

“Your eyes are beautiful”, first session of an observation

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Abstract

This is the report of a first observation session, punctuated by comments coming from the supervision work and concluded by a series of more global considerations, which allow to inscribe what was said within a family and physiological evolutionary path.

In this text is constantly present the passage between what the family actually puts in place during the session, the contemporary emotional state of the observer, who participates in what happens and questions herself, without yet formulating explanations and, finally, the real elaborations, coming from the supervision sessions that allow to pass from an observation without judgment to an interpretation of what happened. This organization was chosen to underline the different positions in which an observer finds himself: from a participant character of the actions to elaborating figure that allows to give a meaning and an order to what happened.

Keywords: child observation, supervision

The observation session reported here is the first of a journey that lasted several months and started when Daniele, the child, was five and a half months old.

I chose this first meeting as it seems to me that it represents the impact that the presence of the observer produces on the host family, especially on his first arrival.

For this reason, the comments accompanying the report are aimed above all at describing and emphasizing the dynamics activated between me and the parents and do not intentionally enter into details of some more specific modalities of the family group.

However, the thought that accompanies these comments is that in the dynamics that the parents put in place with the observer is present their usual relational modality, used also with the child, the last arrived.

In this case above all, since it is a first meeting, we can observe the reception of a new participant in the family group and then ask ourselves how the child's arrival was managed.

I do not add further considerations, for now, in order not to saturate the reader's mind and leave him free to follow the report as it presents itself, as it happens in the observation sessions in which the first step is the collective and continuous reading of the observation report, postponing the comments to a later date.

The day of the first observation we have an appointment at 10:30 at the train station (the family lives just outside Rome). The mother calls me at 10:20 am, to ask me if it's a problem to go and see a school play of a friend's daughter. I reply that is fine for me and she says that her partner will pick me up.

Actually, I am very relieved by this proposal because we will not meet at home but in a near town (which she frequents daily). I was worried that the observation would have become a meeting between me and the mother in which we just talk, as we did the first time (during the meeting arranged to know each other). That time the mother had already expressed many fantasies about becoming a friend of mine.

The father arrives two minutes later, with the child in the car (which I did not understand from the call), in the carriage on the back seat. The father introduced himself to me, as if it was the first time we meet, and immediately afterwards he corrected himself, remembering that we already met. On the way, I do not see the child because I sit on the front seat and he is turned towards the back of the seat. While entering, I see that he is awake but he will not make any sound during the ride, except a quiet moan at the end of the journey.

The father explains me that his friend called him shortly before. Therefore, they thought it would be nice to pop in there. He asks me if I'm from Rome and he talks to me about the city: he lived there for ten years, he moved there to study and then he stayed in Rome until he got tired of the chaos of the city.

He tells me that he had a scooter that was essential, according to him, but that here everything is much easier and in fifteen minutes, at most, you can reach your friends. He also tells me about the job he has (in the field of social services) and tells me about the difficulty of working in the public, with fixed-term projects. He adds that he is now pursuing his training funded by the association for which he works.

Once we arrive, we go down together from the car and the father takes the stroller in the baggage compartment. In the meanwhile, I am in front of the window at the height of the child who looks at me steadily and seriously all the time. He has an expression that seems different from the one of the previous time, less sunny and expressive. I think that he probably does not see his father so he feels lost, finding himself alone in the car and seeing me only. In fact, when the father opens the door to take him, he smiles at him and, once put in the stroller, he looks at me again and he smiles to me too.

Putting the baby in the stroller, the father talks to me again as if I had never seen Daniele and tells me: "Now you will see how big this baby is", correcting himself immediately, as the previous time.

The first communication of this meeting is the one in which the mother asks me to go to the play. The parents, who will never let me in their house but will always meet me outside, opt for an open situation, in which the heaviness of my gaze on them can be dispersed through the presence of other people. They have recourse to a third party, to the whole family, in order to tolerate my presence. This decision is certainly

dictated by the inevitable embarrassment of the first encounter with a stranger but also by the deeper fear of let me see them in their role of parents. Even more deeply, it leads us to question ourselves about the welcome given to the child, which generated, like my arrival, the new presence of a third in the couple and the need to develop new skills, perhaps involving a weight that the couple can tolerate only by resorting to the support of external presences such as that of friends and, above all, the maternal family, which among will be present in many other observational sessions and that, more generally, is very involved in the life of the child.

