

Getting to Know My Superego: A Student Psychotherapist's Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry into  
Her Superego

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## **Abstract**

The superego is conceptualised by Freud (1923/1961c, 1933/1964) as the psychic agency that is responsible for the functions of conscience, ego ideal, and self-observation. Superego is viewed as an important dimension within a psychotherapist's interiority that influences their personal and professional development. A personal struggle, combined with an unforgettable event in my clinical training, evoked a passionate concern in me to examine my experience of my superego as a student psychotherapist. A heuristic self-search inquiry was chosen as the methodology of this study due to its flexibility, accommodation of the researcher's essence, and potential outcome of personal transformation. The focus of my inquiry is the qualitative aspects of my experience and their attached personal meanings. As I elucidated my experience of my superego, I discovered its harshness which revolves around a theme of safety. As I deepened my understanding of my superego, from the point of personal meanings, I experienced changes in myself. I discuss the implications of my personal findings on my learning and development as a student psychotherapist and my understanding of the superego concept.

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### **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Teressa Hoon

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I dedicate this project to Alice.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Arriving at My Topic

#### *My Unease*

It felt like the idea of doing a heuristic inquiry on my superego had been fermenting in my mind for a very long time. Moustakas (1990) stated that “within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem, or question that represents a critical interest and area of search” (p. 24). For me, it started with an indescribable state of unease. When I was a teenager, I remembered becoming explicitly aware of this sense of constantly feeling watched even though I knew I was not. I felt like my every move was being monitored and I could only act within certain invisible social parameters. Gradually, I felt myself becoming a rigid person. My unease was not really just about feeling being watched. I became an avid evaluator of my own behaviours, feelings, motivations, and thoughts. There seemed to be this invisible presence or force that was felt both internal and external to my experiencing self; that was enforcing some vaguely understood principles to keep me in check. For the most part of my life, I could not allow myself to act spontaneously, even though I did not know why. At the same time, I found myself constantly battling with a harsh inner critic.

#### *Harsh Superego*

The idea of studying my superego as a dissertation project was crystallised when I received a piece of unforgettable feedback during my psychotherapy training which I interpreted as I have a harsh superego and it may affect my learning and development as a student psychotherapist. Thus, when the opportunity came to do a dissertation project, I referred back to this troubling memory and chose to study my superego.

#### *My Superego, My Unease?*

The Oxford University Press (2011c) defined superego as “the part of the mind that acts as a self-critical conscience, reflecting social standards learned from parents and teachers”. Superego is a psychoanalytic concept founded by Freud (1923/1961c, 1933/1964), who stated that the three functions of superego are: to serve as conscience, to maintain the ego ideal<sup>1</sup>, and to self-observe. Having become familiar with the term superego during my psychotherapy training, and having received that unforgettable feedback which I described in the previous paragraph, I began to wonder if my superego is the common construct that linked

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<sup>1</sup> As a simplification, ego ideal refers to the ideal inner image of oneself that one strives to become (Akhtar, 2009).

my experiences of unease. My struggles seemed to relate to an overall feeling of being subsumed by a force or presence of authority that I felt within me. To me, “superego” could best describe this presence. It is a concept that seemed both wide and specific enough to encapsulate the dimension of my self-experience that I would like to study.

### **Nature and Focus of Inquiry**

Upon deciding that I would like to study my own superego, it was relatively easy and straightforward for me to determine my research methodology as only the heuristic methodology could cater to my hope to solve or transform my relationship with a personal struggle, such as attested by the personal accounts of Moustakas (1990) and Sela-Smith (2002). To change, I need to first understand. I wanted to understand more about my superego and to see if this understanding could bring me out of my personal struggle that I illustrated earlier. The focus of a heuristic inquiry is the nature of a lived phenomenon and the meanings attached to the phenomenon as it was experienced first-hand (Moustakas, 1990). A heuristic self-search inquiry is understood as a passionate self-search journey that has the potential to uncover the tacit knowledge or personal myth that is entrenched in my interiority (Sela-Smith, 2002) that is linked to my superego.

Pursuing my psychotherapy training has been the main focus of my life for the past six years. In my training journey, I was simultaneously a (trainee) psychotherapist, a client of psychotherapy, and a student of psychotherapy theories. Being a student psychotherapist rendered me a unique vantage point to explore the concept of superego. I consider it my interest, responsibility, and learning opportunity to embark on an intimate self-search journey on superego. Superego is identified as a vital construct in the understanding of psychotherapy with a psychoanalytic orientation, and in the learning and development of a student psychotherapist (Driver, 2019; Sedlak, 2016, 2019; Strachey, 1934). Hence, my research focus was centred on answering the question: “what is my experience of my superego as a student psychotherapist?”.

Driver (2019) stated that psychotherapy training requires the “totality of the self” (p. 158). I could not agree more. To clarify, my intention was to explore my experience of my superego not solely pertaining to the role of a psychotherapist but from my living experience as a student psychotherapist. This means that equal focus was paid to the personal as well as professional domains of my life as both domains were equally significant in my living experience as a student therapist and mutually intertwined in informing my findings. As a research study, my heuristic self-search inquiry held the following aims:

- to discover the qualitative aspects that could describe my superego or my experience with my superego, and
- to uncover some personal meanings through this elucidation of my experience.

### **Clarifications Relating to Language**

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term “psychotherapy” refers to psychotherapy that is informed by the psychodynamic or psychoanalytic school of thought. This is the form of psychotherapy that I was predominantly trained in at Auckland University of Technology. Consequently, the term “psychotherapist” connotes a practitioner of psychotherapy in the same stream of meaning. In addition, “psychotherapist”, “therapist”, “psychoanalyst”, and “analyst” are used interchangeably for the purpose and level of discussion in this dissertation as the technical differentiation between these terms was beyond the scope of this work.

Further, the term “living experience” was chosen in the place of “lived experience” to represent the new paradigm of understanding described by Sultan (2019) where “within this framework, any and all episodes are not isolated entities with clearly delineated beginnings, middles, and ends but are interrelated and bonded as part of a single, continuing process that is always unfolding in the present moment” (p. xvi).

For clarity, the feminine pronoun has been used as a generic reference to a psychotherapist (or student psychotherapist) while masculine pronoun has been assigned as the generic reference to a psychotherapy client. Outside of the therapist-client context, “their” or “they” pronoun has been used as the gender-neutral pronoun.

### **Notes on Context**

#### ***About the Researcher***

A heuristic study is one that embraces the essence of the researcher in the process and outcome of the research (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Although it would be impossible for me to recount every aspect of my background that I brought into my research, my gender and cultural background was felt to be of particular significance as a context surrounding my self-search inquiry. I am a middle-aged woman hailing from Malaysia. I identify with the Chinese ethnicity. My grandparents migrated from China to Malaysia. I migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand about ten years ago. I do think that my identity as an Asian migrant plays a crucial part in how I experience myself in my psychotherapy training and how I relate to the world.

## ***The COVID-19 Pandemic***

The start and the duration of this research were enveloped within an ongoing pandemic; one which I suspect that people who have lived through it, including myself, will not forget. I would like to acknowledge here, in a concise manner, that the current COVID-19 global pandemic has unavoidably impacted my research process, life interactions, and reflections on superego. One significant impact has been that along with the re-organisation of normality in everyday life, I felt that I was injected with both the anxiety from the uncertainties in life and the boldness to question some personal myths. The pandemic, indeed, has presented me with a unique context to conduct a heuristic self-search inquiry that involves, as Sela-Smith (2002) described, the implicit opportunity to confront and re-organise some internal, psychological structures.

### **Summary of Chapters**

The following summary of chapters, I hope, could orientate my readers to the flow of ideas presented in this dissertation:

#### ***Chapter One – Introduction***

I have, in this chapter, presented the story or context that inspired me to conduct a heuristic self-search inquiry on my superego. I have stated my research question and discussed the nature and focus of my inquiry. In addition, clarifications were offered regarding the usage of certain terms for the purpose and scope of this dissertation. A brief discussion on my cultural background and the temporal context surrounding my inquiry were included as these factors were deemed particularly influential in shaping my research experience and discovery.

#### ***Chapter Two – Literature Review***

I first discuss the results of my literature review on the concept of superego, including Freud's key ideas that captured my interest, how superego may manifest in a person's experience and problems with the superego concept, along with my thoughts on these problems. As a result of this literature engagement, I confirmed superego as my topic of inquiry and found a working definition for the starting point of my inquiry. I then move on to present the themes I found within selected articles that discussed superego in the experience and development of psychotherapists, before offering my own overall responses from this literature review exercise.

### ***Chapter Three – Methodology and Method***

In this chapter, I first discuss the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of heuristic methodology that was founded by Moustakas (1990). It is followed by an elaboration on the research tools (important concepts and processes) and research methods (the six phases of a heuristic inquiry) as delineated by Moustakas, juxtaposed with comments on my actual experience while traversing my heuristic journey. I end the chapter with a discussion on the potential limitation of my heuristic study by considering the compatibility between the subject of my inquiry and my chosen methodology.

### ***Chapter Four – Findings, Part I: Getting to Know My Superego***

The results of my heuristic inquiry are presented in two parts. In the first part, I depict my findings via a discussion on the major themes and insights I have uncovered from my heuristic journey, represented more or less in the order where these insights were presented to me in my journey.

### ***Chapter Five – Findings, Part II: A Beginning to a Different Relating***

In the second part of my findings, I focus more on the transformative aspects in my living experience as a result of my discoveries from Chapter Four.

### ***Chapter Six – Discussion***

I discuss the implications of my personal findings on my understanding of the superego concept, and reflect on the professional as well as personal significance of my heuristic inquiry. I end the chapter by offering encouragement for student psychotherapists to undertake their own heuristic inquiry or a thorough study of their own superego.

### ***Chapter Seven – Creative Synthesis***

Finally, I end my dissertation piece with composites of images that I felt are representative of the core essence of my discovery from my heuristic inquiry.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The content of this chapter is not the result of a comprehensive, systematic literature review. Rather, it reflects my engagement with psychoanalytic literature without following any pre-established formulas except for honouring the trail of curiosity within me and allowing my subjectivity to interact with the search process, as embraced in the spirit of a heuristic inquiry. Nonetheless, my review process was implemented to fit two purposes: 1) to seek further understanding on the concept of superego as a part of my initial engagement phase of my heuristic inquiry (research phases to be covered in Chapter Three: Methodology), and 2) as pointed out by Kenny (2012), to find inspiration and create movements in my heuristic process.

### **About Superego**

I will first introduce the concept of superego and then discuss some ideas I found within Freud's writings that captured my interest and ignited curiosity within me.

### ***What is Superego?***

Superego is a key concept introduced by Freud (1923/1961c) in his structural theory. "Superego" was Strachey's English translation of Freud's "Uber-Ich" in German. Frank (1999) stated that "the essence of Freud's concept of the superego is best captured by the German term he used, Uber-Ich, that is, that which stands above or over me" (p. 449). Superego is the psychic agency that presides over id<sup>2</sup> and ego<sup>3</sup>, serving as an internalised authority to guide our behaviour according to our morality, values, ideals, and social norms. Freud (1933/1964) stated that the three functions of superego are: to serve as conscience, to maintain the ego ideal, and to self-observe.

### ***Formation of Superego***

Superego is said to only come into being at the resolution of the Oedipus complex, which Freud postulated to take place between three and six years old (American Psychoanalytic Association, n.d.). Referencing the Greek legend of Oedipus, the Oedipus complex refers to the unconscious wish of a child to possess the opposite-sex parent and to eliminate the same-sex parent who is seen as a rival. Freud (1923/1961c) stated that superego

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<sup>2</sup> Id is defined as "the part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and primary processes are manifest" (Oxford University Press, 2011b).

<sup>3</sup> Ego is defined as "the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and the unconscious and is responsible for reality testing and a sense of personal identity" (Oxford University Press, 2011a).

is “the heir to the Oedipus complex” (p. 48), portraying this psychic agency as the outcome of a child’s renunciation of his desire and suppression of his aggression towards his parents via a process of identification with them. The term “superego” signified the establishment of a relationship within oneself with an intrapsychic agency where one feels judged and observed by this agency, which mirrors one’s interpersonal relationships with one’s parents and surrogate figures (Arlow, 1982).

### ***Superego and Aggression***

The introduction of the superego psychic agency by Freud was partly to account for the observation that the need to punish one’s own self can play a role in psychic conflict equal to id’s drives (Brenner, 1982). Freud (1923/1961c) noted that superego is largely unconscious and the need to punish oneself could be repressed. This is due to aggression being turned inward from superego towards the ego, as a safer option to directing aggression outwardly towards one’s father, for example (Freud, 1930/1961a). The result of this aggression turning inwards is guilt.

According to Freud (1923/1961c), superego is charged with death instincts and has a close link to id, hence its latent and destructive qualities. He even stated that superego “act as its [id’s] representative vis-à-vis the ego” (Freud, 1923/1961c, p. 49) and further remarked that:

it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be. (Freud, 1923/1961c, p. 54).

Meanwhile, from her clinical observations of young children, Klein (1958/1975) postulated that superego existed at the beginning of life and in its early form, superego is savage under the influence of death instincts, setting forth a developmental trajectory that requires experience of love and good objects to bridge to normal functioning.

I was fascinated by Freud’s perspective on id’s connection with superego and intuitively agreed with his view. I carry an inner critic that mostly spoke to me in a harsh and punitive manner, as if imploding the aggression that I feel I could not safely express outward to others. Thus, I could comprehend how the tone and delivery of my superego’s messages may have much to do with id’s (safe) discharge of aggression and less to do with morality itself. This way of apprehending the superego validated my perpetual questioning about the morality of morality. I grew up in an environment where, from my perspective, morality was often asserted and regulated with intolerance, aggression, shame or punishment. On one hand, I

hold some level of resentment and scepticism toward morality asserted by figures of authority. On the other hand, I worked hard to stay within the boundaries of such morality to maintain a sense of safety and, perhaps, in the process of doing so internalising the same intolerant attitude toward myself.

### ***Superego as Archaic Heritage***

Looking beyond parental influence, superego is fundamentally the link between an individual's psyche and their society (Weiss, 2020). As I dived into psychoanalytic literature for explanation of the superego concept, I began to consider the various implicit levels where society could permeate into a person's personality, potentially through the superego. Frank (1999) observed that Freud had noted four factors that influence the formation of superego: biological heritage, culture and its embedded values, parental influence, and identification with parents' superego. However, the biological heritage factor was barely mentioned in post-Freudian discussion on superego (Frank, 1999) and this too reflected my experience in doing this literature review. Nevertheless, my interest was particularly piqued by Freud's explanation of this phylogenetic influence on superego, not on his point regarding the biological imprint of superego per se, but on the relationship between id and superego. Freud (1923/1961c) stated that:

Through the forming of the ideal, what biology and the vicissitudes of the human species have created in the id and left behind in it is taken over by the ego and re-experienced in relation to itself as an individual. Owing to the way in which the ego ideal is formed, it has the most abundant links with the phylogenetic acquisition of each individual – his archaic heritage. What has belonged to the lowest part of the mental life of each of us is changed, through the formation of the ideal, into what is highest in the human mind by our scale of values. (p. 36)

Bocock (1976) explained archaic heritage as tradition, religion, and morality that operates mostly on an unconscious level and shapes a person's connection with their society. My understanding of the above passage is that superego and id were both postulated as being psychic vessels that carry the phylogenetic influence of past generations, in that the id is stored with the unfulfilled wishes carried forward from past generations and somehow these unconscious wishes were transformed into an individual's superego in the form of ego ideal. Did Freud mean that our ego ideal was shaped in that direction to fulfil these unconscious wishes passed down from our collective id or in the direction that would further restrict or censor these "immoral" unconscious wishes? Somehow, my mind went into thinking about how intergenerational trauma may be connected to this process illustrated by Freud. This

wondering persisted in my inquiry as I moved into my immersion phase (refer to Chapter Three: Methodology).

### ***Ego Ideal***

Prior to the introduction of superego, Freud used the terms “ideal ego” and “ego ideal” interchangeably; when superego was conceptualised, only ego ideal was used and was represented as a component of superego (Hanly, 1984). Frank (1999) contrasted ego ideal with ideal ego, stating that the former represents realistic conscious ideals while the latter represents unrealistic, unconscious ideals. Meanwhile, for Hanly (1984), ego ideal implies a state of becoming, and ideal ego implies a state of being. For the purpose of this dissertation, ego ideal simply connotes the ideal inner image of oneself that one strives to become (Akhtar, 2009).

