

Growing Points and the Role of Observation

Talk given in Paris in November 2010 at a conference in honour of Martha Harris

The title of this talk is taken from a paper of my mother's published in 1982 – her last paper I believe (“Growing points in psychoanalysis inspired by the work of Melanie Klein”). Here she reflects on the influence of Mrs Klein and selects what she considers to be genuine subsequent “growing points” in the history of psychoanalysis itself; Bion would call these points of “catastrophic change”.

What is a growing point? To pursue her botanical metaphor, a growing point is a place where all the essential genetic information for development is concentrated, ready to sprout or branch outward. It is a point at which different influences converge, meet, and create another shoot (a new idea or “baby”), and there is of course an implication of inevitable “growing pains”. She uses the term “inspired by”, which always implies a sense of responding to a life-force beyond any single person's control – “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower” as Dylan Thomas expresses it (*Fern Hill*). The historical growing points since Klein that she lists in her paper are very few: firstly, Bion's idea of the thinking breast that operates through normal projective identification; secondly, Mrs Bick's of normal unintegration and integration; thirdly Meltzer's distinction between three- and two-dimensionality. These are all concepts that enhance our capacity to observe the complexity of normal development, marking the seismic shift in psychoanalytic thinking from its earlier preoccupation with psychopathology and diagnosis.

I believe that Martha Harris's method of teaching psychoanalytic observation by means of a marriage between Bick and Bion is itself a growing point in psychoanalysis, perhaps one that is not yet fully developed. She tied Bion's imaginative conjectures about the internal group and the infant in all of us with Bick's method of observing the mother-infant relationship. My mother was interested in infants not because she doted on babies, but because infants tell us about ourselves, by activating our core identifications and our capacity to learn from experience, in a way that avoids the confines of verbal communication. The prototypal container-contained link between mother and baby is overseen by what Bion calls a “third eye” (Bion 2005, pp. 20, 23). The third, overseeing eye, entails a sense of being observed by a non-persecutory object. In infant observation, Martha Harris writes, a “reliable watching person” helps the mother “recover her ruptured sense of identity but with additional space to accommodate the child” (1982, p. 85). In other words, the presence of an “observer” is therapeutic in a particular way: not through understanding, but rather, through spatial extension. The new infant for whom

space is being found in the world is a living embodiment of the new idea that Bion talks about as requiring space in our minds, and that he emphasizes is accompanied by turbulence and discomfort (growing pains) as well as wonder and surprise.

All the great minds in psychoanalysis emphasize the strenuous nature of observation and the psychic discipline involved. They recognise the distinction between explanation and exploration in the psychoanalytic model of the mind. Observation activates our own transference to internal objects; it stimulates a latent turbulence and initiates the growing-point. It is an indication of interest, and therefore of hope – possibly the most essential requirement for any therapeutic outcome. My mother also made use in her seminars of the fact that a focus on observation can afford relief from competition, “anxiety-ridden interpretation” and “therapeutic zeal”, as well as other “impediments”, including that caricature of observation the “voyeuristic eye” that seeks only to find “psychopathology in everything” (1977, p. 10). In addition, she saw that the threesome of baby, mother and observer replicated the psychic vertices of the analytic situation – in the consulting room and indeed other fields of self-analysis. Like the three actors in a Greek drama, they can tell any human story. The observing aspect of the mind links the other protagonists in a fertile conjunction; they are all necessary ingredients in the nodal growth-point. Learning to observe truly, and to tolerate what we see, is what enables the growth of container-contained to occur.

My mother saw infant observation (as established by Mrs Bick) as an ideal opportunity for the type of educational experience in which self-observation plays a crucial role. Adding this to Bion’s theories about groups, she expanded her idea of an educational experience into other contexts, such as the “work discussion group”, using Bick, but in a way that Bick herself was not in a position to do. In her model of psychic education, nobody is merely learning “about” another person – whether adult, infant, family member, or school pupils; they are learning through self-observation. For as Bion points out, we can only see anything at all by virtue of the “marks” which the phenomenon makes on oneself. My mother was constantly aware that it is oneself one is observing and analysing, all the time, whatever the context, alone or in a group. In all the areas in which psychoanalytic observation plays a part, she stressed not theory but “self-scrutiny”.

