

2007

Finding Nina

Inge Meyer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Meyer, Inge, "Finding Nina" (2007). *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)*. 391.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/391>

This article was downloaded by: [University of Western Ontario]

On: 10 December 2012, At: 08:08

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Infant Observation: International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riob20>

Finding Nina

Inge Meyer ^a

^a P.O. Box 1176, Northam, Western Australia, 6401, Australia

Version of record first published: 14 Aug 2007.

To cite this article: Inge Meyer (2007): Finding Nina, *Infant Observation: International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications*, 10:2, 165-171

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698030701466853>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Finding Nina

INGE MEYER

P.O. Box 1176 Northam, Western Australia 6401, Australia

Abstract

This paper provides an account of the unique cultural experience of observing an Aboriginal infant within her extended family system while overcoming the challenges of separation from the seminar group through geographical distance. Underpinning the entire process were multiple layers of transgenerational and personal loss. There were many poignant moments in this rich observational experience.

Keywords: *Aboriginal, holding, watch over, transgenerational loss*

Introduction

When embarking on the University of Melbourne Infant Mental Health Graduate Diploma I was aware there would be logistical challenges to overcome. Some 3300 kilometres separated me from my seminar group. My work as a member of a community mental health service, which delivered clinical services to an area in excess of 113 000 sq. km (almost twice the size of Ireland) involved significant travel. I was under no illusion that it would take an extra commitment to maintain the energy required to keep observation appointments, attend to course work and remain connected with my group. Email proved its worth in keeping us connected across great distance and different time zones. The telephone was my connection to the weekly seminars; the baby and family I was eventually to observe became the glue that held this all together.

Nina was the replacement for a baby boy I was about to observe, who was 'lost' to me with his mother becoming unwell and moving back to the city. I was disappointed and increasingly conscious of the passage of time and its effect on my ability to keep up with my group. Week by week I had little to 'show and tell' and with no visual link I had to make a conscious effort to maintain a sense of connectedness. For my seminar group the voice at the end of the telephone created the added dimension of the need to develop a sense of mindfulness for another person who was 'there but not there'.

The local child health nurse came to my aid with the prospect of a baby to observe. I had little information about this baby except that she was six weeks old, born to a young Aboriginal couple, Terry and Natasha, who were interested in meeting with me to discuss the observation.

First meeting

Terry and Natasha lived together with Terry's parents in a small weatherboard home on the outskirts of a small rural town. It was a modest home but even on the first day, I was made

aware of an environment of caring and sharing. Terry and Natasha both played sport at a state level and Terry also coached youngsters. He played an active role in supporting local youth and players were free to call at the house any time. His father and mother were mentors to the community and their home also served as a gathering place.

At our first meeting I had to navigate a reception committee of four dogs. Once the excitement of my arrival had died down, I could hear an infant crying, not a lusty cry but more that of a baby who was working up to make her needs known. There was more than one voice calling and crooning to her as I knocked on the door. Natasha opened the door as Nina was picked up by a woman, introduced to me as 'Terry's Mum'. Nina stopped crying and snuggled close to her grandmother. They seemed very comfortable together. Nina's eyelids kept fluttering then the eye movement ceased and her arms dropped loosely at her side. Her breathing pattern changed, she gave a number of little sighs and appeared to slip into a deep sleep.

Nina's father bounded into the room, he was full of energy and enthusiasm. He was also extremely tall and athletic. Nina's mother was tiny and fine boned. When they stood side by side she fitted under his armpit and the family referred to her as 'our little mother'. Terry scooped Nina up and held her in his cupped hands after kissing her and giving her a chuck on her chin said, 'Wake-up, sleepy head'. Still Nina did not stir; her arms were hanging loosely almost behind her back. She was in such a state of relaxation with her head thrown back that her breathing was almost imperceptible.

Other family members entered the kitchen and Nina was passed around the room from person to person, all wanting 'to have a hold'. She was referred to as 'Pop's girl, Nana's girl, Dad's girl, Mum's girl and Auntie's angel'. At different times a procession of people entered the kitchen from the hallway and left with a loud bang of the door. No one in the kitchen acknowledged or seemed troubled by the sound. Natasha calmly went about the motions of preparing formula and Nina slept serenely.

