

Why Does Being a Therapist Not Make Me a Better  
Mother? A Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry into the Duality  
of the Mother/Child Psychotherapist

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## Abstract

This research portrayed my lived experience by answering, "What is my experience of the duality of being a mother and becoming a psychotherapist?" Adopting Moustakas's heuristic methodology and Sela-Smith's heuristic self-search inquiry (HSSI), I collected data through a process diary, recollections, dreams, discourse with others, and academic papers. The data was analysed, and the essence of meaning was identified from emergent themes by employing heuristic concepts and processes. The discoveries were presented through the explication of write-ups and a creative synthesis of artworks. My main finding was a differentiation of two developmental processes: 1) the Therapist's Path on which Therapist, a non-mother therapist, transits to Mother(T), a theory-informed mother who, in turn, transforms her professional identity into Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood; and 2) the Mother's Path on which Mother, a biological mother, transits to Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood who, in turn, transforms her motherhood into Mother(T), a theory-informed mother. An ongoing cycle from Mother to Mother(T) captured my self-transformation from an unconscious mother to a psychodynamic mother. This self-inquiry associated the mother/therapist duality to a broader context of 1) the causation between the psychological births of my dual identities; 2) an integration journey of theory and motherhood; and 3) wounded healers. Specifically, an awareness of my position on my Mother's Path clarified an identification confusion, which addressed my long-seeking query of "Why does being a therapist not make me a better mother?" The implications of my research are threefold: 1) for practice and to be of value to psychotherapists who position at different phases on their Mother's Path; 2) for training and to advocate the impact of the trainee's role identification between their personal self as well as professional self; and 3) for future research on the two differentiated developmental paths of mental health professional parents.

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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 in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), 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. The word count of this dissertation is 10,975.

Signed: Ka Wai Ho

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

"Can you give me a boat?"  
"Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree.  
And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away.  
And the tree was happy... but not really.

— From *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, 1964

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This chapter introduces my study and its context. It explains how I formulated my question, and elaborates the research aim, scope, and significance.

### A Last-Minute Determination

In contemplating my topic, I imagined it would be another clichéd struggle between picking something useful or following my heart. Having been trained to be reflective, I felt some calling that resulted in an intense self-query: What is that *one* question? I was tempted to research some outside knowledge, but my intuition inclined towards something which linked my personal and professional life. Without understanding every reason behind it, I finalized my topic in the following words: "I struggle with how psychotherapy affects motherhood. This topic seems deep inside me, which feels scary to explore but intriguing where it leads. This dissertation could be the first and my last chance to find the answer. I feel that I should be brave for myself at least this once." After I clicked "sent" some unexpected pent-up tears ran down my cheeks as if a bondage around my chest had finally been shaken off.

### What Brings Me Here

Among my multiple identities, I have mainly identified with mother and therapist. I mothered for fifteen years before becoming a psychotherapist. I realized I never questioned why I wanted to be a mother during my personal therapy. In my gut was a sneaky avoidance: I had no reason not to be one. I then realized how my Asian

upbringing ingrained an auto-justification for motherhood: it is proof of my maternal capacity. Although I had no knowledge of the motherhood constellation (Stern, 1995) when I gave birth, the possession of a mother identity alleviated my persecutory anxiety of falling below familial/social expectations. Later, I reflected that my motherhood made me feel complete. This awareness stirred up a complicated feeling throughout my training. In reality, my motherhood has been unexpectedly overwhelming with two difficult infants, children, and then adolescents. My frustration aroused a desperate urge to seek "cures" to relieve my feelings of failure and loss of control. My first cure was to become a play therapist by equipping myself with knowledge and skills. When my children entered adolescence, the anxiety of "not knowing enough" triggered my nerve to seek the second cure to become a child and adolescent psychotherapist. Although "being a healer" was my teenage aspiration, it was not until my motherhood failed me that I became a psychotherapist.

### **An Unfinished Process**

"Why do you want to be a play therapist if you do not enjoy playing with children?" My therapist's question emotionally attacked and debunked me. It consumed the rest of my training to appreciate the opportunity to reflect on my choice of profession. I realized an unspoken expectation underneath my repetitive pursuit of professions: being a therapist makes me a better mother. This faith caused a vicious loop, aggravating deeper maternal frustration when my therapist identity neither endorsed the efficacy of my parenting nor armored me from adolescent challenges: "Stop talking like a therapist!" or "Just give me the answer!" These spontaneous responses lingered in my head, pulling a loose thread off my tapestry of belief.

### **My Question**

I decided to resolve the mystery of the interweaving relationships between my personal and professional life. My research question is "What is my experience of

the duality of being a mother and becoming a psychotherapist?" "Duality" is defined as "the state of combining two different things" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), "the quality or state of having two different or opposite parts or elements" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and "a difference between two opposite things: a division into two opposite groups" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). "Mother" is defined as "a female parent" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.), as having "maternal tenderness or affection" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and as someone who "give[s] birth to" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). "Psychotherapist" is broadly defined as "someone who gives people psychotherapy" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), in which "psychotherapy" is defined as "the treatment of mental illness by discussing someone's problems with them, instead of using drugs or operations" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), and "treatment of mental or emotional disorder or of related bodily ills by psychological means" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In academic research, "psychotherapist" is defined as a qualified health practitioner who is registered.

### Research Aim, Scope, and Significance

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of the mother/therapist duality, initiated by a confusion that triggered my *being*: why being a therapist does not make me a better mother. The scope includes relevant psychotherapeutic literature directly investigating this duality. While abundant studies explore a myriad of maternal concepts and psychotherapist concerns throughout history, my preliminary search indicated that the most relevant literature only falls within the past four decades. No theory explains the duality, and self-inquiry is rare. This study potentially contributes to the existing knowledge by reflecting on two developmental processes that transformed me from a mother to 1) a mother/play therapist; and 2) a mother/psychotherapist. Each process includes a role shift, a new identity formation, a dual identities integration, and a self-transformation. My findings could be valuable for research regarding the transitions between different phases on a mother's developmental path to becoming a psychotherapist, and

relevant for training and practice when trainees or practitioners are mothers before becoming therapists.

## Overview of Chapters

This chapter sets the scene that formulated my research question. Chapter 2 elucidates the research plan and the selected methodology and method. Chapter 3 is a critical literature review to the knowledge relevant to the complexity of the duality. Chapter 4 presents my illuminations and discoveries. Chapter 5 illustrates a creative synthesis. Chapter 6 provides a critical commentary on the research process and results and evaluates my research.

## Chapter 2 - Methodology and Method

This study aims to address my question: What is my experience of the duality of being a mother and becoming a psychotherapist? This chapter elucidates my research plan that executes the heuristic methodology and explains the rationale behind employing the heuristic method for data collection and analysis.

### Moustakas's Heuristics and Sela-Smith's heuristic self-search inquiry (HSSI)

Within the interpretive paradigm, Moustakas (1990) characterizes heuristic research as a transformative journey, derived from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find. Its constructivist ontology and epistemology underscore the nature of knowledge: context-dependent, socially constructed, and subjective, implying that truth can be unearthed in the self-understandings of the participants (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Norman, 2019). A self-inquiry is ignited by a mysterious call that beckons a researcher who has personally experienced and ardently seeks to comprehend a significant experience. Based on a self-study on loneliness (Moustakas, 1961, 1972, 1975, as cited in 1990), the advancement of heuristic methodology and the evolution of heuristic concepts are shaped by a multitude of psychological influences, including Maslow's self-actualizing persons; Jourard's self-disclosure, Polanyi's tacit dimension, indwelling and personal knowledge; Buber's dialogue and mutuality; Bridgman's subjective-objective truth; Gendlin's meaning of experiencing; and Rogers' human science (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic research finds relevance in psychotherapy, with its foundations in phenomenology and its association with humanistic therapy (Tudor, 2016). Its goal is to uncover the nature and meaning of a subjective human experience, using defined concepts, processes, and phases to explore and analyze in a non-linear, free-fall manner. This methodology recognizes the importance of the researcher's *self*, necessitating the courage to leap into the unknown. A heuristic process is self-sustaining and self-contained, relying on internal

resources to relate and make sense of the external reality through reflective thought, feeling, and sensation. By deeply engaging, immersing, and focusing on conscious awareness, inspiration, self-dialogue, self-processes, and self-discoveries, the researcher's self is awakened, completed, then transformed.

In questioning Moustakas's heuristics, which comprises self-inquiry and interview with co-participants, Sela-Smith's (2002) HSSI stresses an absolute focus and perseverance on the *I-who-feels*, not the experience itself, nor how others comprehend similar experiences as a justification for research validity. HSSI agrees with most key components of Moustakas's model but emphasizes the acceptance of surrender to resistance with an aim to achieve a transformation of self and viewers.

