

The Experience of the Young Child  
Bereaved by Sibling Stillbirth

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## Abstract

Siblings bereaved by stillbirth have been described as “invisible mourners” because their loss is often unacknowledged. This research project uses a psychoanalytic developmental orientation to examine the experience of young children (aged two to six-years-old) bereaved by sibling stillbirth.

A hermeneutic literature review engaged with diverse texts including academic literature, pūrākau, poetry, novels and visual art works, in dialogue with the author’s lived experience of sibling stillbirth in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The findings suggest that the stillborn sibling becomes a lifelong constant companion for the bereaved young child. A unique set of concerns is confirmed for the bereaved young child, based on the intensification of the emotional themes of young childhood, especially loss and separation. Then, through the lens of the subjective reality of the young child, this study explores the disembodied, symbolic and spiritual relationship between the young child and their dead sibling.

The concept of the dead sibling as a phantastical transitional object is constructed from psychoanalytic references. Then inspired largely by mātauranga Māori, the dead sibling as a spiritual presence is discussed and affirms the author’s lived experience.

Implications for the psychotherapy profession include an awareness of a range of different presentations in the individual child and the family that may have a basis in sibling stillbirth. The importance of undirected play as therapy, and the transpersonal aspect of the therapeutic relationship are highlighted.

The research underscores the importance of play and symbolisation for the young child, both as creative, spiritual and therapeutic endeavours. Through play, the young child encounters their dead sibling in a way that is not possible in the physical world, and their relationship can be seen and fulfilled.

## Acknowledgements

The opportunity to carry out research such as this is rare. This has been a once-in-lifetime chance to think more deeply and broadly than I ever could have imagined.

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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 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.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Chapter introduction

Stillbirth has a devastating impact on whānau. The experience of bereaved parents is often, understandably, foremost in our minds and hearts. But the loss of an infant, before or after birth, has life-long consequences for the entire family. Siblings of the dead infant, often barely out of infancy themselves, have been called “invisible mourners”, since anecdotally their loss is often unacknowledged. This research sees those unseen siblings.

My research uses a hermeneutic literature view to expand understanding of the experience of young children (aged two to six-years-old) affected by stillbirth (the death of a “foetal” sibling). My research question is

***What is the experience of the young child bereaved by sibling stillbirth?***

The essential nature of understanding in human science research is interpretation which takes account of the orientation from which we view the world and our topic (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Accordingly, this chapter presents my research question, my research whakapapa, and my personal, academic and professional orientations.

## 1.2 Borrowing the past

My research has its origins in my own experience as a bereaved young sibling. In this way, my research is a kind of re-search of something that has already made a claim on me, something I have already known but forgotten (Romanynshyn, 2020). My brother died just days before he was born when I was four-years-old, an experience of which I consciously remember very little details. In retrospect, my loss felt largely unrecognised then and ever since. My experience of disenfranchised grief became internalised. It was an implicit and unspoken part of my life story, and it is only recently that I have been able to recognise the gravity of my loss.

Becoming a mother myself, and training as a child and adolescent psychotherapist, has prompted me to look deeper into my experience, in a different way, than I had previously. This research is a representation of that looking deeper.

At the beginning of my research journey, I heard a piece of music by an artist from Aotearoa New Zealand, “Borrowing from the Past” (Sheehan, 2011). The soundtrack has no lyrics, but it has sounds of children playing, birds singing and water gurgling. It took me back to my own childhood in my grandparents’ property in Okēre Falls, and my embodied response told me that these were all important clues to guide my research.

My area of research interest also has a resonance with my current professional situation, where I work as a Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist with bereaved children.

### 1.3 This is Me

The film “The Greatest Showman” has a line that emphatically pronounces “This is Me” (Pasek & Paul, 2017). The hermeneutic research methodology, which I use for this research, relies on and harnesses the strength of “this is me”, calling it the “power of prejudice” (Nixon, 2017).

Prejudices are complex and multi-faceted. They are created by a researcher’s unique position in the world, past and present. My prejudices enable me to dialogue with texts in a unique way, and for them to dialogue to each other through me, to produce a unique body of work that contributes to our collective understanding of human experience.

I am a sixth-generation Pākehā New Zealander. My ancestors came to Aotearoa from England, Ireland and Denmark. My family of origin can be described as a “Western” nuclear family, and during my early childhood my primary caregiver was my mother while my father was the primary earner. During my childhood I lived mainly in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, but I lived for about one year in each of Canada, Australia and England at various times during my childhood and adolescence.

I am a daughter, sister and mother of three children. I am cisgender, heterosexual, feminist, who is educated, an able-bodied woman. I am also a developing Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist, having just earned interim registration with the Psychotherapist Board of Aotearoa New Zealand as I started this research.

Prior to starting my training to become a psychotherapist, I had undertaken paid work and training in other occupations. My first academic training was in Chemical and Materials Engineering, and I worked in dairy factories and in a science-based research organisation, most recently in technology commercialisation.

### 1.3 Te Tiriti o Waitangi

I live and practice psychotherapy in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the basis for research and professional practice. Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand and sets out for Māori and Tau iwi a framework of protection, partnership and participation. Te Tiriti o Waitangi reaffirmed Māori tino rangatiratanga, granted the English kāwangatanga and promised ōritetanga with British subjects (Came, 2013).