In this perspective, the last statement of the father, "you will see how big this child is" may seem to be his way of telling me how cumbersome his presence is, how much space he takes in his life.

Along the way, the father tells me that he has lived in Rome and he works in the social services, assisting psychiatric children. With these affirmations he seeks a closeness with me, a resemblance between the two of us in telling me that he knows the city in which I live and that his job is similar to mine, in my own field. I am particularly struck by the talk about the scooter because I had bought one just a few weeks before, so much that I had to make a considerable effort not to tell him, still taken by the enthusiasm of the purchase.

The father then immediately tries to get in touch with me but not in his role of father rather as a boy who goes out with friends and studies, as I do. The son, and consequently his role as a father, is here totally erased, physically placed in another part of the machine (the back seat), inaccessible to our sight.

The child, who always appears very receptive to the messages transmitted by his parents, seems to be accomplice in this way, not making himself heard all the way, and then accepting to disappear momentarily to make space for his father. He suffers about it, however, and shows it to me with the look that he leads me at the end of the journey, a bit lost, astonished, because he lacks points of reference since his father has momentarily escaped from his role of care. As soon as the father returns to him, taking him from the car and putting him in the stroller, the moment in which he turns his attention to him, the child responds with a lively smile, showing the willingness to gladly accept the return of the father and his attentions.

The two statements made as if I had never seen the child before represents the extreme opposite of the approaching way put in place talking about his life: they deny my relationship with the child and my existence in the role of observer.

It seems therefore that my presence is acceptable to him only as a friend with whom he can chat without the child and not in my real role as a silent observer of the child.

We enter in the school where the play will take place and the father calls his partner to ask for directions but they do not understand each other so we walk around for a couple of minutes (I'll see later that the mom had called me at that period). In the end, the mother comes to pick us.

Coming toward me, she greets me and asks me: "what's up?". Then she runs toward the child to greet him and kiss him. Going towards the classroom, the parents talk to each other and I walk behind them, so I cannot see the child in any way.

We arrive in front of the classroom where the play will take place, the place is very lively, full of adults talking and children playing. They immediately introduce me to the mother's uncles and her sister, who is with her daughter and her partner, to whom I will not be introduced.

As soon as we arrive, everyone focuses on the child who responds very actively, smiling, stretching his hands and pressing his feet on the stroller to pull up with his back. As soon as the enthusiasm fades, the mother picks up Daniele, who was quiet on the stroller, chewing the hinge of the coat. Doing it she says, without speaking directly to someone (and therefore, I think, to me) "yes, I pick him up because he's a spoiled child". He continues saying to me: "You look at him so much, but would you tell me exactly what you look at? One day you will have to tell me".

The child is, and he will tend to remain all the time, very calm and placid both when he is in the arms of one of the parents and when he is in the stroller. He looks around even if he does not always seem attracted to something in particular. This gives a vague feeling of inexpressiveness. The expression I had noticed when I was in the car, and that I had attributed to the fact that he found himself alone, seemed to me vaguely present all the time. He seemed to me a little less active than the first time I saw him, although he was never impatient or annoyed by something and he never showed signs of annoyance or sadness. Shortly after the mother passes the son to the father, Daniele does not seem to show preference between the two of them and while being taken by his father he smiles at him.

The mother greets me with a "what's up?" so enthusiastic and friendly to leave me almost stunned, so much so that I cannot respond. Immediately afterwards, however, rejoined with the family, she excludes me by making a couple with her husband and leaving me, third unwanted, back to chase them and without the possibility to see the child. However, as soon as we arrive, she introduces me to the whole family group, which amazes me a little and makes me feel more accepted than I thought. Immediately afterwards, however, she speaks openly of my observation of the child, expressing all her concern in being observed and the paranoid nuance that my presence produces.

The mother then approaches with a very similar mode of the father: my presence is acceptable when she can consider me a friend or even one of the family while I cannot be tolerated and then I am excluded in my role as an observer because it produces distress.

Within this continuous and ambivalent movement of the parents, the child remains placid, accepting the presence and the passage of new people, the avalanche of attentions such as being left to himself, staying in the stroller as in the arms of parents.

In the same way, I try not to react and not to break up in front of the different ways of approaching of the mother, trying to keep my own silent line but still a little 'stunned in front of the confusion of the situation. So that, finally, the child and I turn out to be the only quiet and silent person in front of a situation full of movement and noise, both accepting what is offered by the family but also a little uncertain facing the continuous movements and changes.