Most of our observation sessions took place in the kitchen. The room was not large, there was a central table and small wood fired oven but it was the heart and hub of the home. The kettle was always being refilled and placed on the hearth. I became used to the one-way traffic as a constant stream of people, young and old, dropped into the kitchen via the back door and then, after a short exchange, disappeared through an internal door with a cup of soup or tea in hand. The visitors always acknowledged me and as time went by I would hear myself being described to newcomers by some of the more regular visitors as 'the lady who comes to watch over Nina'. It was clear to me, very early on in my relationship with this family, that Nina's observations would be a shared experience and that I could well find myself the subject of observation. I would become a participant observer in every sense.

Observations begin

Nina was almost seven weeks old when I finally began my observations and I was acutely aware there would be considerable change in her since birth. Her parents were also mindful of this and were keen to assist me to catch up on the lost time. They gave me a week by week description of Nina's development and also made available the family photograph album for me to capture the missing weeks through images. It was as a result of viewing this album on my second visit, that I became aware that there had been a lost baby boy and that Nina was

their second child. I was concerned that a very personal and painful part of their life was made known to me very early in our association. Within Aboriginal culture there are significant sensitivities regarding the viewing of images and discussions relating to deceased family members. There was significant risk that this disclosure could be followed by regret at doing so. As it would be another week before I met with Terry and Natasha again I discussed my concerns with them. They were very clear that they felt comfortable with their disclosure as they felt I would appreciate that their son's story was an integral part of who Nina was.

Bick (1964) suggested that the observer must allow the parents to fit him/her into the family relationship and should feel themselves sufficiently inside the family to experience the emotional impact. Mindful of the cultural sensitivities and grief issues, I let this family lead me as they felt comfortable. As each visit progressed they drew me closer and shared more. Both Nina's parents and grandparents facilitated my fitting in. The entire family was accommodating and welcoming and our culturally different backgrounds did not seem to create barriers to the richness of the observation experience.

Family relationships

Nina's parents were also quite different in temperament. Natasha had a very calming influence and was a sensitive caregiver. A rhythm existed in the early observations between this mother and child and Nina used her mother to make sense of her internal world and to filter her experience of the external world. There was a definite pattern of Nina sending a message and her mother responding quickly. Through these exchanges Nina learnt to expect a predictable response and in doing so she learnt she could also draw on her own resources and self regulate her emotions. Natasha described this ability as 'Nina settling herself'.

Natasha would talk to Nina as a thinking, feeling, and social being. She would help Nina make sense of a situation by gently offering a commentary and by posing questions to encourage her to think things out and to participate. 'Ah, Nina, is your Dad teasing you? Why do you think he does this? Do you think it's because he loves you very much and wants to be with you?'

Natasha was very protective of Nina. She bathed her in a plastic baby bath on the kitchen table, long after she had outgrown it, voicing the fear she might 'lose her in the big bath'. Nina slept in her stroller rather than in an exquisite hand carved cot Natasha's father had made, because it was 'too big and she could get lost in it'. The language of loss became stronger as the weeks progressed. She remained dedicated to her daughter but I had a sense this little mother was slipping away as she quietly struggled with her own grief at the loss of her son. It was as though the more confident, mischievous and engaging Nina became, the more this brought home what could have been. Natasha did not feel any real sense of closure as the death of the baby was described as an unexplained, intra-uterine death at term. She had not been aware the baby had died until her admission to hospital and had to endure a long, arduous birth process. Nina was relatively protected from a negative outcome in her development as a result of her mother's sadness by her natural resilience, the unwavering support of her family and the fact that Natasha had invested so much good mothering in the early weeks.

Terry was always on the move, light and agile on his feet and expansive with his gestures. His adoration for his wife and child was obvious. He would enter the room, cross it and land in a chair with one bound. He tackled his grief by remaining busy, running in front of it so he wouldn't have to think. He constantly challenged Nina and tested her boundaries. I often observed him trying to wake her while she serenely slept on and resisted him.

Terry became worried that Nina was sleeping too much and that I would be unable to obtain any information. He lifted Nina up and blew in her face. She wrinkled her nose, stretched her arms and legs, looked at her dad and went back to sleep. He cradled Nina to his chest and talked to her, telling her she had a visitor and how he had waited all day to see her. Her mother laughed and said she would wake up when she was ready. Nina continued to sleep with her head under her father's chin, her arms and legs hanging fully extended. She travelled around the room with him as he was always moving from one thing to another. He asked questions about the course, showing genuine interest. He asked if it had been a disadvantage that Nina was already six weeks old when I started my observation. His parents began talking about how much she has changed since she came home when one of the dogs started barking outside. Suddenly Terry got up, passed Nina quickly to Natasha deftly, with cupped hands, as though he was passing a ball and was gone from the room. This time Nina reacted by throwing her arms out in a typical startle reflex. She scrunched her face up and shook her head from side to side at least four times. Natasha talked to her softly and kissed her forehead. She looked over Nina's head and smiled knowingly at Terry's mother.

