

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF  
PSYCHOANALYTICALLY ORIENTED INFANT OBSERVATION  
RECORDS**

**Doctoral theses**

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## INTRODUCTION

In my thesis I examined the manifestation of the socio-physical environment's impact that is difficult to become aware of, by analyzing the observation records created during psychoanalytic infant observation<sup>1</sup> (Bick, 1964) that took place in the families' home. The thesis aims at demonstrating that the socio-physical context (Dúll, 2009), as well as the relationship with the socio-physical environment in which the mother and the infant live their everyday lives are manifested in the observation records and reports, even if their original objective was to record the infant's development and mother-infant interactions. The objective of this analysis informed by environmental psychology is to let those unconscious, yet markedly present, "hidden" socio-physical factors that may well influence the observer's thoughts, the direction and way of their interpretation and reflect the socio-physical context of the observation manifest themselves. Their manifestation may be caused by the fact that the observers detect these factors unconsciously, and they want to record, or maybe disclose, let know something about this context this way, even if not necessarily consciously.

Home is one of the important areas of examination in environmental psychology (Dúll, 1995). The home environment is the scene of the psychoanalytic infant observation as well. The socio-physical context of the homes provides an exciting and novel transactional field (Dúll, 2002a) for presenting the unconscious environmental psychological human-environment relationship of the conscious and unconscious factors of the observation of the mother-child relationship.

### Theoretical overview

#### 1. Environmental psychology and psychoanalysis

##### The psychoanalytic roots of place attachment

In his study, Searles (1960, cited in Chawla, 1992) presented the role nonhuman environment plays in normal and pathological development, and also studies the relationship to the physical environment, equaling its importance and depth to the mother-infant relationship (Dúll, 2009, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> The method of infant observation has become an important part of the psychoanalytic child psychotherapists' training in recent years.

Searles' idea (cited above) notwithstanding, the study of place attachment did not follow the path of classic mother-child attachment, except for the research done by Chawla (1992) who examined place attachment from early childhood to adolescence (Dúll, 2002b). She saw its importance in the fact that children can become attached to places that provide happiness and joy in themselves, due to their intrinsic values (Dúll, 2009).

Fried's thought (1963, cited in Dúll, 2009) that the geographical area (e.g., the home, the city, the neighborhood) may evoke different emotions was an important step in the history of environmental psychology. Fried drew a parallel between the emotions created by losing important persons and loss of places, and formulated in his psychodynamic theory that losing an important place means a break in the person's self-continuity.

### Meaningful spaces and places

The representatives of the humanistic geographical approach, hallmarked mostly by Tuan (1974), Relph (1976), Buttimer and Seamon (1980), have created the phenomenological theory of place attachment. One of their key concepts is the *sense of place*, which designates the characteristic of certain places that evoke a specific sense of meaning. This also means that the place is not only an external circumstance or scenery, but an entity with an intrinsic meaning that influences the persons using that place and vice versa: places and their users interact with each other.

### Places of importance: the home

In the approach presented by Sadalla et al. (1987) and Cooper Marcus (1995), the home is interpreted as a reflection of the self as well. Dúll (2009) writes, citing the studies of Saegert and Winkel (1990), that the socio-physical environment of the home has an impact on the child-parent relationship. According to Kapitány and Kapitány (2000), the home does not only "tell about" its inhabitants, but also influences, changes its habitants' and users' value system, lifestyle, and forms of interaction. Chawla (1992) also stresses the importance of the children's physical space, and thus provides a review of the literature on how the physical environment of the home affects children.

In relation to the emotions linked to a place, Seamon (1979) describes the phenomenon of the *place-ballet*, which presents the everyday, repetitive side of life, since according to his theory space becomes place, i.e. "lived-space" due to usual, routine acts (see also Dúll, 1998), which in turn facilitates the sense of *at-homeness*. According to Seamon's approach, the emotions and

meanings related to the place are formed through the regular rhythm of frequent, repetitive, everyday occurrences, activities, and rituals, where events follow the same script, thus making the consequences predictable.