Reading about ego ideal invited me to reflect on my ideal image of a psychotherapist. I listed down the following qualities: patient, free of self-interest (un-narcissistic), intuitive, wise, mature, observant, reflective, resilient, courageous, and authentic. I wondered from where I picked up these ideas or notions of a psychotherapist. I realised that these adjectives reflected the qualities that I wished for in my love object. These are also the same qualities that I wished I would possess and assessed that I did not possess in my personal life. I began to see the extent of collision between my professional ambition and my aspirations for myself as a person. There was almost no separation between pursuing a career as a psychotherapist and pursuing a goal of being the “ideal me”.

### **Expression of Superego**

If I were to embark on a self-search journey on my superego, I would need to understand how superego may express itself in a person’s experience. In the first instance, self-criticism was my first association with superego. Freud (1930/1961a) noted that self-reproaches that reflect the aggressiveness of superego may be easily heard even though the unconscious demand of the superego may not be easily accessible. Self-criticisms or self-reproaches were described as appearing in auditory form, often in the voice of parental or figures of authority, sometimes mirroring the same words, tones, and other qualities of the familiar figure’s voice (Arlow, 1982; Kessler, n.d.). Although these verbal attacks against the self could be experienced as coming from an “otherness” within us, these reproaches were still identified as our own thoughts, making it hard to distinguish whether it was genuinely coming from our own will (Arlow, 1982; Bouchard & Lecours, 2004; Kessler, n.d.; Moreira, 2008).

Instead of seeing the superego as a standalone psychic agency, Sedlak (2019) preferred to see superego as internalised object relations pertaining to morality or moral judgements. Indeed, the manifestation of the superego's demands could come across as debates between different internal voices, sometimes involving multiple strands taking up different personalities or stands, and these "voices" could be conscious or unconscious. Fancher (2014) talked about listening to the voices of should and listening for the contradictions within the variety of voices we experienced for traces of superego. As he noted from his clinical experience, there could be multiple superego voices (conscious and unconscious) conflicting with the ego while these multiple superego voices could be conflictual within themselves.

Unconscious demands from superego could take the form of impulses or a bad feeling in the body (Fancher 2014; Kessler, n.d.). The demands of the superego may manifest as imperious as the id's impulses (Arlow, 1982). Symington (1998) expressed a similar sentiment when he said, "I am in the grip of projective identification when I am pressured into acting in a particular way against my own inner desire. Such pressure is extremely powerful, the source of such pressure comes from the superego" (p. 160). In fact, the influence, thus the expression of superego, was considered boundless in our living experience. To Josephs (2000), any self-dystonic contents in our mind are a reflection of superego's unconscious disapproval, while any self-syntonic contents connote otherwise. Morality, which could be interpreted as synonymous to superego (Hartmann et al., 1946), extends beyond that intellectual appraisal of ethics in our mind. Brenner (1982) considered that an individual's morality, especially in its unconscious or implicit sense, was founded around two fundamental questions, "what will win or forfeit parental approval?" and "what will rouse or dissipate parental wrath?" (p. 505). To Brenner, every thought, affect, action, wish, and physical sensation will be dictated by these two fundamental questions as being moral or immoral, which connotes, approval or disapproval from our superego. Such conception makes me think of superego as the air that surrounds us all the time. Although sometimes we can feel its presence, we can never see it with our naked eye nor capture it with our bare hands.

### **Problems with the Superego Concept**

In my reading, I came across a number of problems on Freud's conceptualisation of superego raised by other authors. It was crucial for me to have some understanding of these problems before confirming superego as my inquiry topic.

### ***Vague and Contradictory***

Admittedly, the more I dived into the literature, the more I was confronted by the complexity of superego as a concept, despite feeling that superego, as a representation of a personality construct, made intuitive sense. The complexity of the superego concept was partly, if not solely, attributed to its expansiveness in application which then became a lack of specificity and thus vagueness, and the psychic agency subsumed too many elements and qualities that contradicted one another (Arlow, 1982; Arnold, 2006; Frank, 1999; Sandler, 1960). In fact, at the early stage of his conceptualisation, Freud (1924/1961b) himself admitted that his theory concerning superego was vague and incomplete, though it was not clear if he changed his stance later on. Arlow (1982) stated that,

The superego is by no means a uniform, coherent, integrated, harmonious structure. It is a mass of contradictions, fraught with internal inconsistencies, or, as we say in our technical language, intrasystemic conflicts. Its functioning is neither uniform nor reliable, and it is in this respect that the idea of a superego representing the policeman of the psyche holds up best. (p. 234)

This is because superego is composed of many identifications acquired from experiences with actual or imagined objects (people) from across all levels of development, and these identifications may not necessarily be integrated into a cohesive entity (Arlow, 1982; Blum, 1981).

### ***Mixing Superego with Ego Ideal***

Even though Freud conceptualised the superego as including the prohibitive aspect of the conscience as well as the aspiring element of the ego ideal, Freud chose to focus on the punitive side of superego in his writings because of its believed connection to psychopathology (Carveth, 2010; Frank, 1999). Reich (1954) proposed to distinguish ego ideal from superego as the former is concerned with narcissistic wish fulfilments while the latter connotes the restrictive force on impulses. A similar view was echoed by Lampi-De Groot (1962) and Kanwal (1988). However, it could be comprehended that the desired “ought” of ego ideal may also be the flipside of the “must not” of superego’s conscience, simply positioning both elements as different sides of the same coin (Arlow, 1982).

### ***Conceptual Dissolution***

It was understood that the pathology arising from superego is related to superego-ego relative strength differences; thus, in terms of clinical value, superego is not a pathology source per se but an element in a composite issue (Frank, 1999). As such, Sandler (1960) cautioned of “the apparent conceptual dissolution of the superego” (p. 130) as it could be

difficult or confusing to differentiate superego function or content from id or ego. Personally, I felt it was indeed true that it could be hard to distinguish whether some of my internal voices were coming from superego, id, or ego. From my own reflection, I felt that I could identify when my superego was speaking to me in some specific situations such as when experiencing self-reproach or facing ethical pressure. However, in other nuanced situations, it could be less clear whether I was being motivated by my superego, ego, or id.

### ***Superego Versus Conscience***

Freud (1930/1961a) wrote that conscience is a function of superego; and by conscience, he meant “in keeping a watch over the actions and intentions of the ego and judging them, in exercising a censorship” (p. 136). This was presumably why Arlow (1982) equated superego to a policeman. Symington (1998) argued that superego was a concept that is fear based, muffling reality, and only imbued with narcissistic concerns; whereas conscience is reality-based, love-based, and included the welfare considerations of others. To Symington, superego compels no real thoughtfulness while conscience requires one to act out of freedom and deliberate intention. In a similar vein of thought, there had been suggestions to differentiate conscience from superego as some theorists believed that conscience should be viewed as a “kinder” construct than superego. Just as Symington, these theorists argued that conscience is motivated by love and relatedness with other humans rather than fear of punishment as emphasised by Freud. In my view, Freud (1923/1961c) rooted superego in a worldview where human private desires (as conveyed in his structural theory) are inherently against the good of society. The question remains as to whether the worldview that is attached to Freud’s historical context is relevant today.

### ***Relevance of Historical Context?***

Freud (1923/1961c) wrote that:

The super-ego retains the character of the father, while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression (under the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling and reading), the stricter will be the domination of the super-ego over the ego later on – in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt. (p. 35)

Freud’s superego was conceived during 19th century Europe with the characteristics of a Victorian era authoritarian father in mind. Moreover, his structural theory was built on a premise to reflect the impact of societal repression on the human psyche, which was attributed to the sexual repression and conservatism of the Victorian era.

The concept of superego and its structural theory (Freud, 1923/1961c, 1930/1961a), I felt, was founded with the baggage of references to sexuality, such as the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, and penis envy; all of these concepts are mostly considered to be irrelevant in today's context. Just as Lansky (2004) commented, superego's unfortunate association with the often-misunderstood structural theory and the castration complex caused theorists to neglect the superego concept and thus neglect the useful aspects inherent in superego. In this regard, I agree with Lansky as I found superego to be a useful concept to inform clinical thinking (more discussion on this later). As for superego's outdated sexuality references, perhaps at the expense of misunderstanding Freud's intention, I found some (not all) of their symbolic meanings (but not their literal meanings) may still be relevant. For example, I could locate in my own childhood experience the desire to possess a parenting figure to the exclusion of all others; however, I could not agree nor identify with Freud's (1923/1961c) postulation that there exists an unconscious sexual desire within every one of us toward our parents.

### ***My Conclusion (For Now)***

From my discussion above regarding problems around the superego concept, the debates were mostly focussed on whether the superego is a clear and coherent psychological structure or system of functions, and not whether the superego exists. The issues I presented above helped me to evaluate my own stance on the superego. My view was that the idea or psychological phenomenon represented by the word "superego" made intuitive sense; however, it does come with a certain degree of ambiguity and complexity. The vagueness or contradictions detected within the superego concept may reflect Freud's ambivalence or it could reflect his sophistication in grasping conflicting perspectives as merited by clinical evidence (Sedlak, 2019). My preliminary take is that superego is useful insofar as it is used to represent, in a general sense, that part of me that I always felt being in conflict or even hostile to my experiencing self, that part of "other me" within me pressuring me to act toward the directives of "should", and that part of me that judges and evaluates me. All these parts which I named were felt as either coming from a single dimension in my interiority or corresponds as a "superego system". This view on superego that I garnered during my literature review process helped me to confirm that superego was indeed the concept that represents the phenomenon or phenomena that I had always been puzzled about and with which I wanted to change my relationship.

For the start of my heuristic inquiry, I decided to use the following comprehensive definition offered by Lansky (2004) as my *working* definition:

The superego concept concerns more than the moral aspects of the psyche – the aspirations and ideals from the ego ideal and the prohibitions from the superego proper. The concept includes these moral emotions, shame and guilt, and their regulators, as well as internalizations of traits of others and of patterns of relating to important others, repetitions of traumatic situations that one has been unable to master, and the source of internal regulation that underlies self-defeating, self-harming, and self-sabotaging thought and action – anything defying explanation based on philosophic hedonism or, in our language, the “pleasure principle”. (p. 153)

### **Superego in a Psychotherapist’s Experience and Development**

My research question is “what is my experience of my superego as a student psychotherapist?”. Naturally, I was curious to see what had been written about student psychotherapists’ experience of their superego. There is no doubt that an abundance of psychoanalytic literature is available on the subject of superego. However, no article was found written specifically with the focus on how superego was experienced from the perspective of a student psychotherapist. Only one article, a dissertation, employed heuristic methodology to study the topic of superego and was written by Carden (2019), a psychotherapist. The focus of her study was on the connection of superego and spirituality rather than on the experience of training to be a psychotherapist. I did, nonetheless, find several articles or books that focused on superego, as well as including discussions on clinical training or the experience of psychotherapists related to their professional growth (Bierenbroodspot, 1991; Blum, 1981; Colman, 2019; Driver, 2019; Harding, 2019b; Imber 1998; Sedlak, 2016, 2019). There was also an article written by Kannan and Levitt (2017) on the experience of self-criticism in therapists’ training, which I found relevant to the context of my research. The following themes were derived from these articles:

#### ***It’s Personal***

Driver (2019) noted that psychotherapy training requires the “totality of the self” (p. 158) as it is a journey of personal growth that has a developmental trajectory which entails trainees to rework their internal working model. She illustrated that psychotherapy training can be a course paved with psychological landmines and regressive pulls as trainees frequently encounter emotional issues, exposed to the vulnerability of their personality and confronted by the demands of their ego ideal. Similar to Driver, Blum (1981) stated that psychoanalytical training carries an unconscious connotation of “rite of passage” (p. 555) where trainees need to gain their autonomy when facing transference pull connected to their infantile issues and attaining independence from their superego’s resistance toward insights. Furthermore, Imber (1998) attested to the increasing flexibility of her superego allowing personal growth with accumulated clinical experience.

### ***Introspecting Hostility***

Sedlak (2019) discussed the importance of therapists facing into their aggression and hostility evoked in clinical situations, which he saw as unavoidable. As implied by Strachey (1934), and directly discussed by Sedlak, a therapist's aggression could be a hindrance in delivering optimal intervention, not necessarily due to the therapist's aggression but due to her failure to become conscious of it and to work through the feeling, presumably due to superego's repression. Sedlak cautioned that unacknowledged or unreflected aggression would result in therapists opting for interventions or interpretations that may carry the tone of moral judgements, of which clients are often unconsciously perceptive. Conversely, clients could sense and would benefit from their therapists working through the harshness and resistance of their own superego.

### ***Navigating Uncertainties and Self-Criticism***

Colman (2019) pointed out the ambiguities in psychotherapeutic work where it is difficult to know for certain if a therapist has functioned in a desired way and made the right clinical decision. Due to the inherent uncertainty in the profession, self-criticism was reported as a frequent occurrence in the experience of student therapists and functioned as an "interpersonal barometer" (p. 211) as student therapists compared their performance with their peers and supervisors (Kannan & Levitt, 2017). Factors that mediated the occurrence or severity of self-criticism of student therapists included perceived responsibility of therapists, assuming the stance of an expert, and experience in supervision, as well as a student therapist's relationship with her supervisor (Kannan & Levitt, 2017). It was also reported that student therapists saw their shortcomings as a lack of personal potential rather than a lack of clinical experience (Kannan & Levitt, 2017).

### ***Ego Ideal***

A therapist will model and regulate her relationship with her clients based on her ego ideal (Harding, 2019b). Colman (2019) saw that the frequent dilemma of a therapist to act as a good object or a good analyst reflects a false dichotomy. Often, the real dilemma lies in the therapist's struggle between emulating the idealised object of her client and the idealised potency of interpretations, both as a result of identifying with an archaic superego upholding omnipotent ego ideals. It is likely that a therapist's personal ego ideal migrates into her professional ideals (Bierenbroodspot, 1991), and it was easy to associate the psychotherapy profession with such omnipotent, idealised, healing power in order to compensate for the ubiquitous helplessness we touch upon in clinical situations (Colman, 2019). Yet, as Blum (1981) and Sedlak (2016) both pointed out, the aim of psychotherapy training was not to live

up to these ideals but to learn to live with the inevitable failures in therapeutic strivings and to achieve a mature transformation in our relationship with our ego ideals.

### ***Analytic Superego***

Blum (1981) noted that discovering new insights can be unsettling and persecuting because it challenges our comfort zone and disrupts existing values, traditions, and narcissistic investments. He believed that “psycho-analytic treatment is founded on truthfulness” (Blum, 1981, p. 537). A major learning challenge for a therapist in the course of her work is to embrace an enduring commitment to an analytic attitude (i.e., the analytic superego) that is freed from the resistance posed by her pathological superego (Blum, 1981; Colman, 2019). This process includes navigating professional or personal criticisms that may arouse feelings of shame, inadequacy, persecution, and infantile anxiety with the support of her normal superego (Sedlak, 2016).

### **My Responses**

I was searching for the voices of student psychotherapists pertaining to their experience of their superego but traces of their perspectives seemed limited within the existing literature. Moustakas (1990) viewed that every question that holds personal significance will almost always hold a social or universal significance. At the end of my literature review process, I was convinced of the relevance and significance of superego in the experience of any psychotherapist, be it student or seasoned practitioner. Yet, there seemed to be a lack of a phenomenological account or first-person perspective offered on the topic of superego or how superego interacts with a student psychotherapist’s living experience. I wanted to know more. Perhaps, due to my own struggle, I wanted to hear about other student psychotherapists’ or psychotherapists’ story on their superego. When reading the psychoanalytic literature on superego, I had a feeling that most of the authors were approaching superego from the angle of a distant observer, analysing this concept theoretically or discussing their clients’ superego almost from the point of view of a remote reviewer. Occasionally, I stumbled onto some personal comments, such as when Sedlak (2019) wrote about how his own competitive nature may have influenced his motive to deliver an interpretation to a client, or when Driver (2019) included snippets of quotes of graduates of psychotherapy training about their learning experience from her unpublished survey (Driver, 2016, as cited in Driver, 2019), and I felt drawn into these refreshing perspectives. Overall, my literature review experience reinforced my intention to conduct a heuristic inquiry on my superego with the hope to find my own perspective and story on the subject as a student psychotherapist.

## Chapter Three: Methodology and Method

### Research Paradigm and Methodology

This research is a heuristic self-search inquiry that employed the heuristic methodology and methods founded by Moustakas (1990), and incorporated some key ideas introduced by Sela-Smith (2002) within Moustakas's heuristic research framework. The heuristic methodology is situated under the interpretivist paradigm, which holds the ontological position that reality is multiple and relative (Patel, 2015; Sultan, 2019). Interpretivists reject positivists' claim that knowledge is objective and exists "out there", independent of the human mind (Ponterotto, 2005). Interpretivists are interested in understanding how knowledge is derived subjectively via the study of human experience and the underlying meanings uncovered within their specific context (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Phenomenology is a field of study that reflects this aim (Smith, 2013).