### Why Heuristic Research

I recalled moments of delight when I adopted this scientific yet self-directed approach. This methodology permitted a freestyle search, reconnecting and honoring my thoughts, feelings, mindset, and value system. I perceived HSSI as a suitable method to achieve my goal, being the only participant. Heuristics is the "approval" I had longed for to reclaim my autonomy in investigating my own *being*. Adopting HSSI as my research design reflected my resolution to voice out the *I-who-feels* self through an internal-oriented language (Sela-Smith, 2002), not my observing self, informed by external-oriented languages. This self-inquiry is an entrance into my "last frontier" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 54) that has long been denied.

### Method: Data Collection and Analysis

Keeping a diary has been my natural capacity since a young age, a practice that fends me off from loneliness. When I transcended from diary-writing to process-writing as a play therapist a decade ago, self-inquiry and self-dialogue became my second nature. These prominent tools honed my reflectivity and creative power of self-discoveries. Besides my research diary, I collected data from recollections, dreams,

concourse with others, and academic papers. Data was analyzed and the essence of meaning was identified and extracted from emergent themes by employing heuristic concepts and processes, including identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990). The discoveries were presented through the explication of write-ups and a creative synthesis of artworks. The limitations of this method are that both the scope of data collection and analysis can be subjective, personalized, or unconsciously biased. The next section described the execution of my HSSI.

## A Healer's Heroic Quest

Before the onset of my self-inquiry, my tacit knowledge recalled an obsolete adolescent memory - *HeroQuest*, a board game developed in 1989. It was my favorite role-play game in which a fellowship of four characters adventured heroic quests inside the maze of dungeon. It immersed me in epic vibes of the Lord of the Rings fantasy while I was surviving a brutal adolescence reality. My inclined character has always been Elf, a healer. Elf was the first archetype I unconsciously identified with long before I did as a mother. This self-inquiry was a revival spell that awakened my long-buried healer figure. My "spells" were a metaphorical tool utilizing Moustakas's heuristic concepts to guide my quest. They activated my developmental processes, unlocking each and every door of the six heuristic phases and discovering treasures after battling "monsters", my resistance to surrender to the *I-who-feel*. In referencing the guidebooks (i.e., Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002), I experienced a free fall traveling through the six heuristic "levels". I grasped an hourglass and equipped with spell cards (i.e., heuristic concepts), adventuring before the boulders dropped (i.e., submission deadline).

## Down the Dungeon

### 1) The Entrance Level of Engagement

Moustakas's guide states that to engage, the researcher searches inward for tacit awareness, allows intuition to flow and elucidates the context from which the researcher formulates the question. Sela-Smith's warning is that if the topic is personally painful, resistance may set in unconsciously resulting in choosing a less threatening topic. I committed my honesty and integrity in formulating my question. The weight of my urge triggered my motivation, embarking to inquire about my dual-roles experience. Answering this calling required courage to any opening of wounds associated with my mother's constellation. Identifying with the focus of inquiry was the first spell I cast: which role do I "become one with"? Am I researching my mother self from my therapist self, or vice versa? My self-dialogue spell was a beacon of honesty, guiding me toward self-disclosure. Followed by a focused spell, I kept my inquiry from inclining to either of these two identities but staying with my whole *self*, who has experienced the duality. The tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1983) spell enhanced my hunch and speculative skills to sense the right pathway.

## **2) The Twin Levels of Immersion and Incubation**

Moustakas's guide elaborates that to immerse, the researcher fully lives the question in their waking, sleeping, and dream states, to maintain a sustained focus and concentration. Incubation requires the researcher to step back from the intensity of the question, allowing the tacit dimension to reach its full potential. Sela-Smith warns that without immersion, the research may lack integrity. If resistance emerges, only surrendering to this process enables discovery. On the immersion level, my question embraced me in a timeless space. Casting an indwelling spell initiates inward searching for untapped mysteries in my tacit dimension. I battled monsters in return for treasures (perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and judgment lifted from my unconsciousness). In reality, my weekly schedule of practice and research forms an equilibrium. Incubation occurred on my working days and when I walked away from my laptop. Metaphorically, traversing between the immersion and incubation levels was entering and retreating from a dream state: awakening and sleeping. These processes mirror my breathing: inhale and exhale. I repeatedly cast the spells of

focus and self-dialogue to stay with the *I-who-feels*, not the experience, to be self-focus. I relied on the surrender spell to acquire honesty that grants access to my intuition for insight.

### 3) The Illumination Level of "aha"

Moustakas's guide described this phase as a breakthrough into conscious awareness of a clustering of qualities into themes as the researcher opens the door to a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, and a synthesis of fragmented knowledge where the realities missed, misunderstood, or distorted show their presence. Sela-Smith's guide stresses spontaneity and the opportunity for self-integration of dissociated aspects. I sensed myriad "magic moments" when casting the tacit knowing and intuition twin spell. It was usually a sudden flash of striking realization, followed by me running with the excitement of discovery, breathing away the anxiety of losing the nuances while capturing my train of thoughts or feelings in my research journal. Flash images or narratives associated with the new realizations generate access to the next two levels.

### 4) The Explication Level of Discovery

Moustakas's guide elaborates on how a comprehensive depiction of the core themes is developed. This process is contributed by new perspectives and contexts along with refinements and corrections to past knowledge. Sela-Smith's guide highlights the new worldview resides within the researcher. I scrutinized what aroused in my unconsciousness that lifted to my consciousness via my internal frames of reference of firstly being a mother, then a play therapist, and now becoming a psychotherapist. I cast focus spells to devoting full attention to my awareness and my whole being; indwelt to create inner space; self-searched to register relevant nuances; self-disclosed to a thoughtful analysis to extract and clarify interweaving layers of meaning from emergent themes. My tacit knowledge spell to read others' mental states reinterpreted and refined my understanding of my relationship with

my children to generate a complete apprehension of the treasures (findings of my whole experience).

### 5) The Transformation Level of Creative Synthesis

Moustakas's guide concludes that the researcher understands his/her own experience as a whole and achieves creative synthesis through tacit and intuitive powers. The questions inside life grow, and a comprehensive expression of the essence of the researched phenomenon is realized. Sela-Smith's guide refers this phase as "storytelling" that reveals some new whole. Something transpersonal is born with characteristics of synchronicity and integration. Mutuality between the researcher and the knowledge produced. I found the twin spell of tacit knowledge and intuition was essential to illustrate my treasure (the answer to my question) through creating artworks. Tacit knowledge equipped me with an integrating capacity of subsidiary skills and focal attitudes, and intuition led to originality by connecting themes and art concepts, forming patterns that bridges my implicit knowledge with explicit practicality without employing my reasoning self. My artworks summarized a thorough understanding of my whole experience of self-transformation from a mother to a psychodynamic mother.

### Validity

Moustakas (1990) demonstrates that referencing similar experiences of other individuals can testify to the validity of a self-experience. Validity in a subjective discovery inquiry is, however, not assured by others' expression of how they experienced life. Everyone's *I-who-feel* has experienced, is experiencing, and will experience is unique. It is valid as it stands (Sela-Smith, 2002).

The validity of my research is rooted in my ethics, commitment, and passion. It mirrors how I adhere to my tacit dimension, embrace the flow, and combat resistance to enhance self-awareness and self-acceptance. As Moustakas (1990)

succinctly put it, despite its autobiographical nature, heuristics bear a social and even a universal significance, eliciting a profound emotional response. The strength of the self-inquiry method lies in its resultant "self-transformation and the creation of a story that generates the potential for transformation in others and society" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 82). The solution to the surrender to individualism is "a shift from "I-who-feels" to a "we-who-care" perspective" to encompass extrapsychic with intrapsychic (Tudor, 2023, p. 123). The strengths, limitations, and rigor of this study are elucidated in the Discussion chapter.

## Summary

This chapter articulates the rationale for adopting heuristic self-inquiry as the methodology and HSSI as the method. It describes the execution of research design, data collection, and analysis by illustrating how the research process reveals itself by assuming the healer role in *HeroQuest* as a metaphorical journey through the six heuristic phases.

## Chapter 3 - Literature Review

This chapter critically reviews current knowledge relevant to my question. Armed with my torch, I ventured into the depths of immersion and incubation, exploring a collection of "wisdom scriptures" - psychotherapeutic literature that studies the dual experiences of therapists who are also mothers.

### Psychotherapeutic Literature on the Mother/Therapist Duality

In considering self-inquiry relevance, I concentrated on the lived experiences of therapists/mothers and excluded studies investigating aspects of motherhood, such as theoretical maternal concepts, professional development, experiences of therapists' children, and mothering sick children. I applied the key terms of "duality," "mother," and "psychotherapist," along with two to four of their variations for literature search through the databases of PsycArticles, Google Scholar, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP), and PsycINFO. In the context of this study, "duality" is defined as the co-existence of the two roles. "Mother" is defined in broad terms and embodies a multitude of motherhood statuses, including biological, step, and foster mothers who take care of at least one child. "Psychotherapist" was defined as psychodynamic psychotherapists. However, I could only retrieve a small number of relevant literature as "psychotherapists" usually consist of clinicians, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and other therapists. I thereby broadened the definition to include all mental health practitioners.