One of the most striking things I noticed about Terry was how confidently this strapping young man handled his baby with such speed and agility, as he would a basketball in a game, with quick changes and unannounced moves. It was as though his family were in tune with this and were accommodating by 'intercepting the pass' with outstretched arms. For most of the time Nina seemed to be content to go along with this arrangement.

To the casual observer it may have appeared that this father was intrusive. There were some occasions while presenting my observations in the teleconference seminar when I would hear someone in the group catch their breath as I described a vignette involving Terry and Nina. I had the advantage of seeing the loving expression on his face when he tested her boundaries and I could observe her extraordinary fortitude in filtering his high energy to a manageable level. I came to appreciate that 'waking her up' was Terry's way of satisfying himself she was alive. Challenging her limits in a loving way was about ensuring her survival by increasing her resilience.

Nina's relationship with her extended family also provided a secure base for her to experience her world as a safe place. As her relationships within her family evolved she developed individual attachments that were unique and quite different. She demonstrated she had the confidence to be selective about whom she would go to depending on her needs at the time.

Self regulation

From a very young age Nina demonstrated she was able to soothe herself and regulate her emotions. She would respond to anxiety provoking situations by sitting very still and erect. She seldom cried and reminded me of gazelles when they respond to an unfamiliar situation and are assessing risk. As they stand 'frozen' or motionless and face the source of the threat, they use all their senses to rapidly process information to facilitate their decision to flee or remain. In babies "freezing" is viewed as an early defense, apparently summoned from a biological repertoire on the model of "flight or fight" (Fraiberg 1982).

During one observation a neighbour came to visit. On entering the kitchen she pulled a baby rabbit from under her jacket and dropped it onto the kitchen table. It happened very suddenly and the frightened rabbit scurried back and forth on the table. Terry was passing

Nina to me as she had indicated quite strenuously that she wished to be held. The panic exuded by the rabbit obviously concerned Nina as she adopted her frozen stance, sitting motionless and erect on my lap looking intently towards the rabbit. She did not make a sound but very slowly took hold of the skin on my forearm and began to roll it between her thumb and forefinger. She continued this action until the visitor left with the rabbit.

I thought that perhaps this rolling action helped to keep Nina grounded and formed a connection which allowed some of her internalized anxiety to transfer to me so that I could hold and contain it for her and in doing so help in decreasing her anxiety to a level that was manageable for her with her limited repertoire of defences. Was it soothing for this baby who was too young to run away? After all, skin-to-skin contact is the first containing and familiarizing experience given a baby after the stress of the birth.

When Nina was 30 weeks old I had another opportunity to observe this response.

There was a lot of commotion as I arrived at the house. Two of Terry's nephews were running around the house with buckets in their hands. Terry rounded the corner in hot pursuit. He too held a bucket in his hand and laughed when he saw me, saying the boys had wanted a water fight. He waved me through saying that Natasha was at the back. All this conversation took place while he was running at full speed. The stroller was on the back lawn and Nina peered around the side of it as she heard the click of the gate. She gave me a grin and placed her hands on the canvas weather shield, which she used to put up against so she could get a better view. Terry and the boys went rushing past again and Nina jiggled up and down rocking her stroller. She really wanted to get into this and obviously found it very exciting.

Natasha swivelled the stroller around so Nina could 'watch the action'. She lifted Nina a little higher and packed her in with another cushion so that she had a better viewpoint. She then disappeared around the back of the laundry and came back with two chairs, which she positioned on either side of the stroller. While she was gone Nina looked in her direction and then twisted to try and look at me. She didn't cry as she had done on the last visit when Natasha left the room. She looked pleased when Natasha came back and sat down.

The boys came around the house for another circuit with the dogs barking excitedly. There was much yelling and laughter, each goading the other on. Terry threw the contents of his bucket at his smaller nephew. The water arched through the air and glistened in the rays of the late afternoon sun. Nina was fascinated and again started bouncing in her stroller clutching the sides while pulling forward. She began banging the cover, rocking and jiggling her head. Suddenly she stopped and frowned and with deep concentration made some grunting sounds. Natasha said she thought she was 'filling her pants' and that she was due for a change. She peered down the back of her nappy, saying it might have been wind and asked me to hold her while she fetched her change mat. Natasha smiled at Nina and then passed her to me. Nina enjoyed having her legs dangling in the air and jiggled them around. She flashed me a smile and then looked expectantly in the direction of the house where her mother had gone. The boys were coming around the corner again.