A discussion arises about the ears of the child who are a bit dirty, the father cleans it and the mother jokes about cleaning the child in public and the fact that others could get upset about it. Last time too the mother cleaned baby's nose and apologized a couple of times about it. She said that, before becoming a mother, something like that would have disgusted her.

There are many people around us so I can hardly hear the various conversations and see Daniele's movements. The child is still in his father's arms and looks around with a calm gaze. I notice that the mother is talking quietly with her sister. I see that the latter looks at me and I think they are talking about me. Shortly after, I see the same scene between the mother and the father who then come up to me and ask again if the place is fine and if it is not a problem that there are other people. He tells me that he feared that this situation was out of context. I answer that any place is fine and that he does not have to worry. The child is in father's arms but I cannot see his face because he is facing him.

The mother says that she had already asked me it (if the situation was out of context). If this situation was not a good one, she would have sent me somewhere else with her partner and her son, because if she is alone with me she cannot stop talking to me. She goes on asking if I went to the sea because I look tanned, I say "no" but she looks at me in a way that makes me think she does not believe me. Then she goes away.

The mother first creates a couple with her sister and then another one with her partner to talk about my presence, making me a third and external source of paranoia. With the companion they approach me and, in the form of a question and a problem, they actually express the hidden purpose in the choice of the play: going out of context, so that I can understand and judge them within a certain point.

Even in this case, although the child is physically present since he is in the arms of his father, he is actually out of the relational dynamic because I cannot see his face and is still very quiet.

The mother then continues expressing all the need to be my friend, to dampen my role as an observer, and at the same time, the paranoia that arises from my refusal. First of all, she says that if she is alone with me she cannot avoid talking to me, or she cannot tolerate me in my role as a silent observer and a step back from the action but rather she has to involve me, get close enough so that I cannot concentrate on the child talking to her and may rather become a friend of her, part of her supportive family.

Immediately afterwards, she asked if I went to the sea to investigate, almost like a jealous friend. In order to understand the whole meaning of this sentence, I would like to underline that already in our first meeting the mother had fantasized about the idea of going to the beach together once the observation was over, leaving the child to the father. Therefore, it seems that, in her imagination, I not only refuse to go with her but, even more, I do with someone else what I refuse to her. Furthermore, we can notice the use of a third person as a help, in support of your own person (alone I cannot tolerate your presence and therefore I involve other people) and in a more paranoid nuance in which the third separates (you went to sea with someone else and not with me).

The father tells me that the weight of the child begins to be heavy and puts Daniel back in the stroller. The uncles stay in front of Daniele and talk to him; he responds very amused and interested. His mother bought him a new hat and they put it on the child's head. From the moment they put it on his head the child becomes immobilized, with his hands closed in small fists pulled up in front of him and his gaze fixed but apparently not bothered. Even the father notices this and he tells it to his partner. The hat is perhaps just a bit big, especially the visor that looks huge on his face so that it soon falls down covering the child's eyes, so the mother takes it. The play is about to begin and we decide to enter. The mother goes to smoke a cigarette in secret, she says, from her uncle. The father and I approach the entrance. There are already several people, so we have to stay near the door, the father takes Daniele in his arms to make him look around. As soon as we step into the classroom the air becomes more suffocating and the father jokes with me, I think he is very relaxed towards me. He keeps the child in a way that he can look the play, mostly with one hand only, Daniele seems interested in what surrounds him and sometimes he toddles. I find it a bit difficult to observe him because the father goes around a lot to see and talk with different person, while remaining always quite close to me. In addition, the baby is so quiet that I am afraid I focus more on the actions of his parents than on his owns.

The father speaks to me about the "weight" of the child, another attempt, associating it with the phrase "now you will see how big this child is" of the first sequence, to express the effort that this child requires. Even the talk of the closed air could be seen as a sense of claustrophobia and compulsion, always given by the requests of the child.

The child is then placed in the stroller in an attempt to autonomy and detachment and, in addition, he is given a hat too big for his head. Attempts by parents to make he grow earlier than expected to then be able to lighten, at least in part, the weight of having a child still so young.

The child shows once again that his way of reaction, to the not fully attuned approaches of his parents, is to remain still, to freeze almost or otherwise to be

invisible, so much so that he does not protest but rather stiffens. Therefore, he does not seek help from his parents to solve the problem but rather reacts to himself, stiffening and freezing.