Having an “effective historical consciousness” is a key part of hermeneutic research (Smythe & Spence, 2012). For me, this has meant holding in mind that predominantly, my studies have been based on Western models of infancy, childhood and adolescence, specifically psychoanalytic models that have their roots in Europe. But I live in a country founded in Te Tiriti. Coming to terms with this inconsistency is a task continually playing out in all spheres, individually and collectively, of the psychotherapy community, which played out in my research also.

### 1.4 Definitions

#### 1.4.1 Stillbirth in Aotearoa New Zealand

I have defined stillbirth to mean the death of an infant or foetus prior to birth. The Ministry of Health defines stillbirth as a death occurring when either the infant is greater than 400g or more than 20 weeks’ gestation (Ministry of Health, 2019), which is the definition that I held in mind during my research. However, I don’t want this definition to limit the implications of my research, which may also apply to children who have experienced loss due to infertility and miscarriage, and of infant siblings born alive.

Stillbirth affects a large number of siblings in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2016, the most recent year for which statistics are available, there were 413 foetal deaths

(6.8 per 1000 total births) with a similar rate across all ethnic groups (Ministry of Health, 2019). One can assume that many of these stillborn infants have siblings, many of them in the age range specified in my research.

#### 1.4.2 The young child

I have defined “the young child” to mean children aged between and including two and six years old. Psychoanalytic developmental theory refers to these children as “oedipal children”, describing a key part of their development which is about expanding their capacity to relate to people who are not their primary caregiver(s) (Gilmore & Meersand, 2013). My interest in this developmental stage came from my own experience as a bereaved young sibling, but also my curiosity about how a young child, already encountering weaning and separation from their primary caregiver(s), as a normal developmental task, copes with loss. I was also interested to explore what meaning they make of loss through play and symbols, the “language” of young children and the medium of child psychotherapy. Initially I expected I would largely be looking at psychoanalytic definitions of the young child but as I progressed, I incorporated different worldviews such as Te Ao Māori.

#### 1.5 Existing literature

Described as the “forgotten grievers” and “invisible mourners”, children whose siblings have died have reportedly been relatively neglected in academic literature, perhaps reflecting the experience of the surviving siblings themselves (Crehan, 2004; Royden & Rodgers, 2018).

Most of the literature written about bereaved young children appeals to our cortical “adult” brains. The children are explained using devices that help adults understand what is happening for the children. One such device is the characterisation of typical experiences using short descriptors that immediately convey the sense of the child’s experience. Two examples are the “surviving child” (Agger, 1988; Berman, 1978) and the “replacement child” (Donoghue, 2017).

Another characteristic of some academic and clinical literature is to describe a child-like way of experiencing grief in such a way as to make it sound unwanted or pathological. Such writers talk about “distorted cognitions” of the child (Leon,

1986) and use the words “pathological grief response”(Crehan, 2004). I wondered if such descriptions came from the author’s uncomfortable or even unbearable responses to witnessing childhood grief.

Some writers attempt to interpret the experience using technical language from their traditions, such as the psychoanalytic phenomenon of “looking for the lost object”(Adamo, 2014).

A further device is to name the emotions that are attributed to grieving young children. During my research I noted in my journal many feelings that the literature talks about in relation to grieving children such as guilt, envy, curiosity, rejection, despair, sadness, haunted and fear.

While all these methods are valid and contribute to our understanding, an objective of my research is to explore my phenomenon in ways that privilege the subjective reality of young children, where the limbic brain, phantasy<sup>1</sup> and fantasy are more dominant than for adults. This approach is respectful also of the practice of child and adolescent psychotherapy. The use of the hermeneutic methodology supports this objective.

## 1.6 Chapter overview

In this chapter I have introduced my topic and its whakapapa and whenua. In the Chapter Two I explain my methodology and method.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five the data and analysis are presented. Chapter Three sets the scene of the emotional life of the young child and outlines some of the characteristic struggles and achievements of this age group. Chapter Four takes a look at psychoanalytic literature and academic papers to capture some of the unconscious beliefs and family dynamics that can be set up in families bereaved by stillbirth. Finally, in Chapter Five I engage first with academic writing and then with

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<sup>1</sup> Phantasy describes unconscious emotions, thoughts, ideas and modes of relating, of which we were not consciously aware, but which nevertheless greatly influence our daily lives. They have their origin in past experiences and relationships, particularly those in infancy and early life, with primary caregivers, siblings and other significant figures.

creative writing and visual art works as texts, to explore the relationship that the young child has with the dead sibling.

My writing finishes with a discussion about what I have learned in the process of my research, implications for the psychotherapy profession and for caregivers, and recommendations for future research.

## 1.7 Chapter summary

My research aim is to further understand and promote thinking about the experience of the young child (aged two to six-years-old) whose baby sibling is still born. The origins of my research topic are my own experience of infant sibling loss and my current work as a psychotherapist with bereaved children.

My chosen research method is a hermeneutic literature review in which I will use the “power of prejudice” to create novel interpretations of texts by observing the dialogue between the texts and myself, and the texts between each other.