#### A) Therapists Who Became Mothers

The earliest relevant research that directly investigated the interface between motherhood and the psychotherapeutic profession was Derry (1987, 1994) who explored the topic within the historical context of the increasing population of women entering the workforce after the Second World War. When becoming mothers, psychologists and social workers struggled to navigate conflicting societal

values ingrained since the 1960s that "if women stated that their children came first, this has taken to mean that they lacked commitment to professional life" (Derry, 1994, p. 151). When compared with non-mothers, mothers felt increased empathy for parents. Although professional life was less central to mothers, marital status was insignificant to therapists' profession measured by job attitudes and the evaluation and enactment of the therapist's role (Derry, 1987). Robinson (2012) subsequently challenged this finding by revealing that therapists "choose to no longer see certain types of patients (after being mothers) (p. 83)".

The next batch of empirical studies emerged around 2010. The lived experiences beyond women's struggle between work and home underscored the societal and economic shift in how the therapists/mothers felt about their professional role over the decades. Despite "The majority of the writing concerning psychotherapists' motherhood focuses on the impact of her pregnancy on the client (Goldmann, 2020, p.8)," research focused on professional development such as counter-transference (Jalowiec, 2011; Moore, 2008). The identity shifts are regarded as a continuous process (O'Reilly, 2014; Robinson, 2012); the relationship with theory was an evolving re-integration (MacNab, 1995; Robinson, 2012). Sheridan (2017) and Sheridan and Bain (2020) described a journey of integration that begins from the paranoid-schizoid position, where theory can serve as a comforting third or a judging superego for mother blaming (Goldmann, 2020). It progresses into the depressive position, where a therapist/mother can integrate Winnicott's good enough mothering with optimal maternal failure and internalize Klein's integration of love and hate into ambivalence with an acknowledgment of maternal aggression. Theory can act as both an analytic and anti-analytic third resulting in therapists/mothers can feel protected or punitive.

Among all the literature I reviewed and felt inspired, MacNab (1995) spoke to me by naming her chapter "Listening to Your Patients, Yelling at Your Kids." This article struck me immediately. I could easily relate to the guilt and shame associated with

occasional maternal failure and the fears of being blamed for my children's behaviors. As MacNab (1995) pointed out, I struggled over control and containment. I shared similar pain that training does not "cast any protection spell" over me from relational sufferings. The finding that a therapist/mother is not necessarily a better mother than any mother she has known (Goldmann, 2020; MacNab, 1995) narrated my experience.

Robinson (2012) was the first qualitative study that explored the relationship between psychodynamic psychotherapists' professional and mothering lives. Besides resonating with analytic-third and anti-analytic third theory (Sheridan, 2017; Sheridan & Bain, 2020), Robinson (2012) stressed the need for personal therapy and disclosed the involvement of cognitive-behavioral parenting techniques when therapists mothered at home. Maternal desire and maternal ambivalence were discussed. Motherhood is perceived as an asset to therapists, although self-disclosure and pragmatic challenges indicate the complexity in practice. Specifically, psychodynamic psychotherapists/mothers generally hold an overarching psychoanalytic worldview, i.e., "theory becomes the way of being in the inherently psychoanalytic world for both professional and personal life (Robinson, 2012, p. 91)".

Robinson's (2012) "psychoanalytic parenting" was an influential concept. Divergent experiences were, however, reported when researching social workers, marriage/family therapists, and psychologists (Goldmann, 2020; Jalowiec, 2011) and music therapists (Ellks, 2023). Non-psychoanalytic therapists perceive the interface of the dual roles as an art of realignment (Derry, 1987; 1994), a work-life balance (Jalowiec, 2011; Lawrence, 2013; Parker et al., 2024), or a balance to the sense of agency (DiMartino, 2021). Goldmann (2020) emphasized on mother blame and anti-analytic third (O'Reilly, 2014; Sheridan, 2017; Sheridan & Bain, 2020). Music and play therapists reported less reliance on theory as mothers (Ellks, 2023; Parker et al., 2024). These findings imply that psychoanalytic parenting is an option.

### B) Mothers Who Became Therapists

The literature on the experiences of parent-trainee therapists is scarce. When viewed through an institutional lens, George (2010) discovered that the parent dual role (PDR) was a detrimental factor for parents transitioning into the field of psychology. This discovery underscores the need for policies to steer the professional conduct of trainees. In O'Reilly (2014), the identity shifts were portrayed as a continuous, ongoing process when the focus shifted to personal journeys. The developmental path of mother trainees involves emotional reflections on one's past, theoretical awareness in the present, and ongoing theory attainment.

### C) A Mix of Both

Parker et al. (2024) was the only research on both therapists being mothers and mothers being therapists, implying their voices were interchangeable. It highlighted how mothers/therapists tend to grapple with society's expectations and struggle with the reciprocity of playing the two roles, such as self-expectation, the sense of guilt, and the battle of congruence (DiMartino, 2021). The themes of 1) emotional boundaries, 2) conflicting feelings between home or work, and 3) training are strengths paralleled the experiences of mother trainees (O'Reilly, 2014).

### D) Simultaneously Being a Therapist and a Mother

Clarke (2010) was the only researcher who did not examine the lived experience but studied the parallels between the psychological processes of becoming a mother and becoming a psychotherapist. She found that both are life-long developmental processes; identification may occur several years after the events. Baum (2010), DiMartino (2021), and Toomey (2011) studied pregnant trainee therapists' lived experiences. DiMartino (2021) heuristically explored her emotional journey of balancing polarities and developing resilience and grounding when encountering identities' simultaneous emergence as a mother and dance/movement therapist.

Baum (2010) revealed that trainees felt torn between the needs of clients and themselves and worried about how others might perceive pregnancy as a deterioration of professionalism. Toomey (2011) found both facilitating and disruptive elements, echoing Baum (2010) in distancing from clients and DiMartino (2021) regarding personal struggles and changing identity. As a trainee, Toomey (2011) further discussed transference and counter-transference, disclosure, and containment; as a mother-to-be, he found the re-emergence of old conflicts and a reworking of parental relationships significant and advocated support from training institutions.

### **Critique: An Untested Assumption**

Relevant literature is scarce. "There was little written from the perspective of a child psychotherapist (Clarke, 2010, p. 5)". "There is a dearth of literature that documents the experiences of the psychotherapist mothers themselves (Sheridan & Bain, 2020, p.31)". "This is the first study exploring the impact of motherhood on play therapist identity and experience (Parker et al., 2024, p.50)". Nevertheless, I found compiling the literature disorienting. The complexity of the mother/therapist duality is multifaceted due to the analytical stance (i.e., external or internal) and the researcher's identification. Some held a therapist's perspective investigating how motherhood affects professional lives; some studied with a mother's perspective, focusing on how being a therapist affects motherhood; and some interchanged with both. There was an unaddressed ambiguity regarding the developmental paths. As Derry (1994) pointed out, "distinctions between women having children before and after becoming therapists were not clear (p. 161)". Over four decades, this distinction was usually not a participant inclusion criterion in most studies (Derry, 1987; 1994; Ellks, 2023; George, 2010; Jalowiec, 2011; Lawrence, 2013; Parker et al., 2024; Robinson, 2012). This phenomenon implied an untested assumption: the lived experiences of therapists being mothers

and mothers being therapists are indifferent, which implied a need for further exploration.

## Summary

This chapter presents relevant psychotherapeutic literature on the mother/therapist duality. Most researchers studied the voices of the therapists who became mothers, and only a few studied the voices of mothers who became therapists, a unique and under-explored area. My critique highlights an untested assumption of the indifference of the two voices, which leads to an identification of a research gap.

## Chapter 4 - An Explication of Illuminations and Discoveries

### - A Collection of Treasures

It was difficult to mourn the fantasy of perfect mothering.

— From Chodorow (1978)

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This chapter presents my discoveries to clarify the nature, meaning, and essence of my mother/therapist duality. I cast the self-dialogue and indwelling spells to search inwardly and revisit my authentic, interweaving, conflicted feelings. It is a reflective analysis testing my surrender to the flow and my courage to battle resistance. My illumination was to map the two developmental paths of 1) the Therapist's Path on which therapists become mothers and 2) the Mother's Path on which mothers become therapists. In identifying with my Mother's Path, I processed every phase the *I-who-feels* experienced throughout two developmental processes: 1) from being a mother to a mother/play therapist; and 2) from being a mother/play therapist to becoming a mother/psychotherapist. Five themes emerged throughout this self-exploration. In reviewing my Mother's Path, I found the answer to my ultimate question: why does being a therapist not make me a better mother? I acquired an awareness of how I transformed from a mother to a psychodynamic mother.

