties in feeding.

During that visit, every time the fathers were transitioning from one activity to another, Adam looked very sternly into Sandra's eyes. We thought the fathers felt a bit uncomfortable for Sandra to witness Adam's discomfort. They even told her that it would be better if she did not stay when they put him to sleep, since it was becoming quite hard for them.

⁸ The concept of relationship container-contained is based on the ideas of Containment of Wilfred Bion. "Learning from Experience". (Learning from Experience) Chapter 27 page 90-94.

During the group discussion, Sandra felt that Adam was asking her for words. How could he name his overwhelming feelings of confusion and unhappiness? She called that observation "Missing Words". We never knew what happened to Adam, but were very pained by what we felt in the group which was a sense of something indigestible: An experience that felt full of namelessness.

Final Comments

As we went along with Adam's observations, we made some connections with our clinical work. The observer felt protective of Adam's family dynamic and wanted very badly to protect him from that kind of dramatic and painful change.

As clinicians sometimes, it is very hard to harness our desire to rescue the baby parts in our patients and become "better mothers than the original one" instead of helping them to find their own truth.

In Adam's observation, Sandra sometimes felt angry with the mothers and identified with the helplessness of Adam and his fathers. We were all sad about the child's predicament and worked very hard with the observer to help her detoxify from her mental bombardment.

This was a new "Birth" for us and perhaps part of what we want to convey is that we have not developed any hypotheses but rather have questions about this observation. Was this alternate lifestyle really that different than a more typical extended family?

What about the multiple losses for Adam? Were there warning signs? What was the effect on Adam as he was abruptly moved from what appeared to be a wonderful family constellation to a very new one for him? In this case there were also no words told. Losses occur in life but we all felt that in Adam's case, there was a very different mental constellation. Without any doubt the observation in alternative families is different, but how different? This is an open-ended theme that we will definitively pursue.