They assume that object and space utilization is based on choice, thus it has a function, and this function serves some value system, whether consciously or unconsciously. In their research, Kapitány and Kapitány (2000) have taken into account the physical boundaries, aesthetics, the relationship between order and disorder as the home's characteristics. Freedom of movement, congestion, and internal distances were also significant aspects of their analysis; even though under different names and with a different emphasis, these aspects are also part of my own research.

### The appearance of space forms and the socio-physical environment in psychoanalytic theories

Wilfred Bion's (1959) container phenomenon is worth mentioning as one of the interesting examples of how spaces and space forms appear in the psychoanalytic discourse. Through its inclusive, containing characteristic, it represents an important spatial relation within psychoanalytic theories. Daniel Stern's (1985) thoughts on vitality affect describe the emotions that cause shifts in motivational states, desires, and tensions, and which can be defined rather by their form. Stern (1985) thinks that the infant's early space creation means the construction of forms, meaning a bodily, lived experience (Tényi, 2010); these are such spatial or temporal structures, intensities, figures that show the shifts in emotional states, and which play a great role in emotional attunement.

In Imre Hermann's theory (1965), space influences emotions, affects, which then in turn affect the approach to space, i.e. they interact with each other. He was the first theorist to articulate his theory using the notions of proximity–distance, as well as clinging–going-in-search.

In addition to the role of the father, Winnicott emphasizes the importance of the physical environment of the family, society, and infant. He describes the division of me and not-me (i.e. the environment) as part of the normal developmental, maturation process in which transitional objects and transitional phenomena help the infant (Winnicott, 1969a), but finds that the presence of the facilitating environment is essential (Winnicott 1969b/1986).

Taking the separation–individuation theory, created with Mahler (1975), even further, Bergman (2004) describes the infant's and child's changing relationship to space, the exploration and utilization of the world of objects, and also formulates the optimal and safe space that is important to the baby. Initially, this is the maternal space; in the practicing subphase, it is the

external space or the outside world, from where they can go back to the mother for some emotional refueling; and during rapprochement, these are the transitional spaces.

During the utilization of the environment, i.e. the human-environment transaction (Altman & Rogoff, 1987), the characteristics of spaces, objects do not become conscious, due to the very complex nature of the environment, “encompassing”, including the organism (Dúll, 2009), thus its research concerns unconscious phenomena, relations, just like in the field of psychoanalysis.

## **2. The method of infant observation**

### The main stages of forming the method of infant observation

Margaret Mahler (1975) was among the first to conduct regular longitudinal observations (Halász, 2018). Her theories of great impact even today were formed and created through these observations. She firmly believed that studying early forms of behavior provides an important contribution to the theses of psychoanalysis.

Bowlby and his associates studied the effects of early and temporary separation during a series of observation conducted at the Tavistock Clinic. As a result, Bowlby (1969, 1973) described the impact of temporary separation on internal psychological processes.

Fraiberg also conducted a series of observation in order to study the emerging emotional disorders. She realized then that the past memories of the parents (unconsciously) reemerge in their interactions with their infant. These memories often manifest themselves in the subtle disorders of care, and maintain the intergenerational transmission of the trauma of abuse or neglect.

The research done by Ainsworth (1969) drew attention to the important aspects of attachment behavior: the characteristics of early interactional patterns, and the crucial role of maternal sensitivity and responsiveness. These studies provided the basis for her creating an assessment scale measuring maternal sensitivity (cited above).

### Bick's (1964) method of infant observation

The essence of the method of infant observation elaborated by Esther Bick is that the trainee therapist must observe the infant's development, their interactions with the mother, as well as the emotions, actions they detect in themselves by visiting the family home for an hour per

week, for one or two years. After the observation, the trainee makes a record and discusses the experiences in a supervision seminar group. The aim of the seminar group is to share impressions and experiences, discuss how the observer participates in the situation, talk about how the observer resonates to the mother, and how the mother accepts the observer's presence (Bick, 1964; Bick & Harris, 1976; Rajnik, 2010).