Heuristic inquiry is a "phenomenologically aligned research model" (Sultan, 2019, p. 24). Phenomenology was principally founded by Edmund Husserl (Beyer, 2020) who advocated for researchers to get "back to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1900-1901/2001, p. 168). By the "things themselves", Husserl was referring to the understanding of phenomena as they are perceived and experienced in their purest form by "bracketing out" distortions arising from the experiencer's pre-set way of thinking, cultural influences, or prejudices (Phillipson, 1972; Willis, 2001). Heuristic inquiry, however, does not strive to "bracket out" these elements; instead, it "brackets in" (Sultan, 2019) and "retains the essence of the person in experience" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43). Inherent in heuristic methodology is the value proclaimed by Rogers (1961/1995) that experience is a person's highest form of authority (Sultan, 2019), as well as an understanding that the removal of value biases in research is a fallacy (Ponterotto, 2005; Segal, 2006).

Heuristic methodology was developed by Moustakas (1990) to discover "the underlying meanings of important human experiences" (p. 20) through engagement in a systematic, disciplined, and passionate pathway of self-directed search. What captured my interest about heuristic methodology is its full embracement of the researcher's presence and influence throughout the process and in the outcome of the research. I do not see the possibility of studying my superego from the angle of a distant observer. Furthermore, Sultan (2019) clarified that in a heuristic inquiry, the researcher is not separated from their experience because the object of research is not the external phenomenon; rather, it is how the said phenomenon was experienced. As she explained, the experienced entity is "as much a part of our world as we are a part of it" (Sultan, 2019, p. 90). Heuristic inquiry is, therefore, an

autobiographical approach to illuminate a phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1990) and can be considered a passionate, personal pathway to problem-solving (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). My long-time struggle with aspects of my self-experience (which I associate with my superego) created a deep puzzlement within me and sparked my seeking to understand this puzzlement and to find a way through it. I was fascinated by, and curious about, the potential personal transformation that a journey of heuristic self-search could offer, which Moustakas (1990) and Sela-Smith (2002) had both written about.

Although heuristic research was described as a self-search study, Moustakas (1990) devised a systematic framework to include the experience of co-researchers to understand a phenomenon being studied. Such an approach is understood as being a way to enhance the intersubjective aspect of the research as a heuristic inquiry aimed toward uncovering shared essential meanings of the phenomenon of inquiry (Sultan, 2019). Meanwhile, Sela-Smith (2002) saw that the engagement of co-researchers could distract a researcher from their commitment to dig deep (and potentially alter) their internal structures, a process that would most probably evoke inner resistance and ambivalence. The author viewed heuristic self-search inquiry (i.e., excluding co-researchers) as the truest form of heuristic research that could bring about a deeply transformational outcome for the researcher. I was deeply inspired by Sela-Smith's account of her personal transformation through a heuristic self-search inquiry and, therefore, decided to undertake a solo heuristic journey myself.

In the following discussion, I will present the research tools and methods that I utilised in my heuristic self-search journey. I also include comments on my experience pertaining to these aspects of the research process.

### **Research Tools: Important Concepts and Processes**

In his book *Heuristic Research*, Moustakas (1990) outlined seven important concepts and processes that underpin the journey of a heuristic self-search. Out of the seven, I have chosen to discuss here, five of the concepts. To me, these concepts and processes served essentially as tools and as my inner compass to guide my data collection and processing beyond the ordinary level of reflection or introspection. I leave out "identifying with the focus of inquiry" and "self-dialogue" as these two concepts will be covered in the research methods section (Heuristic Phases - Immersion).

#### ***The Internal Frame of Reference***

A goal of heuristic inquiry is to depict the lived (or living) experience of the studied phenomenon from the internal frame of reference of the experiencing person. Moustakas

(1990) stated that the internal frame of reference is the base of a heuristic inquiry. In his evaluation of this concept, he drew on Rogers's (1951/2003) view that any therapeutic personality change needs to entail the empathetic understanding of one's internal frame of reference. I resonated with this wisdom when I gradually realised that without any empathy rendered to myself, I could not dwell into those unflattering elements (e.g., my inner critic that represents my superego, my shame and the parts of me that evoke shame) within me long enough to uncover any real meaningfulness.

### ***Tacit Knowing***

Sela-Smith (2002) talked about the "unseen connective tissue that flows in and between people" (p. 55) and this description was what I viewed as tacit knowing. Tacit knowing is that underlying knowing of patterns and connections between the nodes of our experience that joined distal knowledge to proximal knowledge (Polanyi, 1969). To me, proximal knowledge is my personal myth that coloured my use of any distal knowledge about the external world. As I wrote my findings, the connection between my themes became more visible and that was when I could fully appreciate the pattern that my tacit knowing had brought forward to my consciousness.

### ***Intuition***

Intuition is like that gateway through which we can access our tacit knowing (Moustakas, 1990). Intuition appears to me sometimes as random unexplained or unapproved thoughts, fleeting felt sense, dreams; but, most importantly, as my unexplained stubbornness to persist on my heuristic dissertation even though sometimes I felt like "I was fighting a losing battle". Intuition was like that chaos that my superego dislikes. Yet, at the moment of writing this, I see intuition as a testament to a temporally non-linear process of learning, where I sometimes seemed to know something and then the understanding of how I knew caught up later.

### ***Indwelling***

Indwelling, for me, is that conscious effort to enter into that labyrinth of voices, directives, intentionality, or impulses within me that may constitute my experience of my superego, which are connected to various understood aspects of superego such as morality, ego ideal, boundaries, and prohibitions. As I learned through my journey of inquiry, there could be multiple levels of indwelling and what represented the most effective method of focus was dwelling into that I-who-feels (Sela-Smith, 2002) (more elaboration later) within me.

## ***Focusing***

Moustakas (1990) explained that a dedicated technique of focusing (developed by Gendlin, 1981) is needed to help researchers set aside peripheral qualities and to focus on the core essence of the inquiry. In addition, focusing could help us to grasp what was just outside our immediate awareness because we could not pause long enough in our tracks (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). To me, focusing, or sometimes simply meditating, was that technique I needed to quiet down the white noise that I attributed as my superego's judgements and directives, so that I could hear my intuition and its content.

## **Research Methods: Heuristic Phases**

The six phases of a heuristic inquiry, as outlined by Moustakas (1990), are considered the methods of heuristic research which, in my understanding, depict that heuristic research is a process rather than an outcome-oriented inquiry. Knowing, as embedded within the spirit of heuristic research, is respected as an ongoing process instead of being treated as a final product (Kenny, 2012). Indeed, to me, my heuristic journey was akin to a living entity that refused to succumb to any external expectations or schedule. As Moustakas commented, a heuristic inquiry only follows the internal, experiential clock. Sultan (2019) described heuristic inquiry as an “ongoing nonlinear process of questioning, seeking, waiting, incubating, and receiving” (p. 13) and her description reflects my own experience with the current inquiry. My experience of the following described six heuristic phases was non-linear and unorganised. For example, I found myself returning to the initial engagement phase multiple times throughout my journey, the incubation phase was scattered at various points (sometimes planned, sometimes unplanned), and illumination too occurred at various points in my journey regardless of which phase I considered myself to be occupying.

## ***Initial Engagement***

As I wrote in the Chapter One, the idea of conducting a heuristic inquiry on my superego felt like it had been fermenting in my mind for a long time. I could not determine my exact moment of initial engagement; I only remember having this moment during my adolescence when my puzzlement concerning superego started to seep into my consciousness without even knowing that I was, perhaps, thinking about superego:

*I was walking on this very long and straight sidewalk, on my way to school. It was early in the morning and the street was quiet, except for one or two pedestrians and a number of passing cars. I recall having this sudden awareness in me that I was feeling like I was being watched even though I knew I was not. I had this silly idea in me that when I grow older, I will write a book on “stare-ism” – a word that I made up myself to represent the*

*philosophy or psychology behind the act of staring and being stared at. I thought to myself that some people in this world will forever feel like they are always being stared at while some people will forever do the staring.*

This feeling of being “stared at” developed to become a rigidity that confined me. I think, for the most part, I understood that the person doing the staring and the object being stared at, were both me. I always knew that I am an avid (sometimes obsessive) self-evaluator. It was not until I undertook my psychology undergraduate degree that I came across the term “superego”. A few years later, after receiving that unforgettable feedback during my psychotherapy training (described in Chapter One), I began to seriously contemplate if superego is that vaguely defined phenomenon that had been evoking puzzlement and pain in my living experience.

The next step in my initial engagement was to determine if the term “superego” could represent the phenomenon that I wanted to study. Therefore, a good enough understanding of what the notion of superego captures was my immediate endeavour after having tentatively identified it as my topic of inquiry. Chapter Two (Literature Review) portrays my process of seeking this understanding and confirming superego as my topic of inquiry. In the same chapter, I also depicted my process of arriving at the starting point of my inquiry; that is, my working definition of superego. It was a “chicken or egg” dilemma for me. Starting my inquiry with a definition of superego may seem to be predictive or restrictive; however, without any definition, I would not have a base to ground my self-search of superego. As such, I chose to use a *working* definition after consulting with both psychoanalytic writings and my personal responses.

My current inquiry question, “what is my experience of my superego as a student psychotherapist?” underwent several revisions throughout my inquiry as I came to experience my question and topic of inquiry more intimately over time. There were times where I doubted my choice (much attributed to my inner critic); but, in the end, I persisted with my choice of methodology and topic because I gradually understood that this inquiry was larger than an academic dissertation. Consistent with what Moustakas (1990) had stated, my topic and question of inquiry brought on an emotional effect that I could not ignore, even before they were articulated in the form of my dissertation project. Meanwhile, Sultan’s (2019) affirmation, that a heuristic topic shall be internally located rather than fit into the traditional frame of empiricism, had given me the courage to use my personal struggle as a research topic.

### ***Immersion***

In this phase, I used various data and sources to help me focus, immerse into, and embody my topic and question of inquiry. The data were my thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations or felt sense, reveries and dreams. Sources included self-reflection, self-dialogue, conversations with others, journaling, and perusing literature or any media that inspired thoughts and associations with my superego. Literature was used with the main purpose to inspire and create movements in my heuristic process (Kenny, 2012).

Although the seven important heuristic concepts (or tools) introduced by Moustakas (1990) were generally applied across all heuristic phases, identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, indwelling, and focusing were the indispensable tools that helped me to collect internal data. I tried to identify with my superego; in particular, putting myself solely in the role of that hostile agent I experienced within me whom I called my “tyrant superego” in my findings (see Chapters Four and Five), to understand its perspective, motive, and reasoning. In my findings, I talk about having a conversation with my tyrant superego. It was through this self-dialogue that I began to recognise the protectiveness of my tyrant superego amidst its harshness. Focusing and meditating were invaluable techniques in helping me to listen to the data that lie within my body and my feeling self when my mind was filled with inner chatters of judgements, self-reproaches, doubts, or demands.

One major struggle I experienced was that the unstructured and unrestricted scope of data collection was, at times, overwhelming and yielded too much information and too many directions to investigate. Sela-Smith’s (2002) I-who-feels was that indwelling anchor that I constantly reverted to for guidance in such moments. Moustakas (1990) cautioned that during immersion, researchers may risk “the opening of wounds and passionate concerns” (p. 14). Indeed, this was what I experienced and wrestled with in my journey. At times, I found myself unable to gaze unwaveringly at my superego because I felt too confused, invalidated, and attacked to the point that I had to take periods of unplanned incubation.

### ***Incubation***

An incubation period is needed to allow the space of our tacit dimension to expand, work, and enter into our consciousness (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). During my incubation periods I would distant myself from thinking about my research. I found myself naturally gravitating to the worlds of fiction during these periods, such as watching television dramas and reading novels, especially from Chinese sources. I was attracted to the freedom and feeling of vitality found in fiction. The world I immersed into within Chinese fiction gave

me a sense of belongingness and comfort, which was a welcomed contrast to the harsh landscape into which I often inadvertently submersed myself while journeying into my superego. In the first half of my heuristic journey, I would admonish myself for indulging in such unproductive activities; however, I later realised that my gravitation towards Chinese fiction foreshadowed that sense of shame and “outsider-ness” I felt about my own cultural identity. I will talk about these themes in my findings (Chapter Four) and discussion (Chapter Six) sections of this dissertation.

Although the workings of the tacit dimension were invisible to me, I could attest to the validity and usefulness of an incubation period from my repeated experiences of illumination following an incubation phase, whether my incubation lasted a few minutes or a few weeks. To me, incubation was that process that helped me to realign my mental state to one that is open and not fixated on any outcome. I learned again that discovery does not just depend on the synchronicity of circumstances but is also dependent on my own state of mind to perceive this synchronicity.

I have included a photo of my basil cuttings (Figure 1) later in this chapter to represent the value of an incubation phase in heuristic research. To me, the incubation phase is like that waiting period for my basil cuttings to grow their roots. I could not predict if the roots (representing my illuminations) would grow nor how long it would take. When I checked on these cuttings too closely and fervently, waiting became intolerable. When I forgot about them and returned to them later, I was surprised by how much the roots had grown without my active “supervision”.

### ***Illumination***

Illumination requires tacit working to bring together patterns and subjective meanings that can integrate different parts of ourselves, including the unknown parts (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002); and, as I came to understand, connect my past to my present. I called my illumination “the daze illumination”. I noticed that important findings often arrived in my consciousness whenever I was engaged in an activity that did not require much deliberate thinking, I would then find myself wandering within my mind without any agenda. I wondered if in moments like this, my superego was “fooled” into relaxation when seeing that I was engaging in some productivity.

My first major illumination actually came quite early in my heuristic journey, when I was facing one of my darkest moments in life. I felt really alone and betrayed. It was during this time that I actually found comfort in my own harsh words and harsh lens at looking at the

world. My tyrant superego was like my dark twin that conferred me a distorted sense of safety in its voice claiming certainty. Another major illumination for me was noticing how I use my thinking to pre-formulate my experience while meditating and in my personal therapy, as if I am constantly rushing myself to a point of safety in my mind, following a felt sense of directives which I wondered were coming from my superego. There have been too many moments of illuminations to recount here. I have tried to cover the key ideas emerging from my experience of illuminations in my findings (Chapter Four and Five).

Moustakas (1990) talked about discovery appearing in different forms, including in the form of something that is familiar but beyond explicit awareness. For me, my major discovery was something familiar that broke into my consciousness a number of times but was felt as unapproved by my superego; thus, was not permitted to stay long enough in my waking consciousness for explication and acknowledgement. My major illuminations usually occurred when I was able to be fully honest with my own feelings and thoughts. As I noted earlier, illuminations were scattered across my heuristic journey. I remembered having this jolted realisation that I needed to include the theme of “hearing my own cry” while writing my findings chapters when I was actually trying to explicate the themes I had confirmed for my findings. I understood then that this theme had made itself known to me all along throughout my inquiry, but it felt like my superego had not been allowing it to fully come to light.

### ***Explication***

Explication, as I understand it, is about elucidating the various major components discovered in my inquiry and connecting them into a whole experience (Moustakas, 1990). I found myself traversing back and forth between illumination and explication; particularly as I was writing my drafts for my findings which I had to organise and re-organise many times into the depicted flow of my findings. Even though I thought I had explicated my findings and themes before writing my findings chapters, perhaps partly due to my perfectionism, I had to significantly and painfully revise my draft for my findings multiple times. At the same time, the revision process helped me to find a deeper sense of meaning-making.

Illumination, to me, was like having the streams of my findings flowing into a river; whereas explication was the point where the different rivers of my illumination met in the same sea, becoming the same body of water. That sea where my findings were collated was my over-arching theme of safety that implicitly linked the various nodes in my exploration on my superego. My findings and discussion chapters constitute the essences I discovered in the illumination and explication phases.

## ***Creative Synthesis***

This phase is about finding the whole that represents my heuristic story in its creative form. Initially, I did not understand the purpose of creative synthesis because I thought putting together my findings in a written form would serve the goal of depiction. Having gone through a heuristic search myself, I now understand that a creative synthesis is necessary in a heuristic inquiry because only a creative depiction can communicate the tacit core of a researcher's journey.

## **Additional Comments on My Heuristic Journey**

### ***Focus on Uncovering Personal Myth***

Sela-Smith (2002) framed a heuristic inquiry as an investigation into the interiority of our experience. She stressed that if we want our external world to change, we first need to search internally to see what caused us to shape our external experiences as they are. According to Sela-Smith, the pathway of heuristic inquiry challenges one to face, question, and reorganise one's internal structures and personal myths formed in the past. It is in this spirit that I carried myself through my heuristic journey—always remembering that my goal was to understand previously unnoticed personal myths that may be connected to my superego and my experiencing of the world.