I chose to focus on the developmental stage of the young “oedipal” child due to my curiosity about the loss of the sibling coinciding with a time when the child is experiencing loss of the exclusive relationship with its primary caregiver(s) and expanding relationships to include others. Existing literature is largely, but not exclusively, unsympathetic to the child’s unique way of seeing the world, and it tends to codify the child’s experience for an adult audience that appreciate cognitive, “adult” thinking. I intend for my research to consider the subjective reality of the young child which seems all the more important for this group of “invisible” mourners.

## 2 Methodology and Method

### 2.1 Chapter introduction

I like to think of a light shining through a prism as an analogy for the research process.

The researcher's heart, soul and body constitute a multi-faceted prism through which light, which we can think of as the research data, shines onto and into. The light bounces around inside the prism researcher, off the different internal surfaces, and emerges in a myriad of possible colours, intensities and shades. These are the research outcomes. The presence of a surface for the emergent light to shine onto, and its qualities, also determine the characteristics of the emergent light. We can therefore think of the surface and the observers as part of the research process too.

A research paradigm provides the researcher with a framework, or using my analogy, a prism, for making meaning from their research. At the core of the paradigm is the researcher's ontology, that is to say, researcher's own beliefs about what being a human is, and the nature of reality. The research's ontological wisdom informs the research epistemology, which defines what the researcher values as knowledge, what counts and what to pay attention to (Giddings & Grant, 2002).

In this chapter, I lay out my research methodology and method. Methodologies provide a specific mode of enquiry that is true to the researcher's ontology and epistemology. In turn, methods provide the practical means for collecting and thinking about data.

My study is based on a *hermeneutic literature review*.

The hermeneutic literature review enables us to "re-view" texts in a way that provides context and promotes thinking. Like the art of psychotherapy, it is dynamic and contextual (Smythe & Spence, 2012), and embraces the complexity of human experiences and difficulties, "the problems that inhabit our everyday human lives" (McCaffrey & Moules, 2016).

## 2.2 The woven universe

The hermeneutic philosophy allows us to research as ethical agents, as fully human as we can be, because it can accommodate our unique realities as human researchers (Nixon, 2017). It recognises that we each have pasts, presents and futures into which we are interwoven, inseparably, with our history and culture (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

Rev Māori Marsden [1924-1993] was a tohunga, scholar, writer, healer and philosopher. In the introduction to Marsden's book "The Woven Universe", Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal acquaints us with the "the woven universe", where the world is a "kahu (dress), a fabric comprising of a fabulous mélange of energies" (Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 2003, p. xiii)

He tells us to concern ourselves with how this fabric is woven and the nature of our place within it. This is my conceptualisation of research.

Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal credits his brother Haunui Royal with highlighting the importance of language. Reo (language) is a way to weave people and all things together into a fabric of whanaungatanga and relationships. This weaving is the work of the tohunga whakapapa (genealogist) (Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 2003). My hermeneutic literature review also harnesses the power of language, using it to bring different voices into relationship with each other and to create a conversation about the research topic.

## 2.3 Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy

Hermeneutic research is to do with understanding texts. In the present day, hermeneutics can examine all kinds and sources of texts (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Romanyshyn, 2020). In this research, I look at many different types of texts including papers from academic journals, photos, dreams, novels and picture books.

In the nineteenth century, hermeneutic studies aspired to capture the original meaning as intended by the author. However, the German philosophers Heidegger [1889-1976] and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer [1900-2002] advocated that hermeneutic study could offer more than original meaning. Gadamerian



hermeneutic philosophy, on which this study is based, was the result of Heidegger's and Gadamer's collaboration.

For the rest of my dissertation from here on, when I refer to hermeneutic research, I am referring to research based on Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy.

### 2.3.1 Power of prejudice

Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy contends that research can achieve more than reconstructing the original meaning of the texts, if the researcher deliberately includes the effect of their own prejudices and subjectivity. This is the way that fresh insights are generated in hermeneutic research (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

An essential part of the hermeneutic methodology is acknowledging that one's vision is limited to the horizons that are created by one's "inherited structures of thinking" (Austgard, 2012; Schuster, 2013; Smythe & Spence, 2012). Gadamer called these structures "prejudice", "fore-meaning" and "fore-structure" (Schuster, 2013). In my writing, I use mainly the word "prejudice" to refer to the inherited structure of thinking.

Prejudices are inherent in each researcher, and created by history, place, culture, experience, education and training. Far from being denied or eliminated, as is done by other methodologies, such as those within the positivist paradigm (Giddings & Grant, 2002) prejudices are embraced and useful in hermeneutic research. This is because they *are* the researcher. They are the means through which texts are understood.

When a hermeneutic researcher "reads" a text, we must be open to our reaction and response to the text, which are largely created by our prejudices. When we interact with a text, whatever is induced in us has a message for us about our research question. We might have thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, desires, urges, dreams, actions and conversations in response to each text. We might not even link them to the text at the time, or we might make obvious spontaneous connections. Sometimes, it takes the course of almost the entire research journey to realise the message. These messages in response to texts determine how we

answer, or do not answer, our research question. Slowly the messages come together to form an understanding that we then offer to our own readers, who in turn have their own responses.

We can see therefore an influential factor in hermeneutic research is the researcher's relationship with *our own selves*, with our previous experiences, worldview, culture and other contextual elements. This is the way that we make meaning, and which enables understanding. Through this process we realise our full human potential (Nixon, 2017).