The basic concept of observation lies in that maternal care and the specific characteristics of the mother-infant relationship can be understood via daily, repetitive, and mainly non-verbal events (Stern, 1985). Observation of the normal daily routine is important because parents often complain about problems within the daily routine. Similarly, traumas can pertain to ordinary, daily, even non-verbal events (Rajnik, 2010). Since these routine occurrences usually take place in the home, they serve as a basis for the sense of at-homeness, and vice versa: the sense of at-homeness often creates the possibility of these routines occurring in harmony (Dúll, 1995, 1998, 2015).

#### The results of infant observations: constructed and reconstructed image of the infant

In the period before observations, the image of infants was basically a reconstructed picture based on adults' therapeutic experiences. Based on the latter, the infant was described as a being at the mercy of their instinct, functioning according to the pleasure principle, turned only on themselves. However, the experiences of observation made it clear that the infant is a very active, differentiated being, ready to make contact with others (Halász, 2001), who is clearly competent in their world of objects and relationships (Dornes, 1993/2002), right from their birth. From the beginning, they are apt at detecting their own boundaries and those of others, they differentiate well the interactions directed at them, they are aware of the emotional valence and aims of these interactions, and they can also use them to organize their own world of experiences (Stern, 1985; Hámori, 2016).

While observations provide us a clear picture of the infant's abilities, they tell us very little about their current experiences. This is where psychoanalytic theories and exploratory, qualitative studies can be of assistance. In order to elaborate the experiences and meanings, we have to study the infant's experiences, as well as the environmental psychological relations.

### **3. Philosophy-of-science and historical background of the method of Grounded Theory (GT)**

While positivism ontologically assumed the existence of objective reality and declared that everything can be measured, affected and generalized (Mitev, 2012), post-positivism on the other hand called the existence of value-neutral methods into question. This is when Glaser and Strauss' oeuvre of great impact, *The discovery of grounded theory* (1967), was born, which "became the flag bearer of qualitative revolution" (Mitev, 2012, p. 17).

In order to understand the method of Grounded Theory (GT), its ontological and epistemological background has to be briefly outlined. One of the most important is the *phenomenological* approach that stresses the person's subjective experience which becomes the main organizing principle when perceiving the surrounding world, i.e. everyone perceives the surrounding world in their own individual way (Husserl, 1905/2002; Rácz, 2016).

Among the most influential figures of hermeneutics, Ricoeur claims in his concept of *metaphorical truth* that metaphors help us to describe the world in a new way using them on the one hand, and to have access to new experiences through metaphors on the other hand (Rácz, 2016). From the perspective of the background provided by the philosophy of science, the concept of *hermeneutic circle* is of importance, which is based on the supposition that the whole of the text can only be understood through its parts, while the individual parts can only be interpreted as embedded in the whole, not by themselves. Thus interpretation itself can only be described as a circular movement, and interpretation always contains our unconscious attitude as well, which we shall discover, cites Rácz (2016) Gadamer (1960/2003).

Existentialism is concerned with the being, the existence of the human person, researching how man gets to know the surrounding world. Its main representative, Heidegger, researched the being's mode of being as a disciple of Husserl, using the hermeneutics of the *Dasein*, i.e. being-there. He asserted that man cannot be understood separated from their environment, but only in their relation to the world, while man is always the point of reference when understanding the surrounding world (Rácz, 2016).

One of the representatives of *symbolic interactionism*, G. H. Mead (1973), said that both adaptation to the environment and understanding the world and ourselves take place using symbols (Rácz, 2016), thus our external world is a kind of symbolic representation, created and recreated via interaction, together with our internal world.

According to *constructivism*, every human knowledge depends on human activity, is transmitted in a social context, formed in interactions between men, and thus cannot be treated outside its environment.

This analysis is rooted in the above conceptual ground.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The initial statement of the exploratory qualitative research described in the doctoral thesis is that during observation the participating observer detects many stimuli of the socio-physical environment, and also perceives their pattern, the socio-physical context while spending time in the same socio-physical context as the observed mother-infant pair (their home). However, this perception does not usually become conscious, and thus does not serve as an explicit source of information or experience for the observer. Observation records, on the other hand, often spontaneously present related descriptions.

According to our research question, we wanted to give an answer to based on what kind of category system did the observers observe the mother-infant relationship, and how do the socio-physical environmental factors appear in these criteria.