### ***I-Who-Feels***

In her emphasis that heuristic inquiry is purposed to investigate that final frontier that is our interiority, Sela-Smith (2002) pointed to our feeling domain that often goes unnoticed but nonetheless plays a significant role in shaping our construction of subjective meanings to life experiences. She explained that only through surrendering to our feelings in our experience can we gain access to that most intimate yet unknown part of us that constitutes our internal organising system. Surrendering to my real feelings had proven to be a major arena of struggle and growth for me as my inner critic (my superego) often judged my feelings. When overcoming my barriers to reach down to that intimate part of I-who-feels, the shame and judgements that previously shrouded who I was began to feel less significant, allowing a narrative that had always lain close to my heart to be fully revealed.

Sela-Smith (2002) cautioned that the experiencing self may be lost when we are fixated on observing an experience or an event. Accessing the I-who-feels in the experience is the real focus of inquiry as this is the only way to connect to that tacit dimension of our experience (Sela-Smith, 2002). At some point in my heuristic inquiry, I found myself misplacing my focus on the events of my experience or on finding the correct version of "truth" in these

events. By re-orienting my focus back to the I-who-feels, I found my way back to my internal frame of reference and, as I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five, I found my way to reconnect to “my own cry”. Through reconnecting to my own real feelings and pain, I was able to own some of my hostile feelings that were previously projected onto external figures but were really meant for my internal object (i.e., my superego).

### ***The Paradox of Researching Superego in a Heuristic Study***

The most prominent difficulty in conducting my heuristic inquiry on my superego was the paradox inherent between heuristic research and superego. I came to see that my superego may be pulling me towards certainty and stability (see Chapter Four); however, the pursuit of a heuristic inquiry requires one to “swim in an unknown current” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 13). Douglas and Moustakas (1995) urged heuristic researchers to “stay in touch with the unnumerable perceptions and awareness that are purely my own, without the interferences of restrictions or judgements, with total disregard for conformity or congruence” (p. 47). My superego represents that part of me that wants to judge or conform. As such, I had to navigate the paradox of indwelling into my superego while adopting a mindset of congruence and openness. From this experience of paradox, I was able to glimpse experientially into, what I called, the dialectical wisdom of embracing multiple contradictory perspectives, which I will discuss further in Chapter Six.

### ***Believing and Transpersonal***

Although I was greatly inspired by accounts of Sela-Smith (2002) and Moustakas (1990) on the “transformative magic” of heuristic research, after embarking into one, I was quickly doubtful of my own ambiguous process and constantly questioned myself as to whether I would yield any meaningful outcome by following my diverse and sometimes random strands of inquiry. Unlike any of my past research experience, this time I was unable to predict what was in store for me in the next moment. To me, the whole heuristic journey is like drawing with one stroke at a time without having any idea of what the whole drawing will look like. The inquiry process of a heuristic nature, as I came to realise, requires a believer. At the end, just like Sela-Smith stated, a heuristic self-search inquiry has a life of its own—this was what I came to see when putting together my findings.

If I were to use a single image to represent the core of my learning from undergoing a heuristic journey, I would select my basil cuttings (Figure 1). As described earlier, waiting for illumination to arrive was like waiting for my basil cuttings to grow their roots. Once upon a time, I had been checking on these cuttings every day for any appearance of roots and

lamented that it had probably been a wasted effort. I forgot to check on these cuttings for a day or two and when I returned, I was pleasantly surprised that the roots were visible. This experience ingrained that understanding in me of the value of incubation in a heuristic inquiry, which I struggled to embrace the most, and encouraged me to trust in the invisible workings of tacit knowledge. Just like my basil cuttings, my heuristic inquiry requires me to be patient and believe.

### **Figure 1**

*My Basil Cuttings to Represent the Wisdom of Heuristic Inquiry*



### **Potential Limitation**

Early in my inquiry, a question was brought to my attention as to whether superego, a largely unconscious psychic agency, could be realistically accessed using the heuristic methodology. Moreira (2008) compared the unconscious mind, as conceptualised by Freud, to a kind of otherness within us, which is only accessible through psychoanalysis. She viewed that only an external other (a psychoanalyst) could access the content of this unconsciousness as the external other is not subjected to the exact internal forces of influence and repression. She described the superego as the “moral otherly-other” (Moreira, 2008, p. 695), representing that sense of internal otherness from whom we strive to please or gain approval. As such, it would be impossible to look at this “moral otherly-other” with any objectivity or neutrality from within as the ego is governed by the influences, limitations, and prohibitions imposed by its

superego. Therefore, how could I observe my superego in a way that would allow a meaningful discovery to occur? I would like to attempt an answer from several angles.

First, I would like to explore if one's superego is really unobservable by oneself. Moreira (2008) suggested that the unconscious mind (including superego) can only be inferred but never be an object of direct observation. She cited this passage from Freud:

all acts and manifestations that I observe in myself and that I do not know how to connect to the *rest* of my mental life, must be considered as being foreign, belonging to an other, must be explained by a mental life attributed to this other person. (Freud 1915, p. 195, as cited in Moreira, 2008)

This passage reflects Freud's invitation to his readers to use inferences to gain a glimpse into the unconscious (Moreira, 2008). If we are not able to observe or infer our own superego from a more objective stance, like presumably an analyst could, perhaps we might still be able to feel that aspect in our self-experience that corresponds to that "otherness" that constitutes the unconscious, including the superego. Furthermore, Bouchard and Lecours (2004) suggested that it is possible to train our ego to observe the activity of our superego and its mental representation and to change our relationship with this "hostile inner agent" when it is "comparatively more available to self-observation" (p. 879).

Second, Freud's notion of the descriptive unconscious or preconscious, which refers to contents that are not present in our conscious awareness but are retrievable (Kihlstrom, 2015), could support the use of heuristic methodology to study the descriptive unconscious aspect of superego. In fact, the design of heuristic methodology is understood to be geared towards uncovering this implicit dimension that is outside our immediate, ordinary consciousness. Heuristic methodology emphasised the inclusion of non-verbal cues and data that exist outside our conscious intentionality, such as dreams and felt sense. It could arguably be a well-suited methodology to uncover our unexamined personal myths (as discussed above), which would normally be permeated with elements of morality and values that are associated with superego. Even if I merely "scraped the surface" of my superego, I personally believe that it was still a worthwhile attempt at a heuristic inquiry.

Let us go back to my earlier question: how can I observe my superego in a way that a meaningful discovery will occur? Although superego may not be directly observable, my points discussed earlier posited that superego is at least inferable, and its reverberations could be felt in one's interiority or self-experience. Therefore, to clarify, the aim of this inquiry was to study my subjective experience of my superego rather than, strictly speaking, observing my superego (however, for brevity, I sometimes may refer to "my superego" rather than "my experience

with my superego” in my writings). What lay implicitly in making such an inquiry was to explore if a heuristic inquiry could help me to achieve any meaningful change in my understanding of my superego and, from there, inspire personal transformation. Bouchard and Lecours (2004) seemed to suggest that by knowing one’s superego more intimately, constructive change is possible.

## Chapter Four: Findings, Part I: Getting to Know My Superego

I have divided my findings into two parts. The first part (this chapter) focuses on the major themes or insights I discovered from my experience of my superego as a student psychotherapist. The second part of my findings (Chapter Five) will discuss the changes I experienced as a result of my discovery conveyed in this current chapter.

### Inner Critic

“Do you see (or hear, or feel in your body) this form of relationship you have with this other within, which is hostile, unknown part of you?” (Bouchard & Lecours, 2004, p. 884)

When I first thought about my superego, my mind naturally went to this harsh inner critic whose voice seemed to wax and wane in my inner chatter; nevertheless, its presence is always felt. This inner critic judges me and consistently tells me that I am not good enough. Its critical voice is loudest in my head whenever I fall into challenging times. Both Moreira (2008) and Bouchard and Lecours (2004) referred to superego as that sense of otherness within us. This inner critic acts like an external judge within me; that my conscious experiencing self feels subjected to, like an object trapped under its omnipresent evaluating gaze. What amplified that sense of otherness for me is this inner critic’s domineering and, seemingly, sadistic persona. In its extreme state, this voice speaks like a tyrant demanding absolute authority and control, thus, I named my inner critic as my “tyrant superego”.

As I tuned into this voice that was my tyrant superego, I uncovered more of its traits. In the first instance, it rules with absoluteness and rigid standards. There is hardly any room to negotiate with this tyrant. Its principles, though vague, shall apply the same to all circumstances and contexts as it uses overgeneralisation as its weapon. Extremity describes this tyrant’s worldview and standpoint. The main principle which this tyrant operates by is: “If there is a will, there is a way”. For any difficulties or failures that I encounter, this tyrant will accuse me of not having enough willpower or ability. This tyrant pushes me to be perfect to the point of being omnipotent and does not believe in the limits of reality. It prefers to use the phrase “what if” in trying to get me to review every past action or decision. It subjects me to never-ending competition by often comparing me to others. Its favourite line is “if others can do it, why can’t you”? It holds intimate knowledge about me and often uses this knowledge to accuse me of harbouring immoral intentions. It insists that I should always prioritise my “face”<sup>4</sup>

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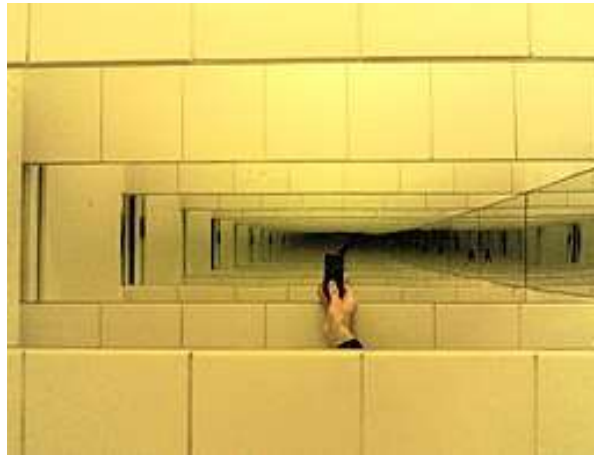
<sup>4</sup> In Chinese culture, “face” connotes dignity, honour, respect, and prestige or reputation.

over relating with others. Last, but not least, it values cleverness and expects me to be all self-knowing.

At some point, I recognised that my inner critic seemed impossible to please. As it stands, I feel like my superego is layered with conflictual standards and values, making it seemingly impossible for me to satisfy its criteria. Being sucked into heeding its demands and criticisms could often feel like standing in between two facing mirrors, being trapped within infinite self-reflections (depicted in Figure 2) with never-ceasing self-judgements.

## Figure 2

### *Infinity Mirror Effect*



*Note.* From *Infinity mirror effect* [Photograph], by Elsamuko, 2010, Flickr <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28653536@N07/5033806460> CC BY SA 2.0

Many times, my tyrant superego attacked me for falling short of its expectations. When it is at its most rampant state, it would demand that I give up my endeavour to be a psychotherapist. I came into the psychotherapy profession holding an ideal image of a psychotherapist that had the following qualities: patient, free of self-interest (un-narcissistic), intuitive, wise, mature, observant, reflective, resilient, courageous, and authentic. With these standards as my goals, the pressure to perform in clinical work (in client sessions and supervision) had been constant in my mind. Harding (2019a) described superego as akin to a group of musicians banded together to play the music that we hear in our head that influences our moral directives and sensibilities. This music that I seemed to be constantly hearing from my superego was drumming with relentless criticism, judgement, and self-doubt. It had morphed into this constant background of white noise that, on many occasions, seized away my attunement with my clients.

I felt helpless engaging in such self-defeating, never-ceasing cycles of self-criticism and meta self-criticism (criticising my self-criticism). Often, to me, the journey of learning and practising psychotherapy is incredibly unpredictable with no obvious bearings for validation or consolation. I once heard that we should treat our work with clients akin to fiction-building. This way of thinking provided some solace to me as it encourages me to forgo “the rights and wrongs” when reflecting on my thoughts, feelings, and actions in my clinical work. Yet, it was too easy for my inner critic to hook onto every assessment point in my training course and each time it regained its dominance in my mind. How can I reflect on my work with curiosity without judgement, but also know that I am good enough to be a psychotherapist and that my intervention is helpful for my clients? How can I play the role of a “professional” but “not knowing” is the ultimate message that I can offer to my clients? The dialectical tension between certainty and uncertainty, known and unknown, permeated my experience throughout my psychotherapy training. It is in the sea of such tension that I feel my tyrant superego is pushing me to swim toward a shore of certainty, even though the landscape of this shore is only black and white, and landing on this shore would mean forgoing colours in my world.

### **Safety**

There were times during this heuristic inquiry when I felt thrown into a temporary state of darkness, feeling extremely isolated. During a difficult period, I had a moment when I visualised my tyrant superego, a personification of my harsh inner critic, offering me a familiar but distorted sense of security. Even though this tyrant superego was constantly attacking me, its twisted logic and paranoid view of the external world was somehow reassuring. My tyrant superego was saying to me that if I look at this world through a lens of threats and guard my heart with the strictest criteria, then I would be safe. That was when I began to wonder if amidst the high expectations of my tyrant superego and its militaristic style of communication, it holds an underlying motive of protecting me.

I tried to converse with this tyrant presence in me to understand more fully its logic concerning my safety:

Me: Why do you insist that I should aim for perfection all the time? Why can't I just be average? I am so tired.

*Tyrant Superego: If you aim for perfection, even if you fall short, approval from others will still be more guaranteed. Others' approval means safety. You should be intelligent enough to know this logic.*

Me: What about mistakes? Why don't you allow me to make any mistakes? Why won't you allow me to forgive myself for my mistakes? What are so bad about mistakes and forgiveness?

*Tyrant Superego: To make mistakes is to open yourself up to opportunities of getting criticised and disapproved by others. Disapproval by others, especially by the authority, brings harm and danger. So there, mistakes are unsafe. If I punish you enough when you make a mistake, then I can scare you to the point of not making any mistake. To forgive is to forget the lesson that you should learn when you made a mistake. Again, simple logic. How can you not know?*

Me: Since you mentioned authority, why should I always obey the external authority? What about my own authority? What about what I want?

*Tyrant Superego: Again, have you not learned anything from your past? External authority is always powerful and harsh. I am just training you to adapt to this reality. You can't care for what you want if you are unsafe. Abiding by the external authority is your guaranteed path to safety.*

Me: Are you saying that you are persecuting me to protect me? You want me to feel afraid enough to stay within your boundaries of safety.

*Tyrant Superego: Yes. That's my aim.*

The notion that my tyrant critic, which I identified as my superego, is underlined by an unreflected deep need for safety began to germinate in my mind.

### **Intellectual Defence**

In my clinical work, I frequently experienced the pressure to reply to my clients. I found myself constantly thinking ahead of their unfolding narrative, frequently reacting to an urge to conclude or to solve, as if it was a default response, taking for granted that the unknown should always be conquered with known rather than with acceptance or tolerance. Outside the therapy room, there too seemed to be this constant urge in me to rush myself psychically to reach or to preview an ending of a process, whatever this process may be. I discovered this directing voice or intentionality in me sitting on the brink of my immediate awareness that would always strive to evaluate and formulate my experience or to predict the outcome of a process ahead of it taking place. Stern (2003) used the term "unformulated experience" to represent lived experience that is yet to be reflected and symbolised in our minds. In my current discussion, I feel like there is this constant need in me to act in reverse; that is, to pre-formulate my experience and then to judge them (prematurely) as good or bad.

Sedlak (2019) stated that an aspect of a pathological superego is its inability to tolerate the internal chaos that often comes with facing the mismatch between one's desired and actual reality. His comment helped me to contemplate if my superego has been driving me to strive toward a state of stability (i.e., in the form of a solution to a problem, an outcome to a waiting, and a known to an unknown). Reddish's (2019) remark that a sense of certainty is paramount to an archaic superego that prioritises safety affirmed my view, even though I was not sure how to feel about having an "archaic" (or pathological) superego. I had been using my intellect to find a quick fix to any instability or chaos that I might experience in my life, forcefully and in a contrived manner, transporting myself prematurely to the shore of stability that represents safety. It reflected that protective but demanding part of me that always urged me to have a plan for whatever outcome or situation I was thrown into in life. As Josephs (2000) explained, the superego will hold the self responsible and launch self-criticism when a person encounters a situation of danger. I began to see the connections between my overly critical self, my compulsive planning (or pre-formulating) self, and my need for safety. At the same time, Josephs also pointed out that self-criticism may serve the function of covert wish fulfilment. His comment caused me to wonder if behind my tyrant superego's insistence for me to be omnipotent was my unspoken wish to rescue myself and my love objects from our past suffering.