### 2.3.2 Dialogue

The way that we interact with texts in the hermeneutic research is like a conversation. We take in something from the text, and respond in kind, and then are prompted again by our continued interaction with the text. Gadamer framed hermeneutic study as a dialogue between researcher and the text, and through the researcher, between texts. He contended that the texts, from their own socio-historical and cultural standpoints, would have something to say to the researcher, from their own standpoint, and vice versa. He proposed that the hermeneutic process would change the researcher's understanding of a topic by prompting the researcher to be "thought-full" (Smythe & Spence, 2012) and to think about something in a new way.

Gadamer proposed that through mutual and reciprocal exchanges we achieve mutual understanding. In a hermeneutic literature review, the "others" in which we are in relationship with, are represented by texts. In this way, text is regarded as a partner in our journey of thinking (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

In a literature review, a "conversation" cannot happen in the way we imagine a conversation normally happens between people, because the text is inanimate. Instead, the conversation happens within the researcher where the ideas represented by the texts can be put together and interact, argue, agree, dialogue and fuse, within the fertile ground of the researcher's imagination. The research product is the researcher's new understanding and novel contribution to a body of knowledge.

### 2.3.3 Fusion of horizons

Gadamer's philosophy was that from a point in the present time, with a knowledge of our prejudices, we can change and expand our thinking by engaging with others, thus enabling what Gadamer famously called a "fusion of horizons".

My understanding is that Gadamer used the term "horizon" to imply an expanse that only reaches so far as the eye can see, not so far as to see all that is to be seen (Nixon, 2017). It is through dialogue with others that the possibility of a new horizon is experienced. When we can take on the perspective of another, a fusion of horizons is achieved. Then, the landscape that we can see becomes different, more expansive and inclusive, and we learn something.

### 2.3.4 Hermeneutic circle

The notion of a *hermeneutic circle* was advanced by Heidegger and Gadamer, and it implies that the movement of hermeneutic thought is circular and iterative (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The concept of a circular process can represent many aspects of the hermeneutic methodology.

For example, in the process of going back and forth between what we see and the interpretation of the text, we broaden our horizons and gain new awareness. This enables us to see beyond our own prejudice.

Another way the hermeneutic circle shows itself is through the continual revision of understanding. For example, in this research, I completed my three data chapters and then circled back to Chapter One and rewrote it. Only once I got to the end of my writing did I know how it should begin.

### 2.3.5 We look with uncertainty

Hermeneutic methodology uses the power of words, symbols, metaphors and unspoken messages to create new understanding in the researcher. Romanyshyn describes the work of the researcher in this way:

*"...a researcher is attuned to the gap between what is said and what is always left unsaid, the gap between conscious and*

*unconscious, which is bridged by the symbol as the expression of  
the transcendent function” (Romanyshyn, 2020, p. 220)*

Using this approach, the poem “We Look with Uncertainty”, by Anne Hillman, symbolised for me some of key ideas of Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy, especially the movement from one horizon to another.

*We look with uncertainty  
beyond the old choices for  
clear-cut answers  
to a softer, more permeable aliveness  
which is every moment  
at the brink of a death.  
for something new is being born in us  
if we but let it.  
We stand at a new doorway,  
awaiting that which comes....  
daring to be human creatures,  
Vulnerable to the beauty of existence.  
Learning to love.*

This poem was first read to me by Hilary Foged at Te Wahi Ora Women’s Retreat at Piha in May 2020. The context was a women’s writing weekend and the recent emergence from the first lockdown imposed by Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand; the first of four lockdowns while I was undertaking this study.

Like Hillman puts forth in her poem, Gadamer was clear that we cannot take for granted the knowledge that we think we have about something, and fall into the complacency, passivity or security that it offers us. Instead, we must be actively questioning, challenging ourselves and our understanding. In hermeneutic research, the researcher approaches the work with an openness to what may be found, and a willingness for the findings to be different to what Hillman calls “old choices”. “Old choices” is perhaps synonymous with Gadamer’s “prejudices”.

The poem also speaks to accepting that sometimes in research the “answers” are not obvious, or delineated, or simple. Such a methodology can seem difficult to uphold in Western cultures, where positivism is deeply embedded and has greatly influenced assumptions about what knowledge is by emphasising the importance of objectivity, systematisation, observation and verification (Giddings & Grant, 2002).

Pertinent to my topic of study, the poem references birth and death. During research there is a gestation and creation of something unique. The researcher allows their body and mind to become the vessel, sustenance and driver of growth, so that “something new” can be birthed and offered to humankind, in the service of development of humankind and the evolution of culture.

Finally, the poem also speaks to passivity, which although it may be hard for some of us, including me, is sometimes necessary. For it is through the moments of stillness that the mist can clear, or the ideas can catch up with our racing minds and be able to find and connect with us. In hermeneutic research there are periods of immersing oneself in a topic and trusting the process and the surrender to “await what comes”, which is integral in hermeneutic research (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

#### 2.3.6 Why I chose a hermeneutic methodology

I chose the hermeneutic methodology because it is a good fit for me as a person, researcher, developing psychotherapist and for my research question.

