



# Infant Observation

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Satoshi Handa

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## Separation between a mother and child: the observer's role as a container

Satoshi Handa

Adult Department, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

The author describes the process of separation between a mother and her baby in an infant observation. Initially, the observer had a picture of a peaceful mother-and-baby couple, in which he was perceived as a potential intruder. However, the baby's growing ego and interest in the observer confronted the mother with the presence of three during the observation hour, which seemed to lead her at times to resort to overexcitement to ward off difficult feelings related to separation and the threesome. When the mother went back to work, the struggle with separation became more evident. Overexcitement seemed to be the dominant way of dealing with the pain of separation. When these defences failed, the observer felt that he was the witness to and bearer of the pain. The author discusses the role of the observer in this observation as a container for the painful emotions which the mother and the baby seemed often unable to bear. The author suggests that the observer, as a container, might have been of use to the baby, and explores the observer's difficulty in bearing the primitive and infantile emotions stirred up within him which provoked a wish for premature, intellectual understanding.

### KEYWORDS

Male observer; immigrant family; separation; container; projection; negative capability

## Introduction

The process of separation between a mother and her baby is a difficult task. Achieving separation is not an event but a slow process which proceeds gradually. It can be seen from various viewpoints, such as the move from a dyadic to a triadic relationship (Ermann & Lazar, 2002), or recognition of the mother as a whole object (Klein, 1935), facing different aspects of the mother which have been hidden (Kitayama, 1985), and needing to accept the special relationship between the parents from which the baby is excluded (Britton, 1989). Sometimes there is a new baby. Gillies (2008) illustrates beautifully the process in which the baby oscillates between two states of mind, namely being 'a part of the mother' and being 'apart from the mother' (Gillies, 2008, p. 242).

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