I positioned her on my lap so that she faced outwards and could see the game in progress. A ruckus broke out: Terry pushed his youngest nephew under the tap outside the

laundry. The boy was on his back facing upwards and struggling fiercely to avoid a dunking. He was yelling at Terry to stop. Terry was laughing and saying he had to take his 'punishment' as he had lost and was such a 'sore loser'. They were about three metres away from where I sat with Nina. The exchange had her full attention as she sat quite still and faced in their direction. Suddenly the older nephew ran past us and across the lawn. The younger boy broke free and with 'grrrhhh' sound, picked up a chair and threw it at Terry. Nina stiffened her back, sat very erect and began to roll the skin on my forearm between her thumb and forefinger. She leant forward slightly and looked from one to the other. She remained quiet and continued to roll my skin. I realised I had instinctively changed my posture completely and had turned my shoulder inwards to shield her.

I felt uncomfortable with this scenario before me; there was a tension created in being the observer, when becoming the protector would have been an attractive option. Although Nina contained her anxiety, I felt it worried her but on a different level from her experience involving the rabbit. As she sat there, quietly processing, it was as if she was more worried for them than afraid for herself. As she leaned forward, looking from one to the other, she really appeared to be sizing up the situation with, 'What's going on here, is this a game or isn't it? I'm doing okay for the time being but how about you, are you okay?'

It felt as though I was experiencing early signs of this child's ability to mentalize another's experience and have empathy for them. What about the tension I was feeling? Had this come about as transference from Nina who was using me this time to contain any overflow while she stayed with the experience? What about the actions of her mother; did she have prior knowledge that this game could end this way? Were the two chairs a protective barrier as well as somewhere to sit? Had she nominated me for the protector role to keep her baby safe during her short absence? She could have easily have placed Nina back in the stroller while she collected the mat.

Terry then chastised the boy for throwing the chair. The boy retaliated by picking up a stone and throwing it towards Terry. It missed its mark and as Terry set off after him he grinned at me good-naturedly and said that this always happens; that he wants to play but gets 'narky' if he loses. Natasha came out and called to the boy to not to throw stones around the baby. He ran off down the street with the other two behind him. She smiled at me and said: 'He'll be okay, he has a hot temper and he'll feel bad now because he loves Nina and wouldn't do anything to hurt her'.

Nina had stopped rolling my skin and then leaned back against me. Natasha had just put the change mat on the grass when all three came running back across the lawn and the game seemed on again. Nina seemed to sense this as she started moving again and was beginning to bounce around on my knee. Terry called out, 'Your turn, Nina', and ran up to her. Nina began to jiggle her legs and waved her arms in anticipation. Terry flicked a handful of water on her face. Water ran down her cheeks and droplets hung on her eyelashes. I waited to see how she would react. (I braced for the cry but it never came). All she did was to go 'Phew', shook her head, brought her bottom lip over her top lip and began sucking as the water coursed down her face. As she savoured the taste, she looked approvingly at her father. Natasha said, 'Ah, Terry!' Terry grinned and grabbed Nina under the arms, lifted her up and gave her a big, wet kiss saying, 'Ah, she forgives me easily, this daughter of mine'. Nina's face brightened with a big smile. Terry gave her another kiss, plonked her back on my knee and was off again.

Reflections

As the visits progressed I realized that, as a direct result of my initial experience in starting the observations, I had entered this arrangement with this young couple with a commitment to hold onto this infant and her family in the hope of continuing the observations for the duration of the year. This was mirrored by the family who were committed to holding this baby safe and assuring her survival. I came to appreciate why Nina's father would need to wake her when she slept soundly and why her mother always used the stroller for her to sleep in.

Nina brought both joy and healing to her family. She was a delight to all. I felt privileged to observe her development within her devoted family and extended community, a child growing up surrounded by unconditional love.

Nevertheless, with the transgenerational legacy of loss that Aboriginal people carry, at the completion of my observation there remained the unanswered question of whether this mother and baby could still be 'lost' to the family over time.

Reference

- Bick, E. (1964) Notes on Infant Observation in Psycho-Analytic Training. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 45, 558–566.
- Fraiberg, S. (1982) Pathological defenses in infancy. *The Psychoanalytical Quarterly*, 4, 612–635.