As I have discussed, Rev Marsden’s “woven universe” portrays humans as being connected, in relationship, through time and space. This metaphor is consistent with my personal understanding of the world. In the “woven universe”, language and other symbols provide a way for people to be connected, to understand and to be understood. To be known by another and to know another. The hermeneutic methodology holds up the image of the “woven universe” and the power of language and symbols. I believe in the “woven universe”, and I know that symbols can have a very powerful effect on me and are often laden with meaning. And hence the hermeneutic methodology is a good fit for me as a person and a researcher.

The hermeneutic methodology is at its core an interpersonal, intersubjective conversation for the public good (Nixon, 2017). These fundamentals are common to the practice of psychotherapy, the discipline to which this research belongs. And hence there is a good fit between hermeneutic methodology and psychotherapy.

Romanyshyn's interpretation of the hermeneutic methodology makes the alignment with psychotherapy even firmer. He says that the hermeneutic philosophy privileges the role of the unconscious and the symbol as the "expression of the transcendent function" (Romanyshyn, 2020), as does psychotherapy.

Another common tenet that links hermeneutics and psychotherapy, especially psychotherapy with children, is play. Hermeneutic methodology has play at its heart. The hermeneutic process includes a time of play with no intended purpose or end point, just play in which there are no answers, only meaningful questions (Nixon, 2017). This part of the research process upholds the value ascribed to play by psychotherapists as a fundamental motivator of emotional development and a way to soothe and to communicate anxieties.

And finally, to the fit with the research question. My research question is endowed with themes of infancy, young childhood, life and death. All very human characteristics to which the hermeneutic approach is well suited (McCaffrey & Moules, 2016).

## 2.4 Method

The method that I have chosen for my study is a literature review. Gadamer considered that method was a problem and emphasised instead the importance of the question. He even taught that "method" could obscure the "truth" (Gadamer, 2004), and that the way of hermeneutic practice is determined by the phenomenon being studied and not the method (McCaffrey & Moules, 2016). He emphasised the importance of play, it's "to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end" (Gadamer, 2004; Nixon, 2017, p. 32). Hence, the nature of hermeneutic research is that there are few rules to follow; rather a way to be attuned (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Nevertheless, for research purposes, there

needs to be some way to operationalise Gadamer's philosophy, which necessitates a research method.

#### 2.4.1 Literature review as a hermeneutic method

Austgard (2012) and Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) attempt to systemise an approach of interpreting texts using hermeneutic philosophy. I adopted the approach of Austgard of breaking the work into four parts and appreciated the support provided for systemisation by Boell and Cecz-Kecmanovic. In my study, I found that I move backward and forward between Austgard's parts, while maintaining a general momentum from part one to part four. The parts are:

1. Working out the hermeneutic situation
2. Identifying my fore-understanding
3. Hermeneutic dialogue with the text
4. Fusion of horizons

For much of my study I found that sometimes the four parts were separate and sometimes they merged together and were in dialogue with each other. For example, during my study I went away for a few days to an inner-city apartment to progress my dissertation, but I found myself reading academic papers during the day and researching my family tree far into the night, looking for dead children, bereaved siblings, my mother's lost biological family and immigration stories. The academic work during the day could best be described as part three, hermeneutic dialogue with the text. The work during the night was my "dream work" and spoke to me about my fore-understanding (part two) as well as how I was interpreting the texts (part three) and how the texts spoke to me (part four). This "dream work" was like an inner fusion of understanding, interpretation and application, the hallmarks of hermeneutic tradition (Austgard, 2012).

#### 2.4.2 Working out the hermeneutic situation

I propose that working out the hermeneutic situation is about the development of the research question, which starts with an attraction between the researcher and the researched. The research question can be regarded as the frame that forms

“the new doorway” that Anne Hillman refers to in her poem, where we “tarry” and “loiter” as part of our hermeneutic process (Romanyshyn, 2020).

The question arises from the soul of the researcher, the hermeneutic methodology, the tradition of the researcher, the motivation of the researcher and the requirements for an argument that contributes to a body of knowledge (Austgard, 2012; Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Romanyshyn, 2020).

My research question is

***What is the experience of the young child bereaved by sibling stillbirth?***

#### 2.4.3 Exclusions

I refined my research question as I understood more fully the story that was being jointly constructed by myself and my texts. In my original question, I started by considering all sibling bereavements, but came to narrow that down. This was because I became aware of the unique nature of stillbirth loss compared to other types of sibling loss, even other types of perinatal loss and the different experiences of siblings born before and after the loss.

I excluded texts about children born subsequent to perinatal loss, often called “replacement children” such as those described by Beaumont and Donoghue (Beaumont, 2011; Donoghue, 2017). It was clear from preliminary readings that children born after sibling stillbirth have a different experience than those born before.

I only included data about children who were aged between two and six-years-old because I wanted to capture the effect of sibling bereavement by stillbirth at this particular developmental stage.

#### 2.4.4 Identifying my fore-understanding

An important part of the hermeneutic process is identifying one’s prejudices, as much as one can. I have outlined the pertinent parts of my prejudices in Chapter One. In the following chapters I further explore my prejudices and their effect on my interpretation as I present the texts I examined.