Where Bion generally speaks of observation as the key to the idea that “lies beyond” (the “O” or essence of an emotional situation), my mother (like Mrs Bick) stresses the quality of individuality that lies at the heart or core of a situation. These two ways of elaborating the purpose of observation are the same thing, but with a variation in emphasis. Where Bion’s theme is that observation leads us to an abstract, untranslatable Idea (“O”), my mother aims to pinpoint the individuality of the baby (or analysand, or mother-baby couple) . So the aim of observation appears different, but in fact, I think it is the same. Discovering the quality of individuality is the same as finding the abstract “O” behind an educational relationship, the sort that results in “becoming” oneself. My mother focussed on the particular in order to define something more abstract and universal – the principle of growth itself. Her students always stress her astonishing focus on the tiny attributes that indicate individuality – this child and no other: a search to

perceive the vital growing point that might lie beyond or buried in the sensuous present. As Bion says, we are interested in the psychic equivalent of the physician's "see, hear, touch, smell" (1970, p. 7). Or as Shakespeare put it, "Love sees not with the eyes but with the mind". In their joint search to discover the infant's individuality, both mother and observer are concerned with noticing tiny manifestations of the principle of growth, and therefore, the potential to expand their own horizons of knowledge.

And this individuality can only be captured, by a process of defining and describing at the same time. For as Meltzer puts it, "Which comes first, the seeing or the describing?" (1981, p. 504); or Bick: the observer "finds that he chooses a particular word because observing and thinking are almost inseparable" (1964, p. 112). My mother stressed the importance of writing not because she wanted to turn psychotherapists into creative writers, but because she believed in the potential of writing, however awkward, to be a truthful discipline for the recording of observations. She saw it not as a means of self-publication or display but as a slow and sometimes painful tool for enhancing self-observation, from which it may acquire a value for others.

In her paper "Some notes on maternal containment and good-enough mothering" (1975a), she takes Winnicott's formulation of the "good enough mother" and considers how to "add depth" to this valuable but quantitative concept. She suggests Mrs Bick's method of detailed observation of the "interaction between individual mothers and infants may help us to formulate better the quality that underlies this quantitative differentiation" (p. 140). She saw the mother-baby relationship as a complex interaction of container and contained, not simply one in which the mother provides "enough" containment for the baby's anxieties. In "Growing points" she writes:

When referring to the epistemophilic instinct, Mrs Klein laid emphasis on the innate urge of the child to learn about the world. Bion gave another slant to this: he regarded it as the basic need to know the truth about oneself, which is fostered by a mother who is able to discard preconceived theories about children, who is able to be continent and cognisant of her own infantile emotions and to respond to the projections and communications of her own particular infant in its particular context. (1982, pp. 69-70)

There are many ways in which a mother can be "good enough" and it is their distinctness which is interesting, not just the judgement – correct in its way – that to be good enough is better than to be perfect. The good-enough mother is both "continent and cognisant" of her own infantile emotions – that is, she goes beyond a containing function to one of self-observation and self-knowledge. This special type of coming-to-knowledge (which is not necessarily conscious or verbalized) is inseparable from a recognition of the uniqueness of the baby and of her own response to its communications. Beyond and behind the idea of "good enough" is the goal of being real, genuine – a true network of growing points in psychic reality for all concerned.

One of my mother's favourite concepts was "realism". It held a wealth of significance for her. Realism means seeing qualitatively not quantitatively: neither compromising nor sitting in judgement. To be in touch with reality is growth-promoting, and it is

the result of true observation. Almost invariably it requires a recognition and acknowledgement of envy, and she stressed that it is “undetected” envy that is damaging. Once it has been linked to observation, and thereby able to be felt “on the pulses” (as Keats would say), it can become useful fuel for the vital spirit of aspiration and desire. Envy is part of the complex fusion of stirring love-hate emotionality at the growing point of the mind.

But to a degree, growing points must be defined by their opposite – the times when the personality is not growing. Growth may be static, or latent. Or indeed, it may be suppressed or perverted. My mother honed her picture of “quality” learning against various areas of non-growth, such as Bick’s “second skin” and Meltzer’s “two-dimensionality” – forms of avoiding the passionate commitment (“aesthetic conflict”) that is required by growth, without being fully-fledged narcissism in the classical sense of projective identification with a superior power. She points out that “It seems likely that areas and states of non-containment, of two-dimensionality and mindlessness exist in the development of every infant and are therefore in us all” (1975a, p. 142). Although she allowed for resting-points in development – times and spaces when psychic reality is not engaged – she did not find these of great value or interest; she did not (unlike Winnicott) consider them a necessary service of the mother for her infant. These gaps in psychic reality, when wish-fulfilment types of fantasy predominate, are places where observation is not, and where escapism and irrationality prevail. She uses the evocative term “lacunae” to describe the types of mental absence which are not covered by the traditional Kleinian concept of projective identification (1978a, p. 175), but have a place in the theories of Bick, Bion and Meltzer. And she regarded them as, to some degree or other, ubiquitous phenomena.