## **STUDY METHOD**

### Rationale for choosing this study method

Grounded Theory (GT) as a research tradition fits well the study objective, since due to its phenomenological basis, it researches the individuals' experiences, and it is interested in the pattern of interpersonal interactions and occurrences, from which it draws its theoretical conclusions (Mitev, 2012; Charmaz, 2013; Rácz et al., 2016).

### Sampling and the analyzing process

The study material consists of 750 pages of the psychoanalytically oriented infant observation records and reports of the observation conducted earlier in the homes of 10 families between 2006 and 2016 for study purposes in the infant observation module of child psychotherapy training at the Ego Clinic. With the approval and support of Ego Clinic, and knowing the objectives of the research, the colleagues offered their records to let them analyzed this way too.

The colleagues taking part in the observation regularly visited a family for one and a half year, for one hour per week, where they observed the newborn infant's development, as a part of their training. The families were informed that they take part in the observation as part and prerequisite of the training, and that the experiences would be discussed in the professional setting of the training, and at the end, a written summary would be prepared where the reflections regarding the infant's development and observation would be recorded. The families



were given a guarantee that their anonymity would remain intact; they acknowledged the conditions and agreed to the observation; they also gave their written consent to use the records in the present research once again.<sup>2</sup>

Gathering data and analyzing them are parallel processes in the tradition of GT. The codes and categories of analysis are derived directly from the data, instead of previously set up hypotheses, since the latter does not occur in this method—research question(s) need to be raised instead. After breaking up the texts into manageable chunks, the open codes are created using micro-analysis, moving paragraph by paragraph. Open codes are created by highlighting units of thoughts via assigning concepts to the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Highlighting topics and arranging them takes place through a three-level hierarchical process, where axial codes are formed from open codes, and axial codes, and then selective codes are formed from open codes (Sallay & Martos, 2018). Studying, analyzing the list of open codes reveals the possible relations between the codes, thus helping to identify selective and axial codes, which are formed at the same time (Gelencsér, 2003). This process already involves the initial integration of theory, since the basic categories that describe the relationship between the text and the codes are highlighted via merging and selection. Those selective codes will become a basic category that provide some kind of an explanation to the changes in behavioral patterns, and around which the other categories are organized. The thought explaining the connections and relationships of the central category will become the grounded theory that is defined as the purpose of the GT research.

It is a prerequisite of the researcher's authenticity and validity to reflect upon their own research (Sallay, 2015), their attitude toward research; their self-reflection assists and validates the work done.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Using what kind of category system do the observers approach the phenomena to be studied?

How does the socio-physical environment appear in this?

## **RESULTS**

Main topics and overview of the theory

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<sup>2</sup> Research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of ELTE PPK. Permission number: 2018/30.

The research distilled the observational aspects of the records into six selective codes, three of which (I thru III) have a strong and primarily socio-physical relevance, while the other three selective codes (IV thru VI) provide the background for actions, experiences, and interactions, and the occurrences as well as the codes of socio-physical relevance can be placed into a clear explanatory framework with their help. The most important categories, i.e. the selective codes around which the theory is organized, are as follows:

- I. *Movement in space*
- II. *Experience of place*
- III. “Covers”
- IV. *Impressions of the past on present occurrences*
- V. *Feelings*
- VI. *Adaptations*

During the research, I interpreted the codes of socio-physical relevance (I thru III) as key category, since they were also concerned by the main research question; *movements in space*, and the *experience of place* lived in a given space seems to be central, from which a third key category quasi emerges, a category that stands above the first two on the one hand, and can be interpreted as their common section on the other hand: these are the parts of text that contain “covers”. The *occurrences of the past*, the *feelings* experienced, and the system of expectations and *adaptations* driving the individuals give them the appropriate meaning and provides an explanatory background—the key categories that emerge can only be interpreted in depth through them.

**I.** selective code: Movement in space

Movements in space are described by four axial codes, characterized by *Proximity* and *Distance* on the one hand, while the dichotomy of *Activity–passivity*, as well as the phenomenon of Restriction of movement was also strongly present.