#### Mapping the Two Developmental Paths

As explored in the previous chapter, there is a research gap when it comes to the perspective of mothers becoming psychotherapists. This gap aligns with my experiences and intuition that led me to distinguish the two lived experiences: therapists becoming mothers and mothers becoming therapists, as the initial step in exploring my developmental path. As a child psychodynamic psychotherapist, I drew on two psychoanalytic studies for this mapping. Clarke (2010), the earliest research I could identify that studied the parallels of the psychological birth between becoming

a mother and becoming a psychotherapist, concluded, "*Both the process of becoming a mother and the process of becoming a psychotherapist have been described as a developmental process. There appears to be a parallel between these two processes, each described as a continuous, lifelong developmental process*" (p. 49) and "the new identity is incorporated in his or her daily life and a transformation of self occurs" (p. 54).

Robinson (2012), the first empirical researcher who explored the reciprocal nature of mothering and psychodynamic psychotherapists, concluded: "There is an interchange between the two: being a mother affected participants profoundly in their work with patients, and being a psychoanalytic therapist likewise affected participants as mothers" (p. 94). This finding suggested that the therapist's role influences the maternal role of therapist-mothers, and the professional role is, in turn, influenced by their maternal roles. Despite the diverse research focuses, the reciprocity of motherhood and the psychotherapy profession is the most common finding in all relevant literature. These studies inspired my visualization of the two parallel developmental paths.

### The Therapist's Path and The Mother's Path

After immersing myself in my experiences and allowing them to incubate, my tacit knowledge guided my thoughts in naming the Therapist's Path, the journey a therapist takes to become a mother, and the Mother's Path, the journey a mother takes to become a therapist. Each of these two emotional processes describes the transition through three phases: starting from an original identity; gaining a new identity, and an occurrence of self-transformation when a dual identity is integrated (Figure 1).

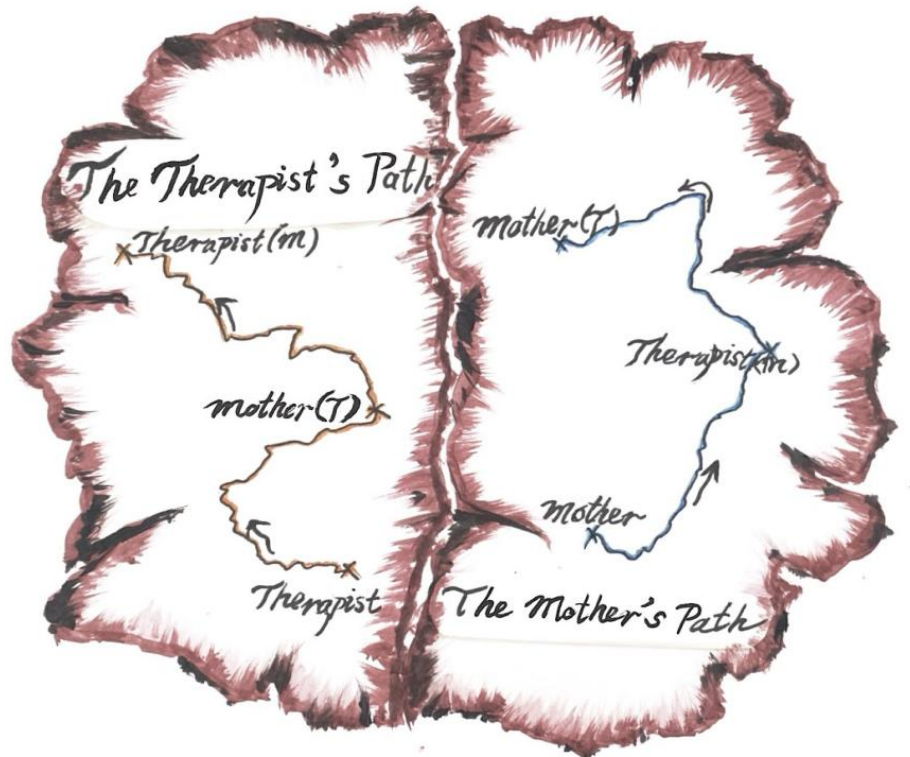


Figure 1: Different maps for the two paths

On the Therapist's Path, Therapist transits to Mother(T), a theory-informed mother who, in turn, transforms her professional identity into Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood. On the Mother's Path, Mother transits to Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood who, in turn, transforms her motherhood into Mother(T), a theory-informed mother.

## My Mother's Path

### 1) My First Developmental Process: From Being a Mother to a Play Therapist

With the mapping of the two developmental paths, I realized I could not process my experiences of becoming a mother/psychotherapist without processing my experiences of becoming a mother/play therapist. It implied I could not process my

experience as a therapist without processing why I became a mother in the first place.

### A Broken Mother's Unconscious Motivations

My Mother's Path began when I unconsciously became a mother while continuing to identify myself as a daughter due to my fears of change and loss. As expressed by Magone (2014): "I was fearful of who I would become and whether the self I knew would be gone forever (p.4)". More importantly, as Hakimzadeh (2015) reflected, "My history, my psychology... is in part an extension of my mother's story and the myth of her womanly experience. The challenge has been to embrace my individuation, differentiate from the merger between mother and daughter (p. 32)". The ramification of an unsuccessful mental reworking of my discourse with my "mother-as-mother-to-her-as-a-child" and "myself-as-mother" (Stern, 1995, p. 172) was an incomplete psychological birth as a mother (Clarke, 2010; Dyson & King, 2008). This implosive pressure around my motherhood constellation (Stern, 1995) precipitated an irreparable rupture in my relationship with my mother. I was devastated with a hovering metaphor for years: a naked baby reborn from herself, grieving for her broken self fragments falling like withering leaves. I had no idea how to mourn the loss of a Great mother (Gonella, 2012). I felt drained, surviving while quasi-solo-mothering an ambivalent toddler and an avoidant infant (Bowlby, 2005). I unduly relied on a "super nanny" to cover up my dysfunctional maternity while I sank in sorrow. When both children struggled respectively in subsequent years, the unprocessed regret, guilt, and feeling of being inadequate (Ashley, 2002) were unbearable. To alleviate my agony, I urged to identify with a new role that could strengthen my wobbling mother's identity and vulnerable self. These unconscious motivations intertwined, paving my first emotional process from a mother to a play therapist with a concealed belief: being a therapist implies I am an adequate mother. This faith explained my wonder around some non-mother peers: what lures these women to be therapists if they are not mothering difficult children?

## A Continuous Developmental Process

Through a profound process, I discovered the causation between the psychological births of my dual identities: being a biological mother fostered the psychological birth of a therapist, which, in turn, accomplished the psychological birth of a mother. My experience coincided with Clarke's (2010) conclusion that *"Identification, which is considered a key aspect in the acquisition of gaining an identity for the respective roles, is not always acquired immediately after the birth of a child for a mother, or after graduation for a psychotherapist, but may occur several years after these events (p. 63)"*. I resonated with Sheridan (2017) and Sheridan and Bain (2020) that my duality experience was a constantly evolving re-integration as the identity shifts felt continuous over the years. I echoed O'Reilly (2014), who found that mother trainees experienced moving forward with theory as an on-going process. In Figure 2, I adopted an infinity sign that connects the three phases in a continual cycle for my Mother's Path to capture my recurrent emotional process.

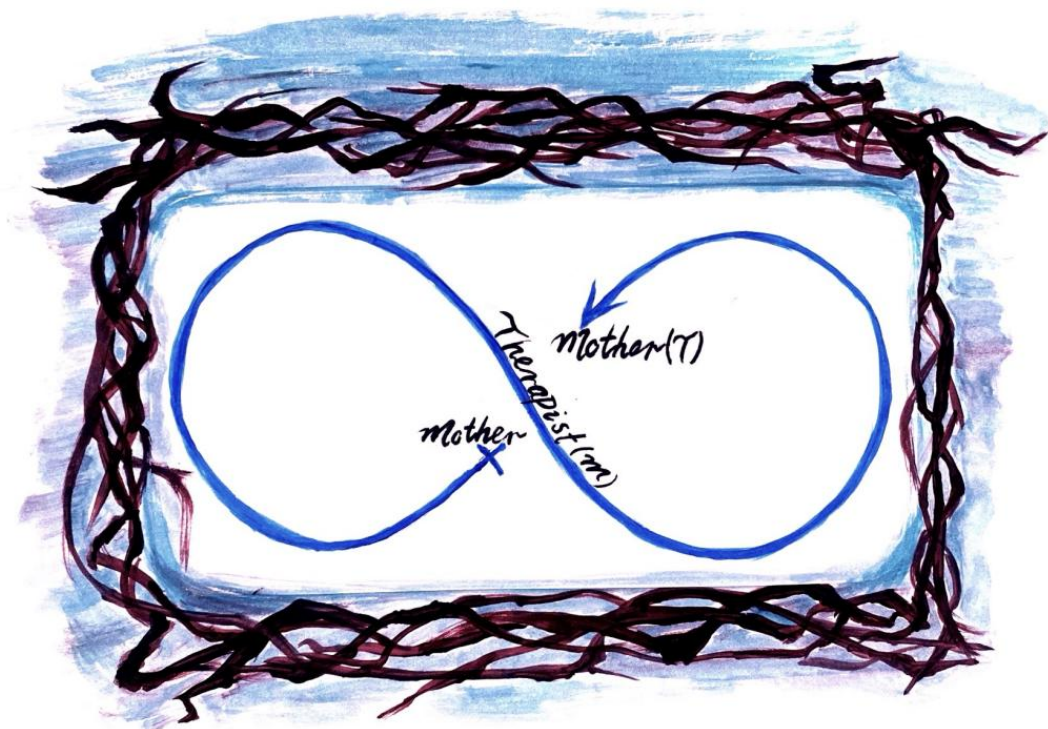


Figure 2: My first developmental process: from Mother to Mother(Play Therapist)