The thought that I have a tendency to pre-formulate my experience came to me when I was meditating. From the experience I was able to notice how noisy my mind was and its relentless attempt in making sense of, labelling, judging, and directing my experience as it was unfolding. There was an urgent need within me to make sense of my world and my experience, like a desperate attempt to find an acceptable narrative for my feelings. I asked myself, "what if I stop trying to make sense of my current experience and let it run its own course and wait for a natural understanding to arrive in my consciousness"? It felt untenable to me. I was too afraid to fall into a vacuum of senselessness confusion and not-knowing. I clutched to my pre-formulations, my meanings to my experience, like straws that could prevent me from drowning in a formless, unpredictable flow of existence. To me, meanings signal knowing and it felt like my superego, or at least a force of authority within me, had been pushing me to construct some form of narrative for myself as my net of safety. Another way of looking at this was that I felt pushed or even unknowingly persecuted by a force of authority within me to justify my actions, feelings, and thoughts with motives or reasons that are acceptable to this authority. Josephs (2000) noted the paradox in the modus operandi of the superego—it instils anxiety or fear in us (via self-criticism) with the aim of helping us to renounce our wishes that would stimulate deeper anxiety or fear. Perhaps, it could be comprehended that my superego

was pushing me to construct and then to confine myself within the frame of a sensible, acceptable narrative as a defence mechanism against the fear of not knowing that was attached to my desire for exploration.

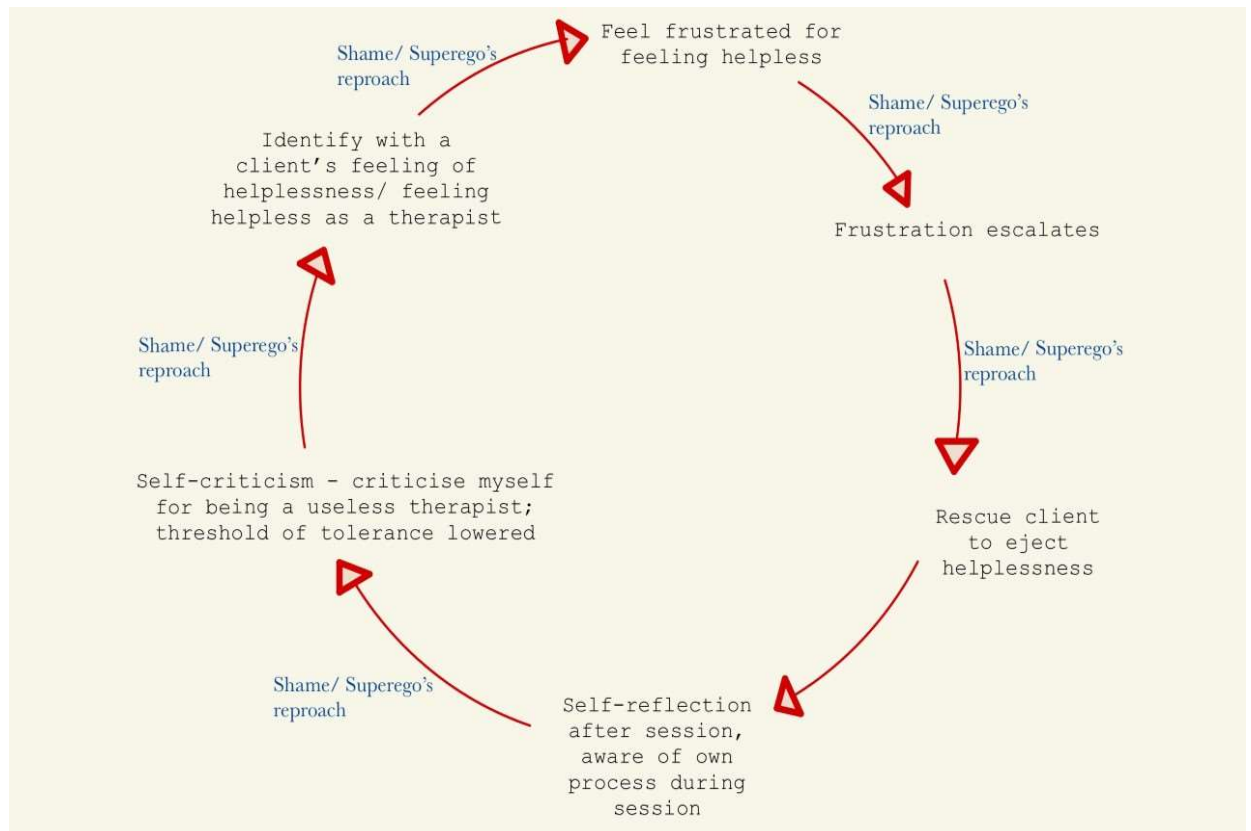
### **Helplessness**

Whether it was about my obsession with productivity or my fear of being a useless therapist, my impulse to rescue my clients was an issue that I had to continuously grapple with in my training journey. It was too easy for me and my clients to slip into cognitive exploration sessions—this was because meaning-making was mainly a cognitive exercise for me, and it was a form of rescuing I offered to my clients (and myself) against that helplessness that we touched upon. To me, not understanding *why* we suffered, not having a story to justify our past, not being able to construct a preview of the future that gives continuity to that story of our past, this not knowing made what felt intolerable, intolerable.

Sedlak (2019) said that a therapist will need to overcome resistance that has a moral basis when helping a client to know himself better. He did not just refer to resistance coming from the client himself but also a therapist's internal block to face into that aspect of herself that was evoked by her client. Witnessing my clients' helplessness that was too close to my own experience did not just evoke in me my own helplessness but also my often-unacknowledged frustration at feeling useless, which sometimes could intensify my rescue tendency. My superego could not acknowledge nor permit that useless me to exist, even more so whenever I am sitting on the therapist's chair. I seemed to be stuck in some sort of a vicious cycle (see Figure 3) that perpetuated a theme of helplessness/uselessness in my learning and development as a student psychotherapist. What is the common factor that has been maintaining the progression within this cycle? As I came to see through my heuristic inquiry, it was that unspeakable shame aroused by the judgement or attack from my harsh inner critic. This shame became more unspeakable whenever I thought about myself possessing a savage inner critic as if I have been brandished with a deformity that would disqualify me from being a therapist.

**Figure 3**

*My Cycle of Helplessness in Clinical Work*



Britton (2003) commented that the superego observes through a moral lens while the ego observes using a realistic lens. I could see how doing nothing or feeling helpless may be automatically construed as being useless by my superego. When I tried to look at my feeling of helplessness away from my moral light, I began to understand that helplessness is not an obstacle that I need to surmount with an idea or an intervention nor is it an unwelcomed guest that I need to hurriedly push out of the door. It is a window to understand my clients' suffering and an opportunity to foster a stronger therapeutic relationship with them.

**Moral Judgement Hindering Embodied Experience**

What is morality? Both Hinshelwood (2019) and Reddish (2019) were of the opinion that morality or the strictures of superego began from inferences made from bodily sensations during childhood. In the beginning of life we associate physical comfort with goodness and discomfort with badness (Hinshelwood, 2019). It is our inborn tendency to interpret discomfort as resulting from attacks from a bad object and to believe that ingesting the "milk" of a good object would purge us of badness (Klein, 1946, as cited in Hinshelwood, 2019). Eventually, what was initially felt as bodily discomfort was intuitively experienced as tied with

immorality, either as emanating from within or from an external other (Hinshelwood, 2019). I recall two separate internal events during this heuristic inquiry when I thought such conception of morality may hold an element of truth:

i) The first event:

*While focusing, I discovered the sensation or experience of different layers of my experiencing. My head buzzing, my heart slightly racing. I told myself I was anxious, yes, it's ok to be anxious, accept it, let the feeling sink down in your body. No, there was this emanating discomfort in my chest, stirring with force. I wanted to push out. I wanted to dislodge, no, to discharge that air stuck in my throat. I suddenly realised that I was feeling frustrated and could almost see how I have used other feelings and thinking to cover this frustration because it's inconvenient to have it in my narrative. Somehow, it was easier to tell myself that I am anxious but not frustrated. Frustration was never allowed growing up. Expression of frustration would invite punishment and worst still, being called immature. Being immature means being immoral, selfish! Also, frustration without a coherent narrative or reason is definitely not allowed. It equals to going crazy. And going crazy is only allowed when you can justify.*

ii) The second event:

*In my chaos, my intellect failed me. My emotions became too loud that I no longer have the option to ignore them. Encouraged by Sela-Smith's [2002] writings, I tried tuning into this I-who-feels within me. What I uncovered was my cowering. I felt it in my body, within my bones and flesh. When I received that invitation to meet with [that person of authority], I felt chills and contractions in my body. I wanted to cower. I could not understand why I needed to. I could not accept my own reactions. That judge in me was telling me that I am a coward. ... I feel like I have been cowering my whole life. I feel ashamed to admit this because my mind insists that I am cowering at nothing and keeps telling me to stop being a pathetic, weak poor thing.*

In the first event, I uncovered my implicit moral overlay on “feeling frustrated”— someone who expresses frustration was equated with someone who is immature and inconsiderate, therefore, immoral. My aversion to feelings of frustration may have started from the point of my own feeling of visceral discomfort and having experienced, in my childhood, the disaster of the “un-containment” of my frustration. In the second event, I felt defective and incompetent because I was cowering at something that I could not rationally justify. By feeling into the discomfort of cowering (which was actually fear), I somehow became bad with cowardice and shame. At the same time, because of my discomfort, I noticed how natural it was for me to irrationally infer that “that person of authority” has the intention to attack me; hence, became my bad object. I later reflected on the event that it felt like I was externalising or projecting my harsh superego onto this figure. Most importantly, my journaling of the first and second events depicted how frustration and cowering could be

censored from my immediate perception and could only be uncovered through a deeper reflection, possibly due to my implicit moral overlay on these visceral experiences.

### **Socialisation and Hearing My Own Cry**

I thought about my negative moral connotation on frustration (and anger) and my submissive-defensive relationship with figures of authority and wondered how my culture and gender played their roles in shaping these connections. Being an Asian woman, I felt this invisible moral overlay on me to be obedient and gentle. As Harding (2019a) put it, superego is that “representative-of-society-in-mind” (p. 2) installed in our psyche to make an individual more acceptable socially, or, as I prefer to see it, superego helps to ensure our survival by behaving in a socially approvable manner.

Meanwhile, Narvaez (2019) commented that individuals will resort to external rules or abide by external authority because “the sense of broken internal reality does not provide reliable guidance” (p. 70). His remark affirmed that intuitive thirst in me to embrace that corner of my inner reality of which my superego disapproved (i.e., to hear my own cry no matter how much my tyrant superego accused me of being immature or childish for doing so). Perhaps I needed to heal my broken internal reality to gain back that trust in myself to guide myself. My heuristic journey brought me closer to this corner of my inner reality that I felt was constantly invalidated or shrouded by that critical voice coming from my superego. In her article, Sabini (1987) talked about hearing two internal voices of authority, which she identified as coming from the superego and the Self. She stated that “these two voices may be intermingled, and the organizing and guiding voice of Self may be obscured by the vociferous demands of the superego” (Sabini, 1987, p. 70). To Sabini, superego was that subjugating voice that presses us to abide to societal conventions and expectations while the voice of the Self is “the voice of a fuller life, of a wider, more comprehensive consciousness” (Jung, 1954/1991, p. 184). As I journeyed further into my heuristic inquiry, it no longer seemed to me that ignoring the content of this shrouded corner, representing my organic responses and my wish to hear my “unapproved” or “societally-incompatible” subjectivity was an ongoing possibility. Perhaps, this calling I experienced was coming from the voice of the Self as described by Sabini and Jung.

### **“Should” Confounding “Is”**

Gradually I came to see how my expectation of the reality (“what should”) could sometimes confound my ability to see “what is”. More specifically, what I-think-I-should-feel could easily take over and smother the I-who-feels as touted by Sela-Smith (2002). Such

contrast, as I came to reflect and grasp, was what I experienced when I received that unsettling feedback (i.e., the incident which I described as the catalyst to my heuristic topic in Chapter One). During that event, I struggled with an internal tug-of-war, caught between feeling unjustifiably criticised and feeling like I should feel grateful for being bestowed the wisdom of truth. My feeling of the latter, on many occasions, smothered my fury and hurt, blocking me from processing my own subjectivity and spontaneous feelings. In many similar events of interpersonal conflict, there seemed to always be a pressure within me to respond according to some invisible moral expectation rather than allowing my organic response.

I came to describe my internal tug-of-war experience as the “gift or dagger?” dilemma. It typically happens when someone gives me a comment about myself that arouses some negative feelings but, somehow, I feel compelled to take the feedback wholesale as if it is a moral obligation. I recalled the first time this dilemma occurred in my childhood. I refused to say “good afternoon” to an adult who just arrived at home and, “pah!”, I was slapped in the face. What hurt me the most was what happened next. I looked into the eyes of another adult whom I trusted and wanted to seek solace. This adult told me in a soft tone that I should just do what I was told to avoid punishment. I knew this adult wanted to help me and was “on my side”, which compelled me to accept this adult’s wise words as if it was a gift of wisdom. Yet, this “gift” was hurting me like a dagger. Since then, I have felt this “gift or dagger?” dilemma repeated far too many times with different people throughout my life. In each of these repetitions I felt more and more combative as my internal conflict intensified. Each time, I felt like my superego voice had been saying to me that if I do not see a “gift” as a gift, then I am neither a mature nor a deserving person. Lately, in a similar situation, I have found myself saying this to myself:

*This is my what is. Stop caring what is good or bad or what should. This is where I am, this is my what is. The gift is a dagger, stop pretending that it is a gift. If I don't fully feel or give what comes up within me a chance, how would I know that it is bad, especially when it is so grey?*

### **My Combativeness**

I later came across Crosby’s (1998) article where he viewed introjection (involved in superego) as a similar process to heteropathic identification described by Scheler (1973, as cited in Crosby, 1998). Crosby (1998) explained it as such:

*Such a person experiences so strongly the expectations of others that he loses any expectations of his own for himself and comes to be dominated by, and to live only for and live only in, the expectations of these others. ...he yields in a sense to the others the place which should be occupied by his own self ...In the presence of some strongly dynamic other, they may at first try to preserve*

their own view of things and their own judgement; but they cannot hold out for long, and soon they are seeing everything with the eyes of the dynamic other, their own view of the world having been suppressed by the force of the view of the other. (pp. 180-181)

What amplified my conflict in dealing with my “gift or dagger?” dilemma was my confusion with my own stand. Even though, sometimes, I felt strongly about resisting or rejecting another person’s evaluation of me, there exists a part of me that would push me to agree with their criticism and compelled me to see it through the other’s eyes. This part of me would accuse me, instil doubt in me, and press me to surrender my own view and subjectivity. If this part of me was my superego, then it was my superego that I often find myself projected onto another person as they became the target of my combativeness. My combativeness was my fight to retain my own view. Scheler (1973, as cited in Crosby, 1998) illustrated heteropathic identification as a squirrel willingly jumping into the mouth of a snake because the squirrel felt strongly of the snake’s desire to want itself and eventually identified with the snake’s wish. The squirrel hesitated for a moment before jumping into the mouth of the predator and that hesitation represented the squirrel’s last remnant of its preservation instinct. I did not want to end up like that squirrel.

Scheler’s (1973, as cited in Crosby, 1998) illustration reminded me of a dream I had around the time I was working on my research proposal for this heuristic inquiry. I dreamed of a snake with a crab in its stomach. I felt an intense desire to rescue the crab; therefore, I took a pair of scissors and cut the snake open. I kept revisiting this dream throughout my heuristic inquiry and wondered what this dream meant. I instinctively understood that this crab was me, but I could not figure out what the snake really represented. Was it a symbol of my transformation (that I interrupted with my cutting) or a personification of the danger I associate with other peoples’ criticisms? In conjunction with Scheler’s animal portrayal of the heteropathic identification, perhaps the snake in my dream represented my superego that I was seeking to release myself from, and the pair of scissors was this heuristic inquiry. Figure 6 (in Chapter Seven) is my depiction of my crab-and-snake dream.