The music starts and the father, who is a musician, moves according to the rhythm, the child is smiling, toddling amused and looking up to see his father. Then they move on a low wall in front of the entrance and the father, to take off his wallet from the back pocket of his trousers, holds the child horizontally with one hand, the child does not seem bothered.

After this operation he kept Daniele standing on the wall for a while, exhorting him to move his legs as if to walk. The child looks around and looks at his feet, moving them just a bit, as if he is trying to keep the rhythm of the music. The mother comes back and they both talk to the child who smiles evidently pleased by the attentions.

For the entire time of the performance Daniele will stand in the arms of his father or in the stroller, the mother will relate a lot but only face to face and will pick him up only in the last minutes before leaving. In taking up the wallet from the stroller, the father holds the child in front of the glass door but I notice that he does not look at his reflection, as he had done the first time I saw him.

At a certain point, the father goes away to go and talk to his brother-in-law and before I follow him, the mother tells me: "he took you seriously". While the father speaks, the child, who looks in the opposite direction of the father, looks around and occasionally leans a hand forward and closes the fist, as if he is taking something. Back in the classroom, I turn around for a moment to watch the play, losing sight of the child and when I turn back to him I notice that he, at my side, was looking at me very interested. Shortly thereafter, the father puts the child back in the stroller and he begins to chew the jacket first and then the belt of the stroller, holding it in various points and pulling it to himself. From time to time, he also stretches like he was trying to touch his feet.

There is a moment when the child looks at his father standing next to him and talking to his sister-in-law. The mother, who was there, notices it and, with a particularly sweet and caressing tone, tells the child: "you look at daddy eh?" and she points out to his partner and starts talking to her sister. The music starts again and the mother rushes back to Daniele putting her hands on the sides of his body as if she was about to pick him up but she stops and simply caresses him along the sides and kisses him. The child smiles briskly, stretches his hands asking to be taken by the mother and shakes on the stroller by prying on his feet to pull himself up. After a minute of pampering, the mother gets up and starts talking to her uncle, the child protests. For a second time she bends down to him in a playful tone. This time also it seems to me that she is about to pick him up but then she does not and the action takes place just as before. This time, however, when the mother gets up, the child protests more vividly so the mother bends over him a third time and she finally picks him up. The baby immediately clears up and lies down practically on her, always toddling a little.

Sometimes, while she cuddles her son, the father approaches and caresses or kisses her. For a moment he hugs her from behind, creating a sweet matrioska figure in which she holds the baby and he "holds" her. Once the father moves next to them, the mother makes the child dance to the rhythm of the music and Daniele laughs sincerely and plays with more energy. Once the song is over, another one starts, much slower and sweet. Mother and child harmonize by dancing in a less joking and more intimate way. The mother bends over head to head with her son and cradles him moving a little, they seem perfectly in tune.

The child and I, in front of the sweet gaze of the mother and her close embracing, await together the culmination of this affection in being in the arms of mother, and, together, we get irritated when this satisfaction is denied to us. For the first time, in fact, the child, and I with him, does not passively accept the changes of the mother but protests and claims what he understood by the maternal behaviors, that is to be picked up.

However, the mother escapes twice the requests of the child, producing an exasperation of the desire seemingly unmotivated that unnerves both me and the child.

The mother shows me in this way all her ambivalence, which will be exacerbated at the end of the session: on one hand she is willing and shows herself capable of giving affection and attention to her son but, on the other, she deviates, preferring perhaps a situation in which the son maintains a greater degree of independence by sitting in the stroller rather than on her.

At the level of the dynamic towards me, I feel here again as the third wheel and I almost perceive that with my presence and my gaze I break this moment of harmony not allowing its entire development. In fact, I wonder if the mother refrains from taking the child in her arms also and above all because she does not want to show herself to me as a mother, she tries to give me as little material as possible to observe and analyze (which is also evident from the fact that throughout the session the child is practically always in the arms of the father). Despite the difficulty, however, the moment eventually melts away in its entirety and all the three members of the family are fully satisfied. The scene takes place in such a sweet way that, for me it's almost touching to observe.

After the song, she continues to hold him in her hands and play with him, but the child starts to moan a little more insistently, he whimpers and agitates, putting his feet on his mother's body to get up. The parents say he is sleepy. The mother then decides to breastfeed to make him reassure and, moving far quickly, she says: "Do you want to see a mother who is breastfeeding?". I follow her (a bit intimidated), looking for a more intimate place. She goes to lean on a short wall.