Starting from Mother, the transition to Therapist(M) represents a "becoming process" that involves a role shift externally while internally, it is a new identity formation. The transition from Therapist(M) to Mother(T) represents an "integration process" that externally involves a role reversal from a therapist back to a mother while internally a dual identity intersubjectivity of being a mother/therapist. A cycle from Mother to Mother(T) is a journey of self-transformation from a broken mother to a theory-informed mother. The reciprocal identity integration continues at Therapist(M) as a therapist and at Mother(T) as a mother when life continues. Besides the continuity, the wavy shape of an infinity sign captures my emotional experience of "riding on a roller coaster" in my self-transformation.

## **Emergent Themes Reflecting on Being a Mother/Play Therapist**

### **Theme 1: Simultaneous Psychological Births**

Relative to gaining my therapist's identity, I was in awe of the lengthy process of transforming from maidenhood to motherhood (Magone, 2014). In terms of time frame, I experienced a simultaneity of psychological births of becoming a mother and a therapist (Baum, 2010; DiMartino, 2021; Toomey, 2011); both involved a process of individuation (Clarke, 2010). It was a differentiation of self from identifying myself as an emotional caretaker in my original family or triangulation with my parents (Alber, 1991). It was "the act of forming an identity as a woman and creating a separate story that acknowledges my relationship to my mother as a daughter and a woman (Hakimzadeh, 2015, p. 32)". Regarding the duality, my "riding on a roller coaster" experience emotionally resonated with DiMartino (2021), who heuristically explored her intense emotions, balancing the polarities during her pregnancy and training. I related little to Baum's (2010) professional inadequacy for clients without experiencing physical pregnancy. I, nevertheless, shared Toomey's (2011) findings regarding the struggles with changing identity, the re-emergence of old conflicts, and a reworking of parental relationships (Clarke, 2010).

## Theme 2: An Incomplete Integration with Theory

My first dual-roles experience of becoming, integrating, and transforming from Mother to Mother(T) was fulfilling. At Therapist(M), I felt privileged to be a mother of a boy and a girl, demonstrating knowledge adequacy regarding children's development. At Mother(T), my professional identity filled the emptiness in myself and repaired my internal frame of reference regarding how to be a mother. I was affirmative with an analytic third (O'Reilly, 2014; Parker et al., 2024; Sheridan, 2017; Sheridan & Bain, 2020), finding theory supportive as they provide "the right answer" in parenting. I was not aware that "theories had a paradoxical influence... they might also exert a negative influence that diminished maternal self esteem (Goldmann, 2020, p.90)". I celebrated how theory enhanced my maternal capacity to contain and empathize. For the first time, I felt I was no less than my mother.

My recent reflection recognized how one-sided my perception was. Theory, along with clinical practice, contained my persecutory anxiety of being not good enough, a possible shadow aspect of the archetypal "too good mother" (Ashley, 2002, p.7). I denied an anti-analytic third, failed to move from a paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive position, and did not complete my journey of integration with theory (Sheridan, 2017; Sheridan & Bain, 2020). Moreover, I avoided encountering the paradox of being patient with clients but getting angry with my children (MacNab, 1995). I was not reflective to accept what Gonella (2012, p. 36) pointed out: "When the mask of perfectionism is exposed to the mother through whatever means, it is the first invitation to the realities of mothering." As a therapist, it was challenging to negotiate with my dual identity intersubjectivity. My clinical counter-transference was, occasionally, "being Mum" to my clients, which aroused worries and needed supervision to clarify the blurring of boundaries between a therapist's identities as a therapist and as a mother (Hill, 1996, as cited in Clarke, 2010).

## Theme 3: A Wounded Healer

As Perlman (1994) asserts, "The multiple motives that shape an individual's career are complex and include conscious and unconscious components" (p. 76). In investigating my unconscious motivations behind my career preference over other children-related careers, I discovered my implicit identification with "wounded healers" (Barnett, 2007; Marovic, 2020; McBeath, 2019; Roots & Roses, 2020; Watts, 2014) defined as "mental health professionals who both provide services and effectively make use of them to address their own emotional or psychiatric challenges (Roots & Roses, 2020, p.76)". I "used (my) clients to provide or compensate for (my) own psychic wounds or emotional vulnerabilities (McBeath, 2019, p. 378)".

Research found that the potential to self-cure was one of the main reasons why one would decide to become a psychotherapist (McBeath, 2019; Reyes, 2022). I felt connected with Watts (2014, p. 51), who asserted, "Wounds are generally thought to inform and potentially improve one's capacity to heal others, especially when the wounds occupy the healer's conscious awareness." I also resonated with Roots and Roses (2020, p. 76), who mentioned the wounded healer archetype, suggesting that "healing capabilities can emerge from the experience of being wounded." I was, nevertheless, conflicted with an unfolding truth: Would I even be a therapist if I had not become a mother or if my children had been well-functioned these years? Guilt and shame confronted me with the absence of unconditional love for my profession. I felt a sense of loss, mourning an illusion of an inborn healer. Even my teenage fantasy of characterizing a healing Elf appeared as a sign of my narcissistic needs (Barnett, 2007; McBeath, 2019) rather than a genuine destiny. I doubted if I could enjoy playing with children without being a broken mother in advance. I came to another realization: my earliest wonder of non-mother therapists was a subtle projection of my envy and aggression.

## 2) My Second Developmental Process: From Being a Play Therapist to a Psychotherapist

### Why is a Good Enough Mother Not Good Enough?

Despite my positivity with theory, the negative impact of being a therapist on my motherhood gradually acted more like a curse than a blessing (Goldmann, 2020), when my children entered adolescence, a vulnerable developmental stage that magnifies children's struggles. Being a therapist did not automate my transformation from a "too good mother" to a "whole mother" who accepts "the paradoxical nature of mothering, and how that relates to their willingness to allow imperfections, and therefore let go of self-judgment (Ashley, 2002, p. 76)". Instead, my capability of healing children seemed irrefutably suspicious when my children did not turn out to be mentally healthy role models; rather, embarrassingly, the opposite. Acknowledging "the darker side of mothering (Gonella, 2012, p.37)" was too scary for me to see that "*when conflict occurs for the mother, it can potentially initiate a critical step in her development and individuation process, as what is mirrored back to her from her child reflects and illuminates parts of herself that may have previously been hidden or denied* (p.39)". I felt lonely and suppressed, not knowing any parent-peers who had to deal with anything similar, either because they were in early parenthood or lucky enough to have resilient children. I reckoned therapists are utterly private as far as parenting is concerned. Is it a taboo, even a stigma, if a child therapist discloses her needs to seek therapy for her children? I felt ashamed, frustrated, and mostly puzzled with an inexplicable question: Why is Winnicott's good enough mother (1960) still not good enough?

As a repetitive pattern, when my disheartening feelings were overwhelming, or theory acted more often as an anti-analytic third, I again felt inadequate (Ashley, 2002). In contrast to Perlman (1994), who reported that "resolving personal conflicts" was not a significant reason for social workers and psychologists to enter psychoanalytic training, that was my exact motivation. My unconscious motivations

paved my second developmental process to becoming a psychotherapist with the same faith: being a psychotherapist implies I am a better mother.

### Another Cycle of Transformation

Figure 3 depicts my second developmental process in green: proceeding from Mother(T), where "T" implies play therapy; through psychotherapy training with a mother/therapist identity, and becoming a psychoanalytic mother, as termed by Robinson (2012), Mother(T) where "T" now implies psychodynamic psychotherapy.