### **Absence and Longing for That Gaze**

I found Horne’s (2019) comment to be particularly meaningful:

[Ego ideal is] the self’s conception of how he would wish the world to see him: when we deal with shame and humiliation, we need to also have in mind gaze and being seen – the gaze that is necessary to contain and to mirror in infancy, and that can so easily instead become a gaze that fosters shame. (p. 47)

Bearing an implicit narrative of an outsider, I always felt unseen and unthinkable by others. What I overlooked in my reflection thus far was to understand that the absence of that desired understanding and attuned gaze could easily foster shame. I could not accept that gift of wisdom presented to me, and took it as a dagger because I felt ashamed for wishing and failing in attracting that understanding gaze, which is the very core reason that attracted me (that I was ashamed to admit) to psychotherapy. In the absence of that understanding gaze, I found it unthinkable to hear my own cry (i.e., my subjectivity); and, as such, found it difficult on some levels to hear others' cry (i.e., their perspective). As a training psychotherapist, it is this balancing act that defines my biggest challenge and growth, and my superego is felt to be that blocking agent that I will need to continuously surmount to hear my own cry so that I could hear my clients' cry.

Britton (1998) discussed the failure to attain the depressive position (Klein, 1946) as being the result of the misplacement of focus and energy on removing the badness that was seen as the barrier to attaining the idealised world/object instead of mourning the forever loss of the idealised world/object. In the language of the Oedipus complex, this means that instead of mourning the futile attainment of his idealised relationship with his mother, the child chooses to believe that riddance of his father is the way to solve his Oedipus complex. This was what my experience with my superego has largely felt to be—that background music of never-ending insistence that if only I willed myself to surmount one more obstacle at hand, real or imagined, utopia would be a step nearer. As I dwelled in my own lifelong theme of migration, and that of the generations before me, this utopia held the meaning of a forever home where I would feel unquestioned belongingness to, and unconditional acceptance from, my tribe and my society. The current heuristic journey has brought me, closer and closer, to see how afraid I am of failure and, consequently, interpreting failure as an approximation of the disaster of not being loved, not feeling that I belong.

### **Outsider-ness**

My heuristic journey brought me to register and confront that unthinkable-ness within me, presumably connected to the censorship enacted by my superego. What was poignantly brought to consciousness was how shameful and untenable it felt for me to move my gaze inward to dwell into my own organic feelings whenever these feelings are registered as “immature” and, therefore, “immoral” by my internal moral judge. My superego was that gatekeeper that was blocking my access to this part of me that was “un-gaze-able” with moralistic judgements that evoked shame. At some rare moments when I could set aside my moralistic judgements toward myself and make a deliberate effort to look inward into my

shame or shameful emotions, I discovered that these elements were connected to my origin (cultural, social, intergenerational, familiar, developmental, educational, etc.) and my current situatedness, which heightened my vulnerability of feeling like an outsider.

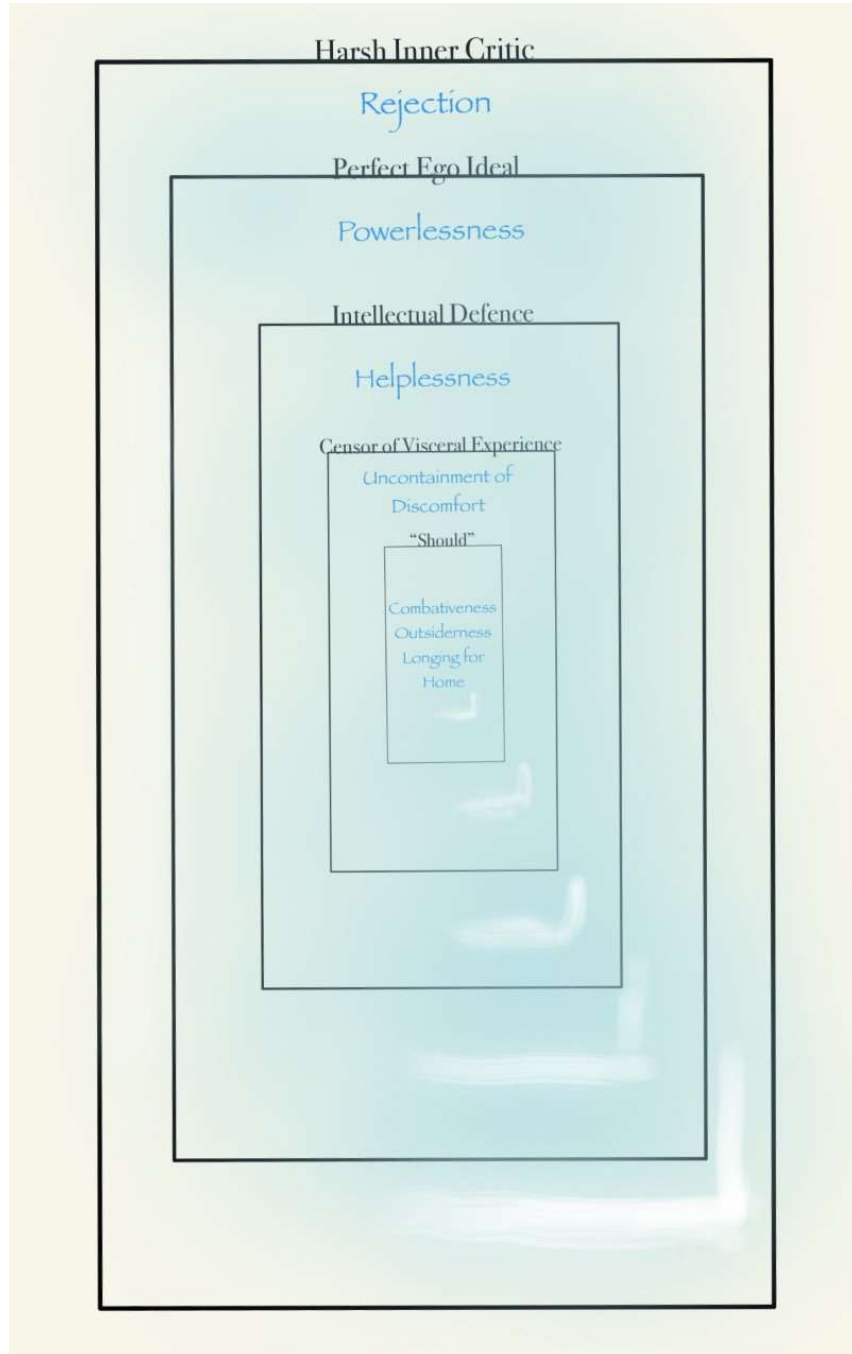
Pursuing psychotherapy training in Aotearoa New Zealand situated me in a unique and complex context on many levels, which augmented my feeling of aloneness in this country, in the training and in the profession. In this context, there are many cultural, social, and political differences and nuances that I felt inadequate in navigating and ashamed to bring into openness of my struggle, because I often felt that no one could empathise nor understood the complicatedness of being an Asian migrant pursuing a western-derived profession of psychotherapy in a bi-cultural country, someone who already struggled with being an outsider prior to her migration. On some occasions, where I was acutely aware of my own differences among others in a group, such as in supervision or in class, my inner critic would say to me that I should not “go there” or accuse me of using my “cultural card”. It felt like my inner critic wanted me to ignore my feeling of vulnerability from being an outsider but, at the same time, wanted me to remember my place as an outsider and make sure I did not challenge my status or embarrass myself. Again, I wondered if my superego, despite its harshness, was serving the purpose of trying to guarantee my safety by insisting that I should stay in hiding. To me, being an outsider is being unseen and, at the same time, generated the feeling that I *should* not be seen. I finally understood that my implicit reason for pursuing this heuristic inquiry is to let myself see my own shame and dare myself to see what lies on the other side of this shame. This is because something beyond me or within me had been calling for me to stop being that outsider to myself.

### **Infinity Mirror**

Earlier in this chapter, I talked about how heeding my superego’s demands and criticisms could often feel like being trapped within infinite self-reflections in a mirror, feeling like there is no end to my self-judgement. At the end of this chapter, I discovered that safety had been an over-arching theme in my experience of my superego. As such, I have chosen to use Figure 4, a mirror with infinite reflections, to represent my superego. For every feature I associate with my superego that I covered in this chapter (harsh inner critic, perfect ego ideal, intellectual defence, censor of visceral experience, and the voice of “should”), there seemed to be a weakness or a vulnerability that is being hidden or protected. In this image of an infinity mirror, the mirror frame represents the protection from my superego and the area within the frame represents my vulnerability.

**Figure 4**

*The Infinity Mirror that is My Superego*



## **Chapter Five: Findings, Part II: A Beginning to a Different Relating**

### **A Hidden Facet of My Superego**

The aim of this heuristic inquiry is to get to know my superego. From the findings I made in the previous chapter, I feel like I have, at least, got to know this hidden facet of my harsh superego that revolves around safety, which I never thought would hold such a depth of personal meanings. My superego, or that “music” that I had been hearing in my mind that constantly judges me and bestows “should”, or that presence of authority and tyrannical otherness that I felt within my interiority, or that un-reflected morality in which I operate my life with that made up my personal myths—that of which I reflected upon and journeyed inwards, represented two significant constructs for me: 1) my psyche’s (over)defence to ensure my safety in terms of survival, and 2) an (rigid) existential narrative that serves as a security net that holds together my sanity and continuity.

In another sense, superego is like that inner resistance that barred me from finding new grounds of experiencing and relating with myself and the world. As I got to know this inner resistance and understanding its “why”, I was able to find more empathy and compassion toward this dimension of my personality that was experienced as rigid and harsh. This, I felt, marked the beginning to a different relating with myself.

### **Context and Nuances**

There had been too many moments in my personal therapy where I felt we were at a doorstep of a stored-away chapter in my life that I felt a resistance to explore. My intellectual self would tell me that I already knew what lay behind these doors and convinced me that there was no point in wasting my time to open these doors. One such door was my feeling of guilt towards my mother. It had always felt like I had sentenced myself to a lifetime of guilt and there was no point to revisiting those memories that evoked my guilt. Giving myself a permanent sentence felt like an easier option. Unexpectedly, on a rare occasion in my personal therapy, I did allow myself to walk through this door of guilt and wandered into my past memories. Even though I thought I already knew the content behind this door, wandering into my past memories, under a different timing and headspace, I found a different experience than what was foretold by my intellectual self. As I allowed myself to appreciate the nuances in these memories, I discovered self-compassion within my guilt. Who knew that this very door of guilt that I was reluctant to open was also the door to self-compassion?

Eventually, I came to understand that the pursuit of insight or a new discovery could occur just by simply noticing. My intellectual self had been insisting that I should actively

pursue an insight through analysing, dissecting logic and reasoning, or asking a never-ending string of questions. I was always in a state of hurry to reach an answer because it is both a point of stability and a piece of self-development commodity. In doing so, I could not stay still enough to take in the nuances of a situation or an experience. In the end, I realised that if I could stay still enough to just take in my current experience, insights were likely to arrive in my consciousness.

Sedlak (2016, 2019) emphasised that a benign superego is a nuanced superego. Through my heuristic process, I began to see the importance of context and nuance in countering my tyrant superego—that part of me that likes to overgeneralise, operates rigidly in absolute moral terms, is restrictive and anti-relational. Context and nuance offer a pathway to connecting and relating to myself and to others, including my clients.

### **Mourning, Giving Up**

*“Giving up wishes for idealised certainties brings freedom from inner persecution” (Harding, 2019b, p. 201).*

The current situatedness of my life—being at the juncture of departing my formal training institution and stepping into the professional world of psychotherapy, the multiple COVID-19 lockdowns and prolonged separation from my family overseas, and, journeying into the current heuristic self-search—all seemed to have contributed to this expanding vacuum of loneliness within me. Furthermore, most of my hopes and expectations for the last two years had to be given up. In this difficult period, I had wrestled with constant bouts of helplessness, loss of control and failures. With all these departures from normalcy that I witnessed in the external world and experienced in my own life, along with my inward journey to understand that confining force within me that I perceived was my superego, I began to experience subtle shifts in my being. I felt like I was starting to understand and face into the limits of my body and my external reality. Amidst the ferocity of that voice that insisted that I have to continue to live up to the “what should” narrative, I found self-understanding that fostered tolerance and the courage to follow an unformulated path.

Since my mother’s passing, I had been asking myself why she had not approached me in my dreams. I felt like my tyrant superego was saying to me that my mother was disappointed at me, thus she was evading me. One day, I heard these lyrics from a song written by Mao (2018) for his late mother (which I have translated from Chinese):

“The moon is bright, the wind is light,  
Have you ever come to my dreams?  
You must have come too carefully,  
Knowing that I sleep lightly.” (Track 4)

I felt comforted by these lyrics. After this event, a dream arrived, which I could only interpret as my movement toward mourning or giving up of my idealised world:

*My dream of loneliness yesterday - I was in a familiar world. It's new but it feels familiar. I started on a street, dark and without anyone. I went into a building, venturing room after room, hoping to find someone, anyone. But nobody was in. I felt incredibly alone in the night in an empty town, having searched into an empty home. I knew I was looking for someone that I knew, maybe my sister, my mother or a friend. I woke up feeling incredibly alone. My first thought was that the feeling spilled over from my dream was going to ruin the rest of my day. The loneliness felt scary. Yet, as I journey into my day, the loneliness or the dream became, not a source of anxiety, but a relief or comfort. I struggled a little less with my actual loneliness during the day. It was perhaps weird. I felt comforted that my loneliness was there to accompany me. Loneliness, as I experienced today, was not emptiness. It was full of my own company including my unfulfilled dreams and grief. Even though in the dream I was not able to find someone, but it was perhaps enough that the impression of my loved ones is still felt without their presence in my dream. I took comfort that I was able to remember to look for them in my dream.*

In the weeks following this dream, I felt a sense of gentleness slowly emerging in my self-experience. I insisted less on how things should be. Lockdown felt more bearable. The pressure to finish this dissertation felt more tolerable. Most importantly, the voice of my tyrant superego generally felt more endurable.

### **Becoming, Working Through**

In the context of this current heuristic inquiry, mourning holds the specific meaning of giving up my idealised image of a psychotherapist and of psychotherapy. One important message that I garnered from my heuristic journey was that there is a pervasive, unconscious or preconscious expectation in me to become something or someone that I wish or need to be, *instantly*. It was like my superego only permitted me to become without becoming. Reasonably, becoming would mean being in a state of movement, not certainty. And as I had discovered in Chapter Four, my superego only favours certainty and stability. As I began to realistically give up my hope to become that ideal therapist that I project into my teachers and assume in therapists I read about in psychotherapy literature, I suddenly realised how elusive the idea of “become” can be. We are constantly living in a state of flux, as a continual work-in-progress. Perhaps being a therapist is about having the courage to surrender into a process, embracing the idea that I will always be working through some undiscovered or rediscovered corners of my interiority as I use myself as a tool for my clients to do the same.

Just about the period when I was actively working through the idea of “becoming versus become” in my mind, I have the following internal dialogue:

*When I read literature on case study, I have the feeling that the writer is above what they observed and stated about the patient and the issues involved - could this be a fallacy? The observer is just a role, a function of that situation and the article, it does not mean that outside this context, the therapist is above it, is it? This speaks to my own expectation of myself to be above it, like in order to qualify as a competent therapist, I need to just embrace this role 24/7 in my life. No room to be anything else. So forever, there is this tension that to be an expert, I can't be the sufferer of the same malaise. I can only empathise from the angle of reflecting a past wound that I have already surmounted and from a distant view. Then with such logic, identification with a client is always easily felt as incompetence, un-expertly, and easily slip into being an unworthy therapist.*

Suddenly, I was questioning whether I may have been too harsh in my expectations toward my teachers who are psychotherapists themselves. The more I expected them to be wise, understanding, or containing, the more I was setting myself up to fail as a therapist. This prison that was my ego ideal, felt like not only a prison for myself but also a trap that confined others. Colman (2019) stated that “the more idealised and therefore unattainable the ego ideal becomes, the more persecutory the functioning of the superego will be” (p. 177). He also pointed out our tendency to elevate our “training parents” to powerful, super-therapists in order to compensate for the ubiquitous helplessness and powerlessness we felt as therapists.

### **Trusting Again, Tolerating Again**

Generally, supervision could readily become a touchy setting for me. Whenever there is an air of ambiguity pertaining to my clinical performance, such as a supervisor's silence, my inner critic could quickly attack me. Lately, however, in reflecting on a supervision session, I wrote:

*In reflection of our discussion, I realised how quickly my intolerance spills over. At first, I could not tolerate the inactive, passive, helpless me that I touched upon when listening to a client. Then I could not tolerate the me in being that therapist. And then I almost could not tolerate the me who could not tolerate. But that tolerance in my supervisor helped me to just about tolerating this last point, or rather, her silent containing helped me to hold together my shame from overpouring into anxiety, paranoia and a career sentence, which my superego is actively pursuing, thus allowing that shame the breathing space to sink in as guilt.*

I began to fully embrace that supervision is there to support my development as a psychotherapist rather than to persecute me. I began to comprehend what it meant to strive for the spirit of the analytic superego. For me, it is firstly the courage to gaze at my own flaws and discomfort with self-acceptance, including the acceptance of my shame. I cannot be curious without empathy. Secondly, it is the understanding that my sense of persecution has less to do with a supervisor's comment but has more to do with my idealised image of a

psychotherapist. Thirdly, it is also to accept that a supervisory relationship may significantly influence a supervisee's confidence, self-criticism, self-evaluation, and consequently, her ability to work effectively with clients (Kannan & Levitt, 2017). This means that working through my relationship with supervisors does not simply reflect my own neediness or narcissism (as I had previously thought) but is an important aspect in my ethical commitment as a psychotherapist.