**II.** selective code: Experience of place

Among the axial codes, we find *views from an external and internal perspective regarding the localization* of the home, contents regarding *ambient stimuli*, as well as codes referencing a *search for place, access to the home, as well as the sense of at-homeness*.

**III.** selective code: “Covers”

This category consists of the generalization of phenomena, situations, and acts that cover some other meaning beyond the surface. It is interesting about this selective code that while it emerged from the two previous ones, *Movement in space* and *Experience of place*, yet it has a marked importance, and stands out as a very significant category from all the others as well. Its axial codes describe partly actual, partly emotional *inaccessibility*, *theater-like* operating, and *metaphorical*, *symbolical* phenomena.

IV. selective code: Impressions of the past on present occurrences

*One's own life events* that also affect the present come up both in the observers' own experiences and those of the family members.

V. selective code: Feelings

Similarly to the other selective codes, here the feelings experienced by the observers themselves and those attributed to family members were not treated separately, but analyzed together, as a whole.

VI. selective code: Adaptations

This axial code mainly concerns adaptation, but can be divided into two larger parts. On the one hand, it means the adaptations made by the parents in relation to the children's physical and psychological development and their role in it, on the other hand, it means the adaptation to the requirements of the method.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

According to our research question, we wanted to give an answer to what the category system is based on which the criteria of observing the mother-infant relationship and its socio-physical context can be elaborated using the records made by the observers.

This category system consists of the experience of place, the movements occurring in the space, as well as the "covers", those metaphorical, symbolical phenomena that are contextualized by feelings, adaptations, and the life history implications of the past. In this system the categories have a transactional relationship with each other.

During the GT analysis we got to define the core and key categories, and as a result, the grounded theory has been formulated. The selective code named "*Covers*" became the central core category, since this was the one that all the other categories have become grouped around, the one that clearly determined the mood of the records, and thus the history of the mother-child

pairs and families, i.e. the one that preeminently captured and oriented the attention of the observers. It can be established based on the analysis that this code reveals what is in the depth, and what it is the family wants to hide, to cover, whether consciously or unconsciously.

This core category emerged from the two other codes considered to be key categories; moreover, it is their equal, since similarly to the core category, both the *Movement* and *Experience of place* categories have symbolical elements, but with a less dense layer of meaning. On the other hand, the core category “Covers” also has a movement aspect and/or is based on an experience of place; it was, however, necessary to make the distinction, since its metaphorical, symbolical meaning is much more pronounced.

All these phenomena that can be observed in the socio-physical space get their meaning and obtain a deeper layer of meaning if the other three selective codes quasi “surround” them, giving them context. The content of *Feelings* and *Adaptations* have a mutual relationship, transaction with the experience of place lived in a given space, and also with which forms of movement become characteristic, i.e. what kind of *place-ballet* is created in the home. And all these are influenced by the life history events that the persons present in that place consider important, which are the *Impressions of the past in the present*. This code influences all other categories, to what kind of feelings are lived in the space, what kind of adaptations, expectations they develop in themselves and thus often in their children, and what kind of characteristic forms of movement appear and how the experience of place occurs. These together describe what kinds of “Covers” are created in the place. The experiences lived in the socio-physical space also retroact to the narrative of important past events of course, which means that the relationship is mutual, reciprocal here as well. Life history—the way the subject gives meaning to the events that occur to them—changes dynamically, after all.

## OUTLOOK

Self-reflection: While analyzing the texts, the experiences lived through in my previous role of observer made a marked comeback, and thus it was easy for me to empathize with the worries and doubts of the observers, as well as with the specific situation of the family members. The situation is wrought by an interesting dynamic, since while the observations took place in the family home, their primary territory, yet an outsider observer was scanning their activity, partly according to the rules of observation.

Observational situations may benefit from the practical use of the research, where observation may be enriched by the new aspects of environmental psychology. This should not be limited

to the narrower field of infant observations, but may very well be extended to other therapeutic situations where observation plays a great role, such as the diagnostic or therapeutic processes of younger children.

Other than its relevance to validity, the application of a resonance panel offers a further opportunity for research, in which the observers are informed about the results of the research in a focus group setting, and they can compare them to their own personal experiences.

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3. Tóth-Varga, Violetta ; Dúll, Andrea

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