#### 2.4.5 Hermeneutic dialogue with the text

Finding and engaging with texts can seem like a complicated and daunting task, which Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic break down into two cycles, with “search and acquisition” embedded into “analysis and interpretation” (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). They liken these operational cycles to a type of hermeneutic circle, and we “await that which comes” (Hillman).

My process of searching and acquiring texts spanned about four months. I started keeping a handwritten list in my journal of “key” pieces of literature, until the point where I felt that I had enough, in terms of number and in terms of feeling satisfied that they would come together to form a new narrative. I acquired texts in a number of ways:

- Recommendations by peers, friends and supervisors. For example, my friend and peer Michelle Amopiu recommended the collection within which I found the short story, “Born.Still” (Grace-Smith, 2019), and my supervisor Dr Margot Solomon recommended “Ka puta rā koe ki te whai ki te ao mārama: Where do babies come from?” (Broughton, 2016).
- Texts from my own book collection such as the young child observations described in “Young Child Observation: A Development in the Theory and Method of Infant Observation” (Adamo & Rustin, 2014).
- A search of the PsycINFO database using key words from my question. PsycINFO is a specialist database of psychological literature. My search strategy was a title search with the following terms: (sibling OR brother OR sister) AND (baby OR infant OR peri\* OR neo\* OR still\*) AND (death OR loss OR die\* or bereave\*). From this search I found ten relevant articles and book chapters written by psychological clinicians.
- Finding useful citations in other works (this is called “pearling” (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014)). This is how I found Klass’ paper on bereaved parents bonds with their dead children (Klass, 1993), which was referenced by Hayman et al in their paper on disembodied relationships (Hayman et al., 2017)

- Texts that found their way to me themselves. For example, I discovered the painting “For Such is the Kingdom of Heaven” on a trip to the art gallery with my family (Bramley, 1891). This experience demonstrates the idea that “precious insights are found in the most unlikely of places” (Smythe & Spence, 2012)

#### 2.4.6 Fusion of horizons

As a result of the texts talking to each other and to me as the researcher, gradually ideas came together, and I conceived new ones. I became impregnated by the work and something new was born in me, as in Anne Hillman’s poem. Romanyshyn describes this creative “birth” process, as bringing a feminine presence to the art of understanding. (Romanyshyn, 2020)

When I had finished my data collection, I drew on a piece of A3 paper what symbols were most enduring for me from my foregrounding, dialogue with the texts and from my own experience of immersing myself in the study. This is how I became consciously aware of how the texts talked to me and to each other. From looking at the drawing, I could see how my dissertation should be divided up and how each text and section might relate to the other. Due to Jill Buchanan’s resignation from AUT, she supervised me up to when I started writing up my data chapters and just after I completed my picture of my work, shown in Figure 1.

Then I worked with Dr Margot Solomon as my supervisor for the remainder of my study. During this time, my ideas took on shape and structure. I started the writing process, and wrote and rewrote as my understanding of my research phenomenon flexed and grew.