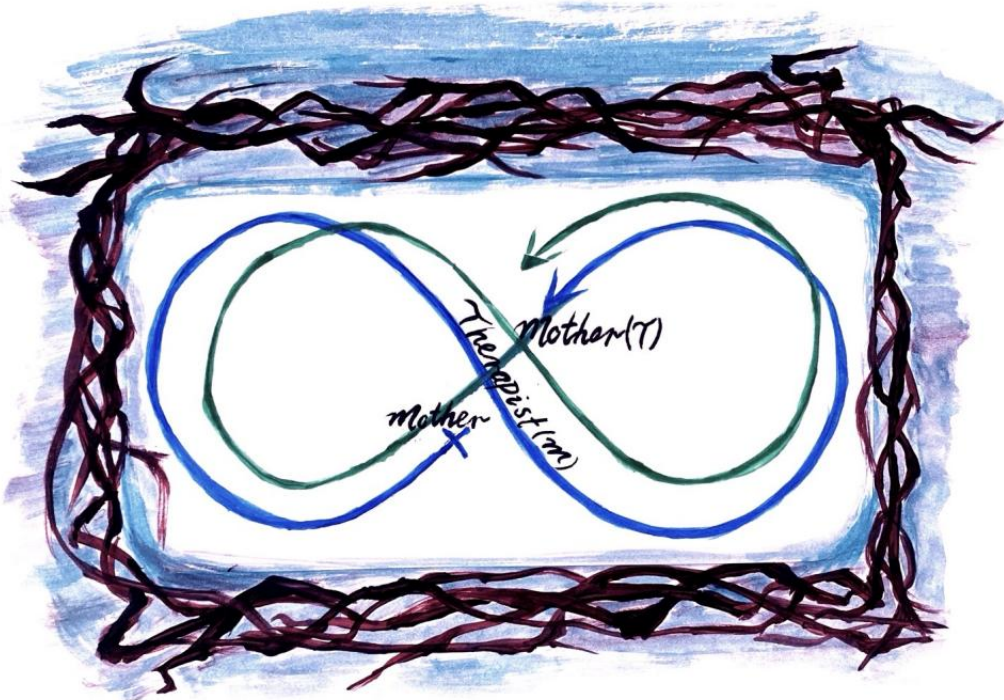


Figure 3: My second developmental process: from Mother(Play Therapist) to Mother(Psychotherapist)

Proceeding from Mother(T), the transition through Therapist(M), a new psychotherapy training, represents a "re-becoming process" that involves a role shift from a play therapist to a psychotherapist externally while internally, it is an amalgamated dual identity re-formation. The second round of transition from Therapist(M) to Mother(T) represents a "re-integration process" that externally involves a new cycle of role reversal from a psychotherapist back to a mother while internally an evolving dual identity intersubjectivity of being a mother with a new

therapist identity. A cycle from mother/play therapist to mother/psychotherapist is another journey of self-transformation. The reciprocal identity integration continues at Therapist(M) as a psychotherapist and at Mother(T) as a mother.

## Emergent Themes Reflecting on Becoming a Mother/Psychotherapist

### Theme 4: Integrating with Theory

While I have been a mother/therapist for over a decade, I was aware my responsibility to minimise potential for compromised professional conduct (George, 2010) or occupational hazards (Goldmann, 2020) during training. I actively sought support and developed awareness to monitor how my motherhood experience and emotion evoked might comprise ethical practice. I maintained personal therapy and supervision to aid my self-reflexivity. My concern was my inherent fear of giving up an original identity (i.e., daughter, play therapist) when a new identity is evolving (i.e., mother, psychotherapist). "Marrying" my motherhood with psychoanalytic theory (Sheridan, 2017; Sheridan & Bain, 2020) was a challenging yet possible mission over the training years. I appreciated this second chance to re-experience the paranoid-schizoid position, where psychoanalysis serves a more protective third despite a harsher superego of mother-blaming (Goldmann, 2020). Throughout training and reflection, I grew capable of retaining my human nature and surrendering to the anti-analytic third. I moved into a depressive position, where besides Winnicott and Klein, rupture and reparation and Bion's containment created sufficient transitional space (Winnicott, 1953) to visualize and accept my maternal desire and maternal imperfection (Robinson, 2012) mothering adolescents. As Gonella (2012) maintained, "On both internal and external levels, women must reckon with this desire and need for perfection; otherwise, it is projected onto their children, spouses, friends, and other members of society (p. 35)" and "Each of her children has one or many specific lessons to teach her. The struggle with her reactions to her children can serve as a woman's invitation for growth (p. 42)". I re-experienced a good enough mother/psychotherapist on my path, understanding

that both need not be perfect (Cozolino, 2004, as cited in Clarke, 2010). I gradually acquired enough inner strength to break free from the fantasy of an "omnipotent healer" or upholding the "savior complex" (McBeath, 2019, p. 379) through supervised practice.

#### Theme 5: The Lost Puzzle - Identification Confusion

A conversation with a psychologist inspired my last yet most prominent discovery when she yelled in my face, "Mother your children!" Her words shook up my theories of motherhood and enlightened me about my fallacy: I over-identified with my therapist identity even though I was mothering at home. Instead of mothering at Mother(T), I mother at Therapist(M)! All the mothering hardships were truthful reflections of this identification confusion. Why does being a therapist still not make me a better mother? The answer was I had not mothered my adolescent children but therapized them! There was no mother to set disciplinary rules as the safety boundary was the only golden rule; to coach behaviors as all behaviors are reflections of a child's process; to form structures as autonomy is returned; to say "No!" as therapists never say no except when someone hurts; to provide practical advice even when requested as a therapist does not teach nor advise. I comprehended Robinson's (2012) insight: psychotherapist mothers use cognitive behavior parenting techniques at home. Aha!

### 3) A Transformation from a Mother to a Psychodynamic Mother

Reflecting on my two developmental processes brought clarity to my experience. It has been my unique path of continuous self-transformation from a mother to a psychodynamic mother who possesses an overarching psychoanalytic worldview:

*In not actively thinking psychoanalytically, allow themselves to just be psychoanalytic. Their psychoanalytic worldview— who they are — is incorporated into their mothering. In going through the actual motions of*

*parenting, what they know is less important than who they are and is, in fact, subsumed within it (Robinson, 2012, p. 90-91).*

My developmental process is continuous; my self-discovery on my Mother's Path is lifelong. I feel fulfilled as who I am. My unconscious pursuit of being "better" now becomes conscious and comes to an end. I am adequate and good enough as a mother and as a psychotherapist.

## Summary

This chapter presents the treasures I discovered on my quest, guided by my intuitive force and tacit knowledge. It illustrates my illumination that set the scene for subsequent discoveries: map the two developmental paths, the Therapist's Path, and the Mother's Path, and identify a literature gap on the latter. My self-inquiry commenced with a self-search into the unconscious motivations that led me to be a mother, a mother/play therapist, and finally, a mother/psychotherapist. The narrative unveiled my Mother's Path, illustrating my transitions from Mother to Mother(T) through two developmental processes and signifying a continuous self-transformation from an unconscious mother to a psychodynamic mother. Five themes emerged through self-reflection: simultaneous psychological births, an incomplete integration with theory, a wounded healer, integrating with theory, and the long-seeking answer to my question: identification confusion.

## Chapter 5 - A Creative Synthesis of Integration and Self-Transformation

Wholeness is a condition in which all the different elements of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious are welded together.

— From Carl G Jung (1983)

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This chapter illustrates my creative synthesis through artwork, portraying an integration of my mother/therapist duality and self-transformation, completing this self-exploration of my Mother's Path.

### Mother/Psychotherapist Integration

#### Yin-Yang Duality

My mother/psychotherapist integration is an accomplishment of wholeness. "It is a natural dynamic of the psychic system, innate, a given, and, from the beginning to the end of the individual life span, it enables the enhancement of consciousness and the psyche's movement towards wholeness (Yeoman & Lu, 2023, p. 181)". In line with my inherent Eastern philosophies as Chinese, the Yin-Yang symbolism originated from Taoism enlightened me when I portrayed my wholeness, integrating my dual identities of being a mother/psychotherapist.

*In Chinese cosmology, the universe creates itself out of a primary chaos of material energy, organized into the cycles of Yin and Yang form and matter. Yin-Yang describes an opposite but interconnected self-perpetuating cycle. They can be thought of as complementary and, at the same time, opposing forces that interact to form a dynamic system in which the whole is greater than the assembled parts, and the parts are important for the cohesion of the whole... the duality of Yin and Yang is indivisible (Wikipedia, n.d.).*

I painted a Yin-Yang symbol to represent my wholeness as a mother/psychotherapist (Figure 4). The figure shows an equilibrium between my opposite parts of self, each possessing a portion of the other. My Mother(T) self is represented by Yin, the black part that philosophically means female, the moon, the passive, or negative principle in nature. My Therapist(M) self is represented by Yang, the white part that philosophically means male, the sun, the active, or positive principle in nature.