She cradles the child a bit and he calms down immediately so she decides not to breastfeed him. In fact, now she breastfeeds the child only to make him fall asleep,

especially considering that now she almost has no milk. Returning to the play, the mother notes an anthill and for a moment I see mother and son in the exact same position, eyes focused on the ground and the same gaze focused. The mother stops and leans over trying to point out the ants to her son.

She talks to him and she puts him in front of the anthill. She keeps him close to the ground. She asks if he sees them and tries to point the ants but she cannot make sure that he is looking at them. Then, she asks me to understand where he is looking. I try to see and I tell her that I think he is looking on the ground watching the ants.

She gets up and tells me that a few months before she had made a great effort to take the child to a park with animals that run free and that he did not look at the animals at all, as if he did not see them.

We go back inside and I tell her that my observation time is over and that I'm going to leave. She proposes to bring me to the station. While we were not there, the play finished and they all decide to leave. The mother tells me that she can take me to the train station with her car, leaving her son to his father. She also jokes with the partner saying that she will leave him the child, her sister and her partner also say, joking, that they want to escape from Daniele's father who wants them to help him. Meanwhile, the child is quiet and passes a couple of times in the arms of the the parents without protesting.

Once in the street the mother's sister approaches me and tells me: "Susanna next time you come, you have to tell us because they did not tell us and they forced us (in the observation)".

Going toward the car, the mother tells me that this is not suitable for the child because it is too narrow and messy and therefore she almost never uses it. In fact, I am struck by the amount of dirt and untidiness inside the vehicle, definitely not suitable for transporting a child.

Along the way, she talks to me about the comfort of the baby carrier and how she would use only that one to carry the baby around. She offers me a coffee together, but I decline saying I drank one when I arrived. When we are greeting in front of the station, she tells me, as she did in our first meeting, that I have very beautiful eyes.

The mother offers to bring me to the station and she immediately transforms the situation into an occasion to free herself momentarily from her role of mother and puts herself at my same level, like two friends going around together by car. The sister immediately follows this modality, also freeing herself of an alleged role of care for Daniele and perhaps trying to participate in turn to an hypothetical "moment between girls".

Within a few moments the agitation and excitement grow up, expressed by the races, by the laughter and by speaking aloud to which the entire family group participates, in a sort of a family ritual.

The baby and I are once again, the only ones who do not actively participate in this crescendo of agitation and movement, we limit ourselves to be tossed in this

confusion, me, looking for the way to keep up with the family, and he, accepting docilely to be moved several times from one pair of arms to the other.

By letting her “girlish” car enter the scene, the mother definitely shows me the part of herself that she did not allow to be reached from her new role as a mother. A part of herself in which the child cannot enter and that remains as a private and personal space, in which not only she can be without the child but above all where she can forget to be a mother, returning a young free girl.

In addition, it shows once again her ambivalence because, within this part of herself split from the child and from its role as mother, it speaks to me of the baby carrier that allows instead of keeping the child almost recreating the situation of pregnancy, the moment of symbiosis par excellence and in which a woman can certainly never forget that she is becoming a mother as she always carries her child in her womb.

She concludes the observation with what is a compliment (“you have beautiful eyes”) but that, especially reconnecting to the phrase “you observe, but tell me exactly what you observe?”, seems a new attempt to express the fear of what I can see, with my beautiful eyes.

Concluding comments

The comments that accompany the observation are mainly focused on the relationship arisen between me and the parents. I would now like to conclude with a couple of more general observations to contextualize what has been observed.

First of all, we must consider that the parents who are observed are always, inevitably, in a very delicate situation. Their child has usually been born for a few days which means that they are in front of a new, important step. At this stage of life, the fear of making mistakes and being judged from outside is inevitable and common to all. Furthermore, the family referred to in this text had begun weaning a week earlier. This is another very important and pervasive event that brings into play a quantity of co-present and yet dissonant emotions. All the highlighted moments in which the mother does not seem to find the right distance with the child, can be reviewed, in the light of this event, as the attempt to build a new relationship with the child that takes into account this new distance.

I add these considerations to emphasize once again that the comments that described the development of this meeting do not want to be a global and conclusive explanation, but rather the description of one of the many levels at stake.

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