Such areas of non-growth and of non-containment are not however the prime enemy. They may be qualitatively distinguished from some more tyrannical states which may appear more respectable yet are more deadly to the vital spirit of psychoanalysis, such as Authority, or sitting in judgement. She writes: “All too often adherence to theories is dictated by personal loyalty or adherence to psychoanalytic pedigrees” (1976, p. 119). My mother found these areas of complacency absolute anathema to the principle of growth, whether in the individual or the group situation – in Shakespeare’s words: “Man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority: most ignorant of what he’s most assured” (*Measure for Measure*). The adult relies on his authority, as the teenager relies on drugs, as (she says) a “substitute for self-awareness” (1969, p. 226). They are forms of action rather than of contemplation. Observation, however, has the power to see through narcissistic or second-skin clothing.

In her later talks and papers she shows concern with the likely possessiveness of the acolytes of Klein and Bion, and warned against rigidifying the formulations of struggling pioneers into rigid dogma, and trying to make followers toe the party line (1982, p. 66). Had she lived longer, she would no doubt have included Bick and Meltzer among those whose ideas were vulnerable to being authoritatively “possessed” by their interpreters (on the lines of Bion’s “loaded with honours and sunk without trace” which she

was fond of citing). She wrote about the dangers of “apostolic succession” in the following terms:

The dependent group structure so often manifests itself in the reliance upon a crystallized selection of the theories of Freud (the original Messiah), sometimes pitted against a similar extrapolation from Melanie Klein (a latter day saint). Bion is unlikely to escape the same fate. Their theories in such a climate of polarization are suitably selected and presented to eliminate the essential questioning, contradictions and progressions inherent in the formulation of pioneers who are constantly struggling to conceptualize the clinical observations they are making. Bion’s postulation about the impossibility of knowing or describing truth... may help us to try to relinquish the idea of owning our own particular brand of psycho-analysis. (1978b, p. 32)

Fixed systems of belief, political allegiances and institutional credos are all damaging to the exercise of observation. Yet in a way, perhaps this rigidification of Authority has not turned out to be the main danger. It seems more fashionable at present to adopt the other mode of deflecting growth – namely to imply that these pioneering ideas are outdated or rigid in themselves. We are supposed to qualify all our insights with “but other people might see it differently”, thereby depriving ourselves of the passionate commitment that might make an observed moment into a growing-point. We may belong to the club but lose the spirit.

Even the most “respectably documented theories”, she writes, are of no value by comparison with “attention to the conditions in which [psychoanalytic] observations may be made” (1977, p. 16). Hence the deliberate freedom from jargon in her own writings. Her writing appears easy to read but, unusual amongst psychoanalytic texts, actually requires the same kind of close reading that she demonstrated in the context of teaching infant observation. Careful attention to its elegance of construction and precision of phrase reveals her model of the mind, constructed from observation and learned from experience.

Bion speaks of the need to approach both books and people by “reading with awe” (cited by F. Bion [1985, p. 241]). This is what my mother means too when she emphasizes, in baby observation, “the respectful experience”, as in the concluding paragraph of “Growing points”:

The awe with which Mrs E regards her gallant little baby in the dream is, I think, a variant of the respect and wonder with which Melanie Klein and some of her colleagues—notably Mrs Bick in her Infant Observation seminars—have approached the study of children’s developing individuality. The theories, so necessary as an aid in trying to bring together and put some order into the wealth of detail we obtain in child analysis and observation, must indeed be seen as an aid but never as a substitute for the respectful experience. (1982, p. 91)

Awe and wonder are due not to theories but to the spirit of development as exemplified by one particular instance of a “gallant little baby”. This, not loyalty or pedigree, is what unites Klein, Bick and all those who are likewise committed to the respectful

– not the respectable – experience. It is a state in which observation and self-scrutiny are intertwined in a process of “becoming”, and the outcome is unknown. This openness to the next growing-point on the horizon is very different from what is often called “open-mindedness” but is really just hedging one’s bets.

My mother liked an anecdote that Bion told her about a trainee who worried about being “only a student”, to which Bion replied, “What are you when you cease to be a student?” (1978b, p. 31). Observation ensures we can continue “living in the question” (like Keats’s negative capability), and take our place in what she calls “the great social class of the truly educated people, the people who are still learning” (1969, p. 156).

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