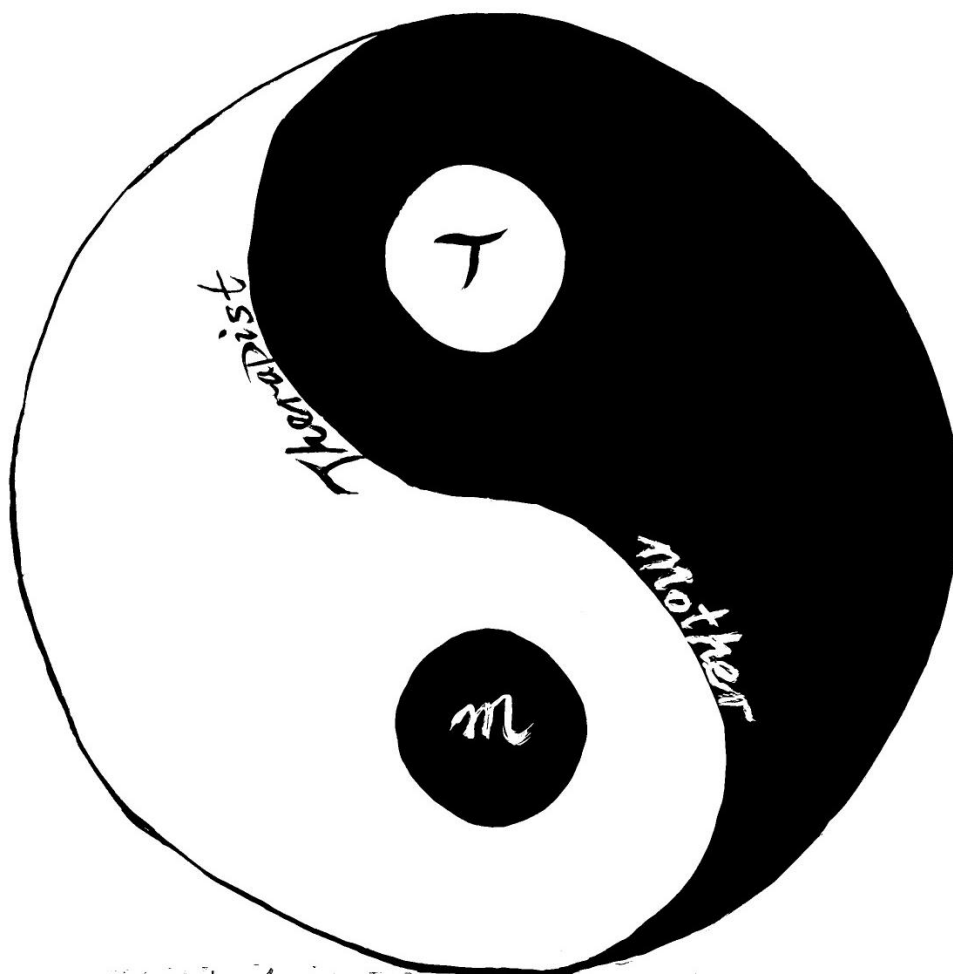


Figure 4: An integration of my Mother(T) and Therapist(M) self

### The Integrating Tree

In Figures 5a and 5b, I created a collage that exhibits a balance of my dual qualities, as a mother and a healer, respectively, when one views it from an opposite perspective.



Figure 5a: My Therapist(M) self containing a child client's process



Figure 5b: My Mother(T) self flourishing my children with love

### The Three Phases of Self-Transformation

My last creation was inspired by a snippet of an ancient Zen Buddhism master who reflected on the three levels of horizon practicing Zen Buddhism as compiled in the Record of Pointing At the Moon: Scroll 28: The 6th Patriarch's 14th Generation (Random Reader, 2020). I translated the snippet according to my internal frame of reference:

Before practice, I saw mountains as mountains.

When I entered the practice, I saw mountains not as mountains.

I have completed my work, I see mountains just as they are.

This wisdom hovered throughout my entire process. I felt the gravity pulling towards it when I extracted the essence of my self-transformation, walking through the three phases of my Mother's Path:

Before training, I saw myself as a mother. (A biological mother)

When I transformed, I saw myself not as a mother. (A therapist)

My process is completed, I saw a mother as I am. (A psychodynamic mother)



Figure 6: The three phases of my self-transformation

## There and Back Again

My love for *The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien's novel, published in 1937, attributed to my fascination with the *HeroQuest* board-game that colored my teenage. For some magical reasons, the spirit of healer offered a peculiar transitional space (Winnicott,

1953) in me. *There and Back Again, a Hobbit's Holiday* is the book title of Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1990), recounting his adventures. In completing this mesmerising quest, it was all I wanted to say, "There and back again, a mother's holiday".

## Chapter 6 - Discussion

This chapter provides a critical commentary on the research process and outcomes. It reflects on and evaluates the significance of my research in psychotherapy, shedding light on the developmental processes of mothers prior to becoming therapists.

### My Process and Findings

My foundation finding was a differentiation of two developmental processes of therapists who are also mothers: 1) the Therapist's Path on which a therapist (Therapist) transits to a theory-informed mother (Mother(T)), a theory-informed mother who, in turn, transforms her professional identity into Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood; and 2) the Mother's Path on which a biological mother (Mother) transits to Therapist(M), a therapist with motherhood who, in turn, transforms her motherhood into Mother(T), a theory-informed mother. I experienced the continuity of my developmental process on the Mother's Path as depicted by an infinite sign. It illustrates a becoming process when a new identity is formed, followed by an integration process when the dual identity intersubjectivity of the Therapist(M) and the Mother(T) are established over time. An ongoing cycle from Mother to Mother(T) encapsulates my self-transformation from a mother to a psychodynamic mother.

By digging into my unconscious motivations for becoming a play therapist and, subsequently, a psychotherapist, I explored the psychological births of being a mother and becoming a psychotherapist through self-dialogue with my two developmental processes. I discovered the causation between the psychological births of my dual identities, the integration of theory and motherhood that takes time to complete, and that being a therapist could be my approach to developing my mother's identification through being a wounded healer. In answering my question,

"What is my experience of the duality of being a mother and becoming a psychotherapist?" my self-inquiry guided me through a series of profound reviews of each step in my mother/therapist duality. Analysing my findings led to a comprehension of the nature, essence, and meaning of my self-transformation from a mother to a psychodynamic mother. These discoveries integrated all the parts into wholeness, paving me to accomplish an integration of my mother/therapist self depicted by Yin-Yang symbolism representing the harmony of my dual roles, and the Integrating Tree, symbolizing my integrated self. Moreover, a constant reflection of my position on my Mother's Path navigated me to avoid identification confusion, a process that addressed my long-seeking query of "Why does being a therapist not make me a better mother?" - I need to mother at Mother(T), and provide therapy at Therapist(M); neither needs to be perfect. These results elaborated my dual role experiences to the fullest extent, and my self-inquiry is completed.

### **A Synthesis of Study**

In critically reviewing current knowledge, I located each relevant piece of literature on the two developmental paths according to the identification(s) they investigated. The majority of relevant literature described the lived experiences of therapists who become mothers - the Therapist's Path.



Figure 7: A summary of where current literature and my research sit<sup>1</sup>

Goldmann (2020) explored all three statuses of becoming a clinician (Therapist), the impact on motherhood as a Clinician (Mother(T)), and the impact on the Clinician as a Mother (Therapist (M)). Derry (1987) compared non-mothers therapist with mothers at Therapist(M). Moore's (2008) was the only heuristic research inquiring about the impact of pregnancy on the therapist's clinical countertransference (i.e., the process from Therapist to Therapist(M)). MacNab (1995) reflected at Mother(T); Jalowiec (2011), Robinson (2012), Sheridan (2017), Sheridan and Bain (2020), and Ellks (2023) studied the intersubjectivity both at Mother(T) and Therapist(M); Derry (1994) and Lawrence (2013) focused on Therapist(M); only Parker et al. (2024) researched Mother(T) on both paths. Clarke (2010) paralleled the two psychological births of being a mother and being a psychotherapist, while Baum (2010), Toomey (2011), and DiMartino (2021) studied the lived experience of simultaneity being pregnant during training. Lastly, I identified two relevant studies on the Mother's Path: O'Reilly (2014) and George (2010). They both investigated parent-therapist trainees (i.e., the process from Mother to Therapist(M)).

<sup>1</sup> Background Image: Freepik.com

In reflecting on my journey, this self-inquiry has attempted to build on the existing literature by contributing empirical research that covers the whole Mother's Path. My research elaborates on Clarke (2010), who paralleled the developmental process of becoming a mother and becoming a psychotherapist and Robinson (2012), who confirmed the reciprocity of motherhood and the psychotherapy profession. My findings align with current knowledge regarding the intersubjectivity of the mother self and the therapist self and the integration of motherhood with theory. The adoption of an infinity sign to depict the Mother's Path symbolized a constantly evolving re-integration of the identity shifts, as concluded in Sheridan (2017), Sheridan and Bain (2020), and O'Reilly (2014). The simultaneous formation and development of dual identities regardless of physical pregnancy resonated with the simultaneity of psychological births of becoming a mother and a therapist trainee as researched by Baum (2010), DiMartino (2021), and Toomey (2011). My developmental process of being a play therapist prior to becoming a psychotherapist demonstrated how the journey of integration with theory evolved from a paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive position and achieved full integration, as asserted by Sheridan (2017) and Sheridan and Bain (2020). Specifically, my acknowledgment of an analytic third supported the finding of O'Reilly (2014) and Parker et al. (2024), whilst an anti-analytic third echoed Goldmann (2020) and the maternal ambivalence of MacNab (1995). My overall experience on my Mother's Path matched with the concept of psychoanalytic (psychodynamic) parenting as termed by Robinson (2012), and hence is not aligned with Ellks (2023) and Parker et al. (2024) in which psychoanalytic parenting was perceived as an option, not an overarching worldview nor a way of being. My results were less resonated with other studies of the Therapist's Path that emphasized how pregnancy, as researched by Moore (2008), or motherhood, as researched by Derry (1987, 1994), Jalowiec (2011) and Lawrence (2013), affect clinical practice. This divergence might be due to a different research stance originating from a diverse identification as a therapist, not a mother.