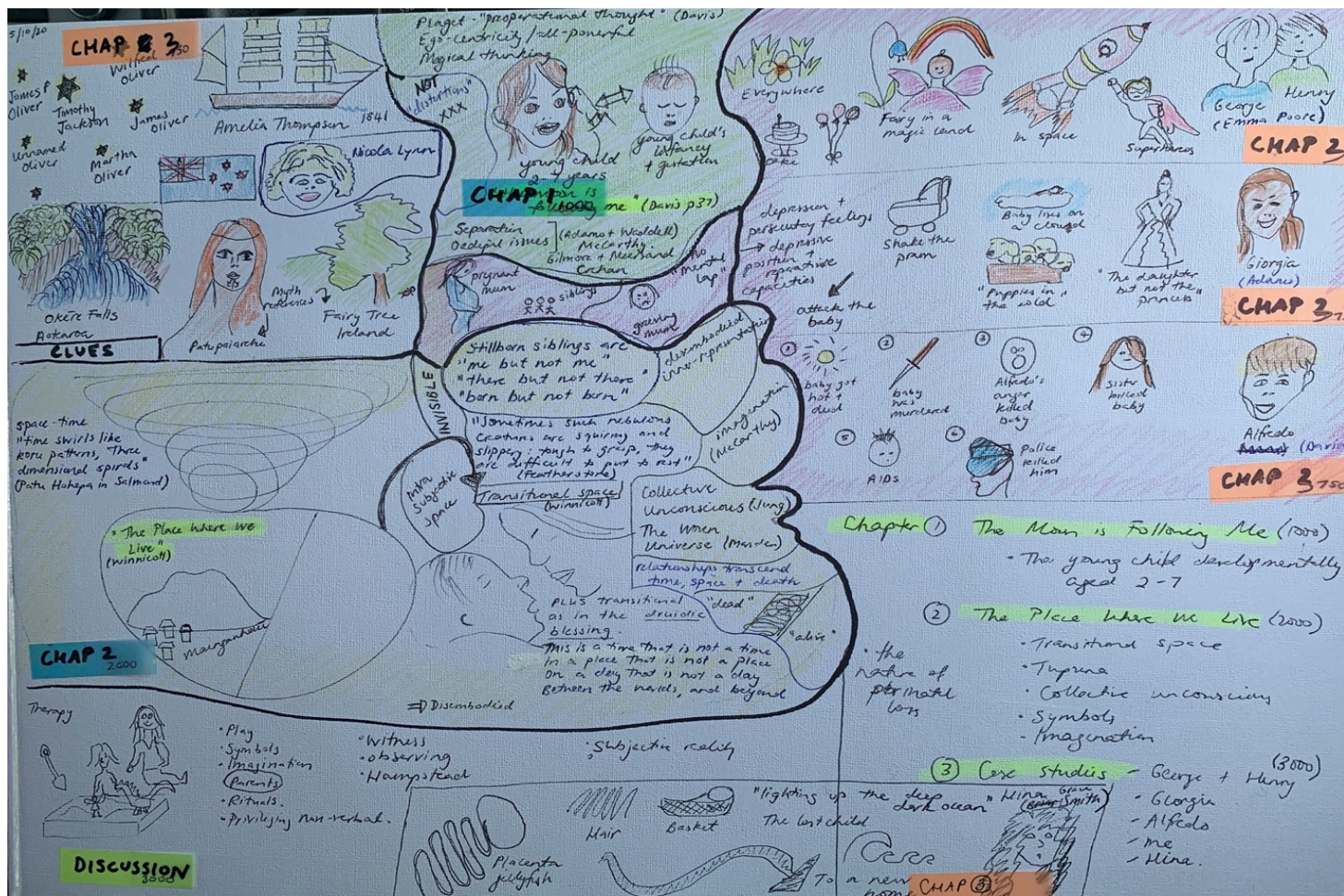


Figure 1. Fusion of horizons

## 2.5 Ethics

Considering texts from worldviews other than my own enables a broadening of horizons which is integral to the hermeneutic process. I was motivated to include texts from Te Ao Māori in the dialogue because I was attracted to mātauranga Māori's wealth of understanding about interconnectivity and the nature of relationships. In addition, as a Pākehā researcher I was called to partner with Māori writers in acknowledgement of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I wish to acknowledge that all research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand concerns Māori. In our country, Kaupapa Māori was once, as still is for some, ordinary and normal (Came, 2013).

Specific and conscious decisions I made regarding my methodology and method to work towards honouring Te Tiriti were:

- Seeking out and engaging with texts by Māori writers
- Welcoming wairua, whakapapa and whānau into my research

In this way I aimed to broaden my horizons and stimulate thinking in ways and directions that respected the country and mana whenua of the land in which I live and practice psychotherapy.

## 2.6 Chapter summary

I use a hermeneutic literature review to respond to the question "What is the young child's experience of bereavement by a younger sibling's stillbirth?".

The hermeneutic methodology required me to be aware of my own prejudices that I brought to the research. Prejudices are created by each researcher's unique blend of factors such as their whakapapa, history, culture, experience, education and training.

I chose to operationalise the hermeneutic methodology by way of a literature review, which required me to engage with texts and to listen for both the explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious messages they had for me. The way I listened to each text, and what I could hear them saying, was greatly influenced by my prejudices. Guided by my response to each text, I thought about the meaning of the texts and then returned to the texts with more questions, or a different approach to reading. This to and fro between researcher and text is likened to a conversation, or a "hermeneutic circle".

Through engaging with texts in this way, I generated new insights which are outlined in the following chapters. This process is also called “fusion of horizons” to describe the researcher’s new ability to look at the research topic from new perspectives, from new horizons, grounded by their original vantage point. One of my intentions was to increase my capacity to look at my research topic from a vantage point which was recognisable as being distinctly located in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I liken this approach to the process described in the poem “Living with Uncertainty”, where “something new is born within us” as part of the research process.



## 3 Young Childhood: Physical Space and Psychic Space

### 3.1 Chapter introduction

One of the key premises of my research question is that there are unique features of young childhood (about two to six-years-old) that set it apart from other stages of life and make it worthy of special consideration. The aim of this chapter is to set the scene for the following chapters by outlining how things are for people in the stage of life we call young childhood.

And so now, I present the age of the young childhood in terms of *space*. This is how I have conceptualised what I see speaks from behind the words of the texts I read about young childhood. Young childhood is about space: physical space and psychic space. It's about movement away from and towards, as the child separates from parents. It's about shapes: mainly triangles, but also squares and circles. It's about the volume of the space between objects, where the objects are the child, parents and people. It's about geometry, geography and landscapes.

### 3.2 A note about gender

Many of the texts to which I refer in this chapter are traditional psychoanalytic texts which infer an association between gender and parental function. For example, they assume that the maternal function is performed by a biological female, and the paternal function is performed by a biological male. A contemporary interpretation, to which I ascribe, is that both the mother and father function can be performed by any adult. This is how I intend my writing to be interpreted.

However, as this is a literature review, at times it has been appropriate to use the original terms that my reference texts use, in acknowledgement of, and to highlight, their prejudices. I have tried to make it clear where I am using the original terms.

I also refer at times to my experience as a cis-gendered heterosexual female mother, which happens to be the traditional psychanalytic definition of "mother". I acknowledge that this may have the effect of enforcing the prejudices of the psychoanalytic tradition, which exclude the experiences of other parents. My intention is to present my experiences as part of the the hermeneutic methodology, where my own subjective reality is considered a part of the research process.