### **Superego is Not Conscience**

I was attracted to Crosby's (1998) article on differentiating conscience and superego, not via a psychoanalytic perspective but from a phenomenological, humanistic perspective. Crosby's argument was simple: superego, as conceptualised by Freud, is obedience or submission to the dominant internalised other; conscience is not obedience to an external imperative but the exercise of freedom and responsibility to follow one's own values and potential towards honouring one's personhood. Crosby's conscience embodied the same essence as the voice of the Self explained by Sabini (1987) that was inspired by Jung (1954/1991). I quote from Crosby (1998):

Conscience is thus a reaction of ourselves to ourselves. It is the voice of our true selves which summons us back to *ourself*, to live productively, to develop fully and harmoniously—that is, to become what we potentially are. It is the guardian of our integrity; it is the "ability to guarantee one's self with all due pride, and also at the same time to say yes to one's self" [Nietzsche]. If love can be defined as the affirmation of the potentialities and the care for, and the respect of, the uniqueness of the loved person, humanistic conscience can be justly called the voice of our loving care for ourselves. (p. 187)

In response, I wrote down the following in my journal:

*Suddenly, reading Crosby's [1998] article, I have the feeling of reading my own experience on someone's published discussion, I was treated like a person rather than a set of issues. Personhood. Integrity. I never thought, funnily enough, this can be justified as good conscience, reason and consideration of morality, rather than being termed as narcissism.*

*... Perhaps, the biggest travesty to my conscience is not to be myself, choose my own path, speak with my own voice, or at the very least, not trying to do that, and blame it all on my so-called inherited or dysfunctional superego.*

Crosby (1998) and Reddish (2019) both pointed out that Freud's superego represents the morality of fear. In fact, Freud (1933/1964) himself advocated the emancipation of ego from its superego. For me, it was not about divorcing the ego from its superego; rather, the graduation of the ego to understand the reasons behind its superego's demands and being able to tolerate or soothe the underlying anxiety that precipitates these demands without

heeding to these demands blindly. Learning to own, forgive, and love my superego, though it may be extremely difficult or even impossible, may be that path towards the personal integrity mentioned in Crosby's conscience.

### **Emptiness is Not Nothingness**

Crosby's (1998) humanistic notion of conscience inspired me to look in the direction of spirituality and into the transpersonal realm to understand how to transcend the superego with something that felt larger than it. After months of internal search, I felt like I experienced a brief moment of such transcendence:

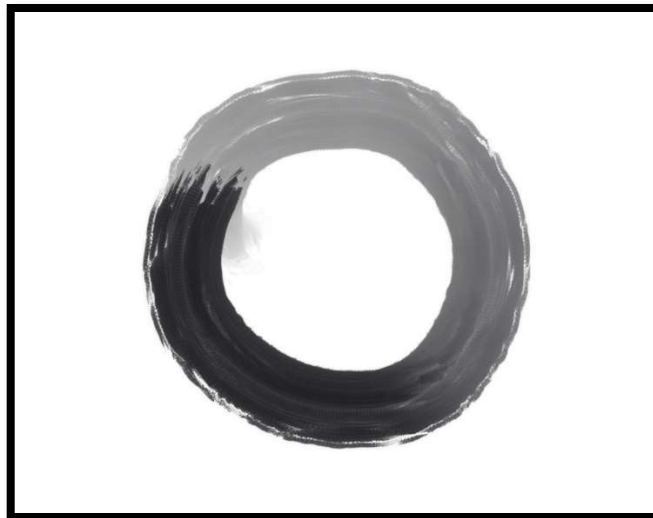
*While stretching and staring mindlessly at my garden outside, I experienced a brief moment that lasted a few seconds of what I would call a deep connection to myself, the pure experience of just being. I did not feel the pressure of time, or has goals, or thinking of shifting states to somewhere else. I felt I was just me. The events that happened in the past few months and my appraisal of my current situations/ problems that upset me sort of flashed before me very quickly and I remembered just understanding that they did not define me, could not trap me. I am just me at that moment. It just is. Perhaps, this was what connection to the whole, spirituality, meant for me - it is that connection to being me. Or that connection to the creative me - the feeling of being creative without feeling the pressure to produce something creative.*

I later came across a quote from Liu (2006/2014) when reading his science fiction novel, *The Three-Body Problem*. In the book, an abbot said to a lost character, "No, emptiness is not nothingness. Emptiness is a type of existence. You must use this existential emptiness to fill yourself" (Liu, 2006/2014, p. 192). This quote deeply resonated with the experience I recounted above. If superego is to represent a temporality, Loewald (1962) stated that it would be the future, but I could only agree partially. Although my tyrant superego has me preoccupied with the future, at the same time, it is also wanting to dictate my future actions based on my past, reminding me relentlessly of past mistakes that I should avoid. Therefore, to me, overcoming my tyrant superego or, perhaps, superego in general, was that freedom I could only experience by being in the here-and-now, feeling unhurried, and concurrently unhindered by any narrative. It felt like to me, reflecting from that brief moment of my version of transcendence, that to feel whole as a person is to empty the mind of the past and the future. This experience was akin to shedding my guardedness and breaking away from the confining shell of my existing narratives, allowing myself to be a vessel of real experience and not a pre-formulated one.

Figure 5 is my drawing of an Ensō, a Zen art. It is a circle drawn in a single stroke. For me, it serves as a reminder to always strive to be that empty vessel for real experience to transverse.

**Figure 5**

*My Attempt of an Ensō*



## Chapter Six: Discussion

### Implications of Personal Findings on My Understanding of the Superego Concept

#### *Superego Versus Conscience*

After my heuristic self-search inquiry on my superego, I am now inclined to see superego as a different construct to conscience. My view was mainly influenced by the concept of conscience elucidated by Crosby (1998) and by my own experience of superego as mainly fear-based, oriented on the past and reflecting a closed system as described by Novick and Novick (2004).

Narvaez (2019) commented that within the setup of today's modern society that promotes individual independence and fuels social isolation, superego has shifted from one that supports a relational self to a persecuting superego that encourages self-protection from the world. My experience of my superego was mainly characterised by a persecuting presence in me that I uncovered as coming from a self-protection motive. Novick and Novick (2004) conceptualised a two-system model of superego, stating that a constructive superego reflects an open system that is attuned to reality while a pathological superego reflects a closed system that is closed off and infused with global omnipotent beliefs and sadomasochism. To me, the relational superego described by Narvaez or that open-system superego portrayed by Novick and Novick is best seen as conscience rather than superego. This is mainly because, from my personal elucidation, superego is a dimension in our personality that is tied to our past and *outdatedness* is understood to be a core descriptor of superego. Like Blum (1981) implied, the superego is a guardian of traditions and status quo, understandably so because superego is that part of our mind that pressures us to act in concordance to our social norms. The superego, as conceptualised by Freud, is intrinsically tied to a person's childhood development and past relationships with their parenting figures (i.e., their historical, social world).

My sense was that my superego reflects a voice of my past, bridling me with principles and values learned from my childhood that carries a sentiment of outdatedness, which was difficult to supersede. Alternatively, conscience, as illustrated by Crosby (1998), is comprehended as something that breaks away from the confinement of one's past learned boundaries and carries a tone of freedom with boundless possibilities. Conscience, like Crosby presumed, may have started with superego but matured into a state beyond the constraint of introjected morality. Conscience is a source of courage for our personal convictions (Crosby, 1998; Milch & Orange, 2004); thus, it is also the source of real personal autonomy. In my view, conscience is best ascribed to the ego to reflect its currentness. Furthermore, the superego, as

touted by Freud (1923/1961c, 1930/1964), was relational only to the extent that it protects its person. A truly relational superego does not stem from a motive of fear and does not act in a manner that alienates a person from their personhood. Therefore, a relational superego is best construed as conscience.

The clinical value in differentiating conscience from superego, as I see it, is the comprehension of dual parallel pathways of morality, especially after a person gains their ability to think for themselves. Superego, as Freud (1923/1961c) intended to illustrate, is mainly that unconscious force sitting in that hidden background in our mind and, I suspect, is a closed-off system (to alterations) that follows an algorithm from our past. However, we can nurture a stronger pathway of conscience that runs parallel to our superego, which reflects more from a place of real thoughtfulness and congruent relational spirit—out of love rather than fear.

### ***Core Essence of Superego: From My Personal Comprehension***

The concept of superego, as understood through my heuristic inquiry, contains two core essences as discussed below.

***Keeper of One's Past.*** As explained above, pertaining to the outdatedness of superego, I reiterate that superego was experienced as a personality dimension that stores and preserves the contents of one's past, especially those that have to do with safety. In my experience of my own superego, I encountered ideas, voices, directives, judgements, or implicit moral principles that either originated from my childhood or related to my background including my intergenerational history. There were certain sentiments of stubbornness and outdatedness that I felt my superego carries, especially when it speaks to me through self-reproaches and self-expectations. As Freud (1923/1961c) stated, superego was enacted based on identifications with relationships that we form in our childhood. Once formed, he posited that superego remained relatively unchanged in adulthood.

***Safety.*** Safety was the theme that overarches my findings from my heuristic inquiry. Be it the voices of my tyrant superego that admonish me and push me to be perfect, the high expectations entailed in my professional ego ideal, the intellectual defence that I automatically enact to push away my helplessness and frustration, or the shame that blocks me from fully acknowledging my raw fury and hurt of being rejected and feeling like an outsider—these were experiences that I felt were evoked from an underlying motive of safety, only that my superego was operating in an overly protective manner and based on outdated personal myths. Alexander (1925, as cited in Reddish, 2019) explained that superego, at its early stage

of development, is not an agency of morality but predominantly serves as a structuring agent that seeks to predict patterns in one's external world and to perform a self-regulating function. This view is concordant to the views of Brenner (1982) and Hinshelwood (2019) where morality, as enforced by superego, originated from avoidance of bodily or visceral discomforts.

Grotstein (2004) remarked that the superego concept was frequently linked in clinical discussions to harshness and savageness and that we are at risk of forgetting that the superego is fundamentally an adaptive function to the human psyche. As I looked carefully into the psychoanalytic literature, there were implications pertaining to the origin of a harsh superego from the point of safety. For example, Brenner (1982) elaborated that a child identified with both real and fantasised prohibitions of their parents and with their parents' superego, becoming harsher towards their own self, than the actual treatment of their parents, to enhance the defensive capacity to guard against their own anxiety and depressive affect. Sedlak (2019) stated that a draconian superego holds the purpose of protecting oneself from depressive pain. Meanwhile, Holmes (2011) considered that our nature of object-seeking reflects our need to seek safety rather than to seek libidinal satisfaction, reminding us that identifications in the formation of superego were motivated by safety in its beginning. He pointed out that while superego is helpful as it essentially serves as our psychological defences, it could become unhelpful by inhibiting our expression of our emotional needs, especially when it is overly stringent. Alexander (1925, as cited in Reddish, 2019) illustrated this point by comparing a harsh superego to a policeman who arrests every man wearing spectacles after being told that the suspect wears spectacles.

In addition, Reddish (2019) wrote that a draconian superego was often observed as the protective shell of a petrified, embryonic ego. The ego, protected yet incarcerated within the shell of the draconian superego, is petrified of the collapse of its superego as a defensive structure and its person's sense of identity is rooted in the superego's strictures and ideals rather than the ego. When I came across Reddish's article, I was surprised at how uncanny its description of the relationship between superego and ego mirrors my crab-and-snake dream which I described in my findings (Chapter Four) and depicted in Figure 6 (Chapter Seven). This is where I talk about my other interpretation of the dream. In this interpretation, the crab was a representation of my rigidity—its shell was my inflexible, draconian superego protecting my vulnerable, petrified ego. Meanwhile I interpreted the snake to be the self-transformation that I had prematurely stalled with my cutting. I felt that this interpretation may too be true in indicating that my harsh superego is, after all, a defensive shell that I have grown to protect myself from my past trauma and intergenerational trauma around homelessness.

## **Looking Back: The Importance of My Inquiry**

Moustakas (1990) viewed that almost every question that holds personal significance will carry a wider social implication. I will first discuss the significance of my heuristic inquiry for the psychotherapy profession and then elaborate on the importance of this inquiry for me personally.

### ***The Big Picture***

The superego is an important subject in a psychotherapist's thinking around her clinical work. Instead of thinking that a client projects a part of his issue onto the therapist, it might be more useful to explore countertransference by examining which aspect of the therapist's personality did the client evoke (Sedlak, 2019). However, it is no easy task for a therapist to offer or access the entire range of her personality for clinical exploration. Freud (1910, as cited in Sedlak, 2019) explained that a psychoanalyst will not be able to explore beyond what is allowed by her internal resistance. Superego is seen as a significant force that presents this internal resistance to understanding clients or clinical material for a therapist. Apart from resistance, superego, or specifically ego ideals, may present a dilemma for therapists in their treatment of their clients. As Sedlak (2019) pointed out, a therapist could be caught in conflicts between her psychoanalytic ego ideal and her reparative ego ideal. Another setting where superego could influence the process of exploration of clinical material is via supervision where a therapist or a student therapist may succumb to the fear of being judged as being incompetent (Kannan & Levitt, 2017; Sedlak, 2019).

Despite the complexity and some perceived inconsistency or ambiguity within the superego concept, the clinical value of the superego in the learning and development journey of a psychotherapist is argued as undoubtable. Sedlak (2016) stated that a psychotherapist is expected to develop, over the course of her training, the ability to tolerate, resist, overcome or recover quickly from "the regressive pull of the pathological superego" (p. 1514). It is through confronting the pathological aspect of our superego that we give ourselves the chance to modify it (Bouchard & Lecours, 2004; Colman, 2019).

In the profession of psychotherapy, professional development is unavoidably intertwined with personal growth. It seemed that the topic of superego, as explored via the personal account of a psychotherapy trainee or practitioner, is a relatively uncharted area within the existing literature. I have hoped that through this heuristic inquiry on my superego, I could add to the richness of current literature and offer another view on superego from the intimate, subjective perspective of a psychotherapy learner and practitioner. Even though the

analysis of superego was said to be the jurisdiction of psychoanalysts, in the sense that superego was said to be only observable by an external analyst and not by our own selves (Moreira, 2008), if we adopt the epistemological view in interpretivism that knowledge is subjective and interpreted within one's idiosyncratic living context, there is a space for personal, experiential accounts of superego that psychoanalytic literature seemed to neglect. Perhaps my elucidation of superego via a first-person perspective could bring about novel findings for others within the field of psychotherapy, as it certainly did for me, and inspire their own exploration on the topic. In the next sections, I will discuss the values of my findings from a more personal perspective.

### ***Zooming In: Personal Significance***

At this point in my heuristic journey, I finally understood that by undertaking a self-search inquiry on my superego, I was answering a calling within me to own my aggressive impulses and hostility. My inquiry enabled me to change my relationship with my harsh superego through: 1) understanding that the harshness of my superego had been driven by an implicit, global need for security and safety, and 2) heeding my desire to hear my own cry. I have gained some insights into my paranoia, fear, and aggression. Even though I still occasionally struggle with these feelings, my understanding of my meanings behind these struggles has and will always constitute a part of my experience; therefore, adding more depth to these living experiences and forever transforming them.

Holmes (2011) stated that maturation is about overcoming the anxiety that inhibits exploration into oneself for higher self-understanding, and it is through this understanding that one may take a fuller responsibility for their negativity instead of blaming their superego. I feel that I have started to do this with my heuristic inquiry. With some gains in my understanding pertaining to my superego, I was able to take back some of my projected hostility onto external figures and looked into my vulnerability that was being covered by this hostility. A theme uncovered from this layer of vulnerability was my "outsider complex" that evoked sensitive needs for safety and security, and my defensiveness. My understanding is that due to my vulnerability and my corresponding (but inadequately explored and unaccepted) hope to be rescued, I have projected this wish into my ideal image of a psychotherapist and of the psychotherapy profession. At the beginning of my heuristic journey, I was afraid to find out and acknowledge that I have a harsh superego. At the moment of writing this, this fear had subsided as I understand that a harsh superego is a normal human condition, a keeper of one's history, and a description of a state rather than a label of permanence. Bouchard and Lecours (2004) remarked that a harsh superego inhibits the self and fosters censorship; however, we

all carry an archaic wish to be transparent and to be completely met and accepted. It is this archaic wish for acceptance that had launched me into my heuristic self-search inquiry on my superego and, consistent with what Bouchard and Lecours have stated, this wish was my saving grace in mitigating that self-punitiveness. In the following discussion, I elaborate on some of the learnings I gained from my heuristic journey.