Besides critically reviewing literature directly studying the parent/therapist duality, I reviewed broader literature guided by the "aha" moments. Instead of focusing on the practical impacts or the functionality of the dual roles (Jalowiec, 2011; Lawrence, 2013; Parker et al., 2024), my research examined the unconscious motivations behind every phase of my Mother's Path. This ambition and endeavor extended my search scope and incorporated a more prosperous range of related topics:

1. The emotional process or transition from being a daughter to a mother
2. The possible causation between the two psychological births
3. The motivation of mothers to become psychotherapists
4. The relationship between wounded healers and motherhood

Overall, my mapping of the two developmental paths visualizes two invisible emotional processes, each possessing three significant identifications. It clarifies how the dual roles integrate conceptually and what these integrated roles entail in personal and professional life.

## Implications

The impact of my research is threefold.

In practice, the clinical implications of differentiating the Mother's Path from the more commonly investigated Therapist's Path could be valuable to psychotherapists who position themselves at different phases on their Mother's Path, i.e., 1) mothers planning to pursue their careers as therapists (at Mother); 2) mother/therapists processing their choice of career or the integration of motherhood and theory (at Therapist(M)); and 3) mothers/therapists reflecting their journey after training (at Mother(T)). Furthermore, due to my ethnicity background, despite cultural factors being beyond the scope of this particular research, my explication demonstrated how a researcher could merge and present psychotherapeutic findings with her/his

sense of family, culture and philosophy, which might inspire other psychotherapists with a non-Western background.

Regarding the implications for training, as George (2010) maintained, my research supports her finding that the occupancy of a parental role impacts the experience of a therapist trainee. To minimize possibilities for a mother/trainee's compromised professional conduct during practice, the impact of the trainee's role identification between their personal self (Mother(T)) and professional self (Therapist(M)) needs recognition and attention by individual mother/trainees, training institutions, and the broader clinical field in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Last, my study contributes to future psychotherapeutic research. One potential next step is to generalize and expand the two developmental paths by exploring the father's and therapist's paths for fathers/therapists. The definition of therapist can be broadened and applied to all healthcare practitioners with different disciplines of training. Besides the infinity sign, future researchers can investigate if different symbols, such as a circle or a wave, are applicable to myriad parent/therapist duality experiences.

The value of my heuristic process is to stress my disciplined commitment to be a child psychotherapist, given my commitment to be a mother, rather than to a specific methodology (Rogers, 1965). My self-inquiry offers a transferable example to the readers demonstrating how a therapist can make sense of personal transitions in the continuous development of dual or multiple identities and integrate into a whole self, "moving from whole to part and back to whole again" (Tudor, 2016, p. 151). My study illustrates a possible framework to contain and reveal individual processes. At the same time, the paths along with the identified phases or identifications could be duplicated and generalized, which no quantitative method can accomplish.

## A Critical Evaluation - Strengths and Limitations

Besides the above-mentioned impacts, I self-evaluated my research according to Yardley's (2008) framework.

### Sensitivity to Context

There is no theory that acknowledged context regarding the duality of mother/therapist, and heuristic research is rare (DiMartino, 2021; Moore, 2008). My research elaborates on the understandings generated by Clarke (2010) and Robinson (2012) along with other relevant literature in the last four decades. As the sole researcher and participant, I addressed the central ethical issue by ensuring my self-disclosures in this heuristic research were research-orientated and relevant, considering factors such as my culture, the intent of disclosure, and how the self-disclosure might impact the reader(s). I explored solely myself and my worldview when writing about my motherhood, and strictly conducted this self-search inquiry in a way that respects the privacy, rights, and welfare of my family. With regular supervision, I closely monitored the data collection and analysis as a researcher to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the lives of all involved, directly or indirectly.

### Commitment and Rigour

Guided by Moustakas's six phases, I fantasized about a personal hero quest adventuring down the dungeon for better engagement with my topic and immersion in my process, aiming to answer my question. The resulting mapping of the two developmental paths, along with five emergent themes, exhibited completeness of data collection and analysis with the methodological competence of the heuristic concepts: identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990) as the process revealed throughout the research period.

## Transparency

I presented all aspects of my data collection using a research diary, recollections, personal therapy, interaction with other health professionals, and academic papers. I interpreted my data by identifying the essence of meaning extracted from my two developmental processes with two disciplines of therapist training and the five emerging themes employing Sela-Smith's technique of focusing on the *I-who-feel*. I unfolded my entire process, magnifying every struggle and defense mechanism I encountered while proceeding on my mother's path. Employing the HSSI method honed my reflexivity and exhibited my speaking position as a heuristic researcher.

## Coherence

My research narrative followed the timeline of my life, from being a mother to being a play therapist and finally becoming a psychotherapist. My key discoveries provided clarity and coherence in the overall analysis and interpretation of the nature and essence of my experience of the mother/therapist duality. My findings showed congruence and alignment between the epistemological underpinnings of heuristics and the HSSI method in answering my question regarding the reciprocity of motherhood and the profession of women psychotherapists.

## Limitations

In adopting heuristic inquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990) and HSSI (Sela-Smith, 2001; 2002), my first-person singular search inquiry is subject to the general limitations of the methodology and method such as blind spots during immersion, researcher is at the centre of the meaning-making process (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006), and not applicable to test a-priori hypotheses (Lumma & Weger, 2021). It falls outside of the standard validity criteria of the empirical scientific method (Ozertugrul, 2017) due to its open-ended and autobiographic nature and the level of uncertainty during data collection. Nevertheless, the validity of an HSSI can be witnessed through critical examinations using the lens of "self-understanding, commonsense understanding, and theoretical understanding" (Kvale, 2007, as cited

in Ozertugrul, 2017). My experience will be relevant to the therapeutic field when it is illuminated through an honest and integral depiction of self-experience (Ozertugrul, 2015; 2017), exhibiting my trustworthiness, integrity, and credibility in the self-validation process, which could be arbitrary, subjective and difficult to prove. Although "creative synthesis is ultimately made by the researcher alone based on subjective perceptions and meanings inherent to the researcher's particular worldview (Ozertugrul, 2017, p. 240)", it is more than knowledge of self but knowledge of self in society as "Any effect on the self who enacts its own knowledge is an effect on society (Ozertugrul, 2015, p. 248)". Every personal question carries social and universal significance (Moustakas, 1990).

## Future Research

### Minimization of Culture and the Stages of Motherhood

These are two undeveloped areas I identified when reviewing current literature. Due to the constraints of scope and time of my research, most importantly, to follow the "aha" moments, these areas remain unexplored. "The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context-biographical, historical, and cultural-in which they are embedded (Mezirow, 1991, as cited in O'Reilly, 2014)". "It is assumed that the identity and experience of an individual are actively constructed in and through culture – a process in which social practices interface with individual psychological processes to give rise to specific identity positions (Frosh, 2010, as cited in Sheridan, 2017)". These narratives indicated the future direction in which researchers consider culture a significant factor in their studies. Besides, "The developmental stage of one's parenthood affected how they experienced therapist-parenthood (Jalowiec, 2011, p. 121)." Despite the inclusion of mothers of adolescents (Jalowiec, 2011; O'Reilly, 2014; Parker et al., 2024; Robinson, 2012) and adult (Ellks, 2023; Lawrence, 2013), the diversity of different stages of motherhood remains unexplored.

## Motherhood and Dual Professions

Transiting from being a play therapist to a psychotherapist was a significant part of my second developmental process. However, an exploration of dual professional identities is beyond this study's scope. Research on the interface of motherhood and dual professions could be valuable for future researchers in enriching current knowledge on the mother/therapist duality by incorporating more complicated yet authentic human experiences. As Clarke (2010) deduced, personal therapy, learning from the client, and self-awareness are crucial in minimizing a trainee's potential moral hazard in the development of becoming a psychotherapist. Future research on the mutuality of personal and multiple professional identities shall contribute essential implications for training and practice.

## Conclusion

As I have experienced it, this journey of self-inquiry, with its challenges, is a source of inspiration. It is a testament to the human spirit's resilience and adaptability, and I hope that it will inspire others on their own journeys of self-discovery and transformation.

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