### **Highlights of Learning**

#### ***Hostility, Destructiveness and Rescue Tendency***

Sela-Smith (2002) stated that tacit knowledge could not be reached without surrendering to one's non-projected feelings. I agree with her. Without owning my superego, destructive feelings, and hostility, I would not be able to look into my anxiety, hurt, and shame more deeply. I am now in a better position to understand Sedlak's (2019) emphasis that a therapist's anxiety towards her own hostility could inhibit her work. To Sedlak, the wish to heal our clients is ubiquitous and intrinsically tied to our deeply-seated destructiveness. Our drive to rescue is enacted out of our anxiety towards our destructiveness; however, our ability to heal as a therapist does not and should not depend on our anxiety to cure but in our commitment to analyse and bring this unconscious anxiety into consciousness and, subsequently, enhance our tolerance to this anxiety (Sharpe, 1950, as cited in Sedlak, 2019). In my heuristic journey, I had started to look into my own rescue tendency from the angle of the anxiety and shame of my own feelings of hostility and destructiveness. This is now something that I feel less apprehensive about exploring both personally and in my clinical supervision in the future.

#### ***Hearing My Own Cry and Analytic Superego***

Sela-Smith (2002) reminded me that if I want my external world to be different, I need to start from myself and discover what contributed to how I perceive my external world. I perceived others as hostile because I have a strong wish to be accepted and I am sensitised to perceive danger and rejection in an interpersonal context. As I uncovered more about my deep feelings of sensitivity and vulnerability revolving my unconscious (or preconscious) wound as an outsider, I was able to challenge my feelings of shame that brought about the generalised sense of hiddenness I feel about myself. As depicted in my findings, I felt to some degree locked out of my own soul, estranged from the voice of my Self (Jung, 1954/1991) that I heard but was afraid to heed. As I permitted myself to hear my own cry and validate my subjectivity, it became easier for me to accept my differences that made me feel like an outsider. Most importantly, I felt less rejecting of the parts of me that were previously felt despicable and

should remain hidden. One particular aspect I am referring to is my helplessness. Another aspect is my cultural identity.

Sedlak (2019) mentioned that when we encounter uncomfortable and hurtful experiences, we tend to hate our experiencing self and the external world. His comment helped me to elucidate Sela-Smith's (2002) insistence that accessing the I-who-feel is the only route to meaningful personal discovery. Bion's (1985/2005) comment struck at the heart of the issue I am contemplating here. He stated "you have to *dare* to think and feel whatever it is that you think or feel, no matter what your society or your Society thinks about it, or even what *you* think about it" (p. 13). Even if my superego reproaches me for my unacceptable feelings and thoughts, even if I hate my experiencing self for registering my discomfort, the I-who-feel remains the source of my subjective truth and my way through to detoxify my (perception of the) external reality from my personal myth.

By noticing and then peeling away some of my superego restrictions, I was able to hear my own cry and stare closer at my subjective truth. I learned, first-hand, the therapeutic power of just acknowledging my "what is". Paradoxically, once I was able to do this, changes in my experiencing naturally ensued without needing to struggle under the coercion of "what should" which was imposed by my superego. Sedlak (2019) stated that "Bion came to call the Language of Achievement in order to describe *what is*, without simultaneously intending to imply *what should be* ...analytic task is to describe what is happening without a strict moral judgement" (p. 64). My own experience serves as a valuable reminder of this statement and the spirit of "faith in truthfulness" embedded in the analytic ideal or analytic superego.

### ***Dialectical Wisdom***

Struggling through my "gift or dagger?" dilemma (mentioned in Chapter Four), I came to realise my fixation on finding a single version of truth. Having looked into my I-who-feel pertaining my dilemma and having come out of it, I was more ready to accept that *my* reality may incorporate multiple, conflictual versions of truth. I felt less fixated to find certainty (representing safety for me) via insistence on a single interpretation for an event. I suspect it is no coincidence that I stumbled on dialectical wisdom as a learning point in my heuristic journey. In the methodology chapter, I noted the paradox between Moustakas's (1990) heuristic methodology and superego, where the former endorses embracing uncertainty and freedom in exploration and the latter embodies restrictions and boundaries. Kenny (2012) pointed out that the heuristic approach is flexible enough to accommodate dialectical processes. He also referred to Gadamer's (1975, as cited in Kenny, 2012) view and stated that

“the movement towards understanding of deep and enduring questions is dialectical” (Kenny, 2012, p. 10).

### ***Owning My Superego***

I agree with the view of Bouchard and Lecours (2004) that the way to cope with a harsh superego is to own it and to find forgiveness for its punitiveness. In my crab-and-snake dream (described in Chapter Four), I was directing my aggression toward the snake which I interpreted as my superego and cut open the snake with a pair of scissors. Later, when I described my dream to a supervisor, she commented that perhaps I could converse with the snake rather than cutting it open to free the crab (that I sympathised with as myself) within (M. Alexander, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Perhaps, I am still a long way to fully forgiving and accepting my harsh superego. However, my understanding that my superego has been operating out of a motivation of protection, somehow helped me to start a process of owning my superego and gaining increased tolerance to its harshness. I am a firm believer that the “tyranny of the past” (Segal, 2006, p. 291) can only be overcome through the seeking of understanding.

### ***Ego Ideal and Mourning***

I learned that my ego ideal was a source of persecution in my living experience as a student psychotherapist. I had set a high benchmark for psychotherapists and psychotherapy and felt persecuted by my superego whenever my performance or my experience fell short of my expectations. Driver (2019) stated that the psychotherapy training journey is paved with emotional exposure and regression that could leave trainees to feel vulnerable. Those who sought a healing experience through their training will harbour the unconscious hope that their training parent will meet their longing for an ideal object as prescribed in their ego ideal (Driver, 2019). When a trainer does not meet the expectations of a trainee’s ego ideal, this will lead to feelings of disillusionment and anger, and when an empathic response cannot be elicited from an idealised training parent, shame can easily arise (Driver, 2019). What had been described reflects my own experience. I felt that my existing narrative of being an outsider in the training enhanced my longing for an ideal training parent and my sensitivity to shame.

An important step in the training is the working through of one’s disillusionment and mourning for the loss of one’s idealised image of psychotherapists and psychotherapy (Colman, 2019; Driver, 2019). Engaging in my heuristic inquiry on my superego helped me to evaluate the internal pressure I faced coming from my superego for omnipotence, understanding its extent and its form, and gave me the chance to confront my irrationality. To

Klein (1958/1975), the maturational process of superego was linked to the process of moving from paranoid-schizoid positions to depressive positions. As Britton (1998) pointed out, resolving the Oedipus complex is similar to attaining the depressive position. Sedlak (2016, 2019) explained that an indication of having a normal or mature superego is possessing the capacity to accept reality and grieve for its imperfections or disappointments (i.e., the capacity to tolerate depressive pain). It seemed to me that the developmental journey of a student psychotherapist will always entail an emancipation of some deeply held, unrealistic private convictions pertaining to psychotherapy through a process of mourning. Such a process of mourning is needed to strengthen a student psychotherapist's superego or, as I would rather term it now, her conscience.

### **Final Thoughts**

I hope that my dissertation could serve as a testament on the value of undertaking a heuristic journey of inquiry on a topic of interest, or performing a thorough study on one's superego, for a student psychotherapist. As for a thorough study on one's superego, I trust that I have illustrated the potential significance of such endeavour for a student psychotherapist via my discussion above. I suspect that everyone has a layer of harshness in their superego. As a student psychotherapist, if you are like me who struggled to come to terms with this harshness, it may inhibit your learning and engagement in your psychotherapy training.

The challenges and gains entailed in a heuristic self-search journey, from my view, are twofold. Undertaking a heuristic inquiry could help develop a student therapist's tolerance to the unknown and enhance her ability to use herself as a tool for her clients. Sedlak (2019) stated that "the analyst must have available to him the capacity to consult with himself and to tolerate waiting in uncertainty until he can think through what is going on" (p. 28). Sedlak has named a core challenge I wrestled with in my psychotherapy training and in my heuristic journey; that is, to train my patience with uncertainty and to build my trust in the mysterious working of the universe in bestowing illumination in its own timing. A heuristic self-search is fundamentally an exercise that helps us to invest, explore, and trust our own wisdom. This was the very ingredient that I needed in order to progress in my professional learning and development. In a heuristic inquiry, one needs to trust oneself to function as a tool in data collection (Moustakas, 1990). The same is required for a psychotherapist in trusting her intuition and perception to capture the client's communication from conscious to unconscious.

It was nothing short of an ambitious mission to want to conduct a heuristic self-search inquiry on my own superego due to the expansiveness of its influence, the diversity of its form,

and its deep nature. In addition, I had chosen to conduct this inquiry within the applicable limits of a dissertation. For this, I acknowledge that a flaw of my current research is its expansive scope; however, as this was my first endeavour to conduct a research study on my superego or any of its related elements, I decided that it was better to not prematurely restrict my field of observation. Furthermore, the professional and personal significance of this inquiry for me was too hard to give up. For me, this heuristic inquiry has revealed many interesting and significant self-search directions that I could pursue more deeply moving forward, such as my shame, aggression, intergenerational trauma, the intersection between my cultural identity and practicing psychotherapy, conscience and so forth. Despite having difficulties with the expansive scope of my study, I still think that choosing to conduct my first heuristic inquiry on the topic of superego is a needed first step, as without this study I could not overcome my superego restrictions enough to listen to myself for data. In any heuristic inquiry, one would need to struggle with their superego to reach into the deep layers of their interiority, to describe their “what is” without judgements and the contamination from “what should”. As such, any heuristic researcher could perhaps benefit from first undertaking some self-searching on their superego.

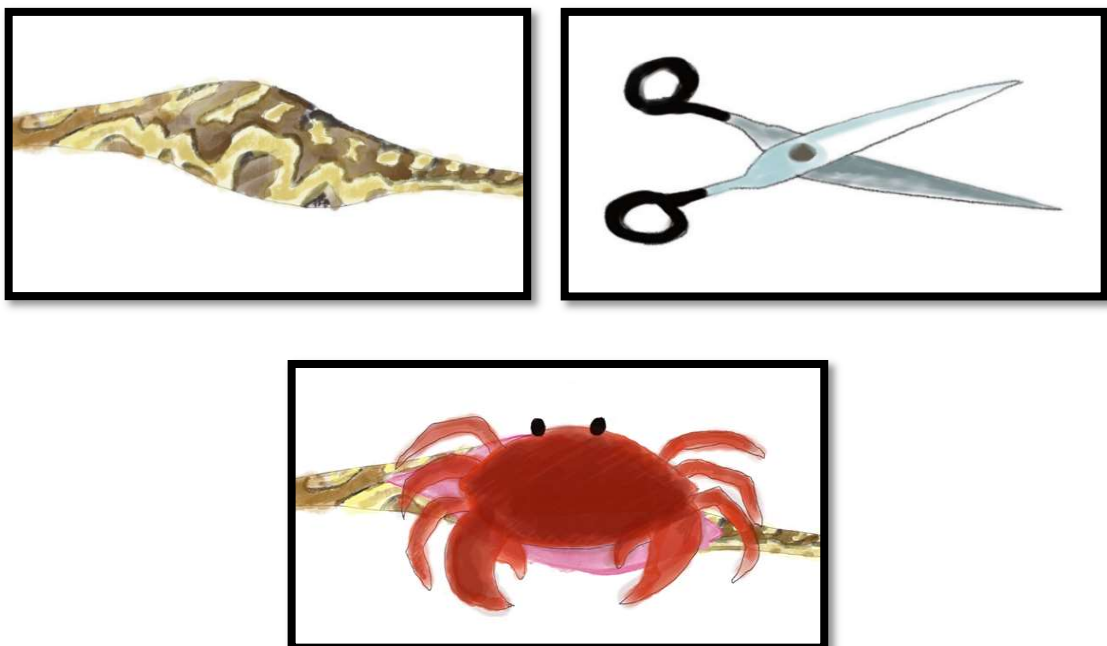
## Chapter Seven: Creative Synthesis

In this chapter, as a closing to my dissertation, I present two composites of images as a creative synthesis for my heuristic inquiry. These images were selected to depict the core of my findings and my experience of my heuristic journey.

The first composite, Figure 6, is my depiction of my crab-and-snake dream that I described in Chapter Four and referred to again in Chapter Six. I had this dream around the time I was working on my research proposal for my heuristic inquiry. I dreamed that a snake swallowed a crab. I felt an urgent need to rescue the crab and so I took a pair of scissors to cut the snake open to release the crab from the snake's stomach. Throughout my heuristic journey, I kept revisiting this vivid dream and wondered about its meaning. I had two different interpretations to this dream. The first interpretation was that the snake represented my superego, and the scissors were my heuristic inquiry—through my heuristic inquiry on my superego, I was able to release my Self (Jung, 1954/1991) (symbolised by the crab) from being smothered by my superego. In the second interpretation, the snake represents self-transformation while the hard shell of the crab represents my rigid superego that is protecting my vulnerable, petrified ego. My cutting of the snake, in this interpretation, represented my stalling of any complete or drastic self-transformation. In my view, both interpretations were valid representations of the personal meanings I uncovered relating to my superego via this heuristic inquiry.

**Figure 6**

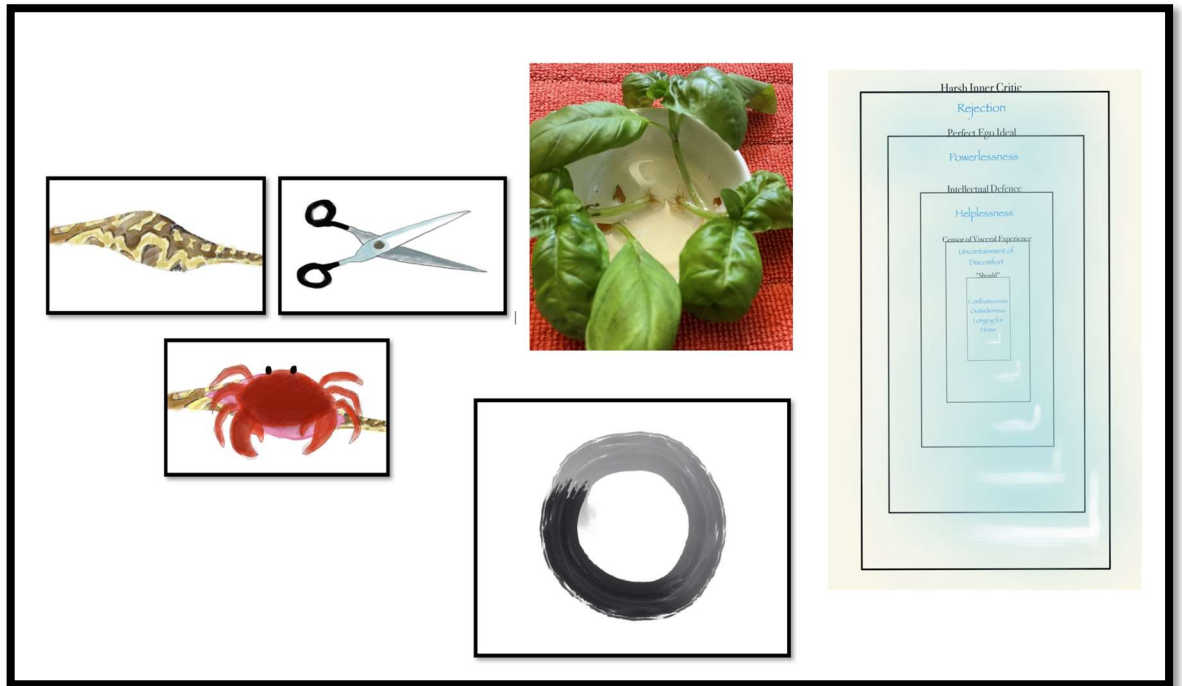
*My Depiction of My Crab-And-Snake Dream*



The second and last composite, Figure 7, is comprised of a number of selected images that I have presented throughout this dissertation. To me, these images, presented together, represent the whole journey of my heuristic inquiry.

**Figure 7**

*A Composite of Images that Represent the Entirety of My Heuristic Journey*



*Note.* This is an amalgam of images that I have included throughout my dissertation, i.e., my crab-and-snake dream, my basil cuttings, the infinity mirror that is my superego, and an Ensō.

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