### 3.3 Separation

The idea of separation evokes a concept of physical space and moving through it to be further away from parents. As such, separation looms large for the young child. So much so that Margot Waddell, a Psychoanalyst and Consultant Child Psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic, London, designates separation, along with weaning, as the central emotional task of young childhood (Waddell, 2002). This is a common stance in psychoanalytic accounts of child development (Lubbe, 1996).

Seemingly ordinary everyday tasks for the young child involve significant separation events. The young child starting preschool, changing sleeping arrangements and the return of parents to paid work are all real-life firsts for the young child that involve physical separation from their parents. The young child encounters new people, places and situations as their world expands past the more contained environment of infancy. However, the sense of accomplishment that parents feel about these “firsts” is not necessarily shared by the young child. For the young child, accompanying this enlargement of their world is an increased capacity to think about its implications, which can be scary or even terrifying. “Growing Up in New Zealand” is a longitudinal study of a cohort on Aotearoa New Zealand born in 2009 and 2010. When the cohort were four-years-old, one in two were reported by parents as being “nervous or clinging in new situations” or “easily losing confidence” (Morton et al., 2017). This observation by parents illustrates the challenge of young childhood.

The “clinging” described by parents in the “Growing Up in New Zealand” study is understandable because, just a short time earlier, when they were infants, the young child enjoyed what they thought was sole possession of their parental figures. Waddell describes this as a “unique, uncomplicated and blissful experience” (Waddell, 2002, p. 65). Even before that, in the womb, the young child lived in a world that was perfectly suited to his needs, “so much so that he never wanted to leave it” (Meltzer & Harris, 2014, p. 43). And so, a kind of “clinging” to past idyllic experiences of the womb and parent’s arms can seem preferable to a young child than separation.

Some children in Aotearoa New Zealand (about 30%) live with parents in extended family groups (8% of European, 26% of Māori, 40% of Pacific and 32% of Asian four-year-olds from

the “Growing Up in New Zealand” study) (Morton et al., 2017). In contrast to the children of psychoanalytic accounts, these children may not experience separation as the dominant theme of early childhood. I can imagine an available resident grandparent for example, who may be available to the child in a variety of ways that complements the care provided by parents. However, for these children I speculate that there is still an expansion of their world in young childhood which involves some kind of separation. For example, we know that the vast majority of children (94%) attend some form of non-parental care at an Early Childhood Education centre or home-based care (Morton et al., 2017). We also know that most children are weaned from the breast or bottle, at one stage or another, by the end of young childhood.

### 3.4 Weaning

Members of the psychoanalytic tradition, perhaps most famously Melanie Klein [1882-1960], give a special centrality and poignancy to weaning as a form of separation; from breast to bottle, to cup, to solids (Klein, 1936; Waddell, 2002). Klein proposed that weaning was the first mourning experience that set up lifelong prototypes for how the child, and the adult they become, deals with loss. She also claimed that infant’s relationship with food symbolised their relationship with their mother. One can imagine therefore the huge psychic implication of weaning from one source or type of food to another.

*Throughout this paper I have attempted to show that the attitude towards food is fundamentally bound up with the relation to the mother and involves the whole of the infant's emotional life (Klein, 1952/1975)*

My personal experience of feeding my babies affirmed Klein’s theory that the physical and psychological aspects of feeding are entangled.

I know that in my experience as mother who practised exclusive breastfeeding, breastfeeding was central to my mothering. Breastfeeding *was* the relationship. In her novel, *Flesh and Blood*, author Michele Roberts portrays what I am talking about when she describes the emotional life of a breastfeeding relationship through the eyes of a mother.

*Mamabebe love you are here with you together us now over and over so non-stop mamabebe so wanting you born this love us so close skinskin*



*talking heartbeat belonging with you allowed love home flesh my  
mamabebe our body singing to you so beautiful love listen mamabebe  
listen: (Roberts, 1994, as cited in Frampton, 2004)*

Words like “together”, “us” and “non-stop”, and the non-structured text show how the identities of the mother and infant merge across bodily boundaries, and “skinskin” refers to the tight bodily contact which emulates the psychic bond.

With these two texts in mind, by Klein and by Roberts, we can see why weaning is a metaphor for separation, both psychic and physical.

#### 3.4.1 Texts about weaning

So, having established that weaning and separation are strongly entwined, I can see why texts about weaning are powerful metaphors to describe the psychic losses of early childhood. Now I know why I was drawn to them during my research process, even though they can be frustratingly temporarily specific about the timing and process of weaning.

Texts about weaning offer us a potent impression of what the young child may feel in response to their perceived diminishment of the special relationship with its caregivers. As Romanyshyn suggests, the texts express more than what they say on the surface. They can convey the authors own unconscious experience, or an experience of the collective unconscious (Romanyshyn, 2020). The texts that are based on close observations of the emotional states of infants and young children will express unconscious communications not just of the author but of the observed.

I think this is a very relevant to my research question, to understand how loss is already present in a young child’s life before the arrival of a stillborn sibling, through looking at texts on weaning.

Klein understood the normal reaction to weaning to be shock, grief and the desire to restore, underscoring the “first experience of permanent loss” (Klein, 1936). So, for a study such as is this, which is about death, it makes sense to find oneself looking to weaning, because it is a prototype for loss. And for a young child, who going through psychic weaning, the feelings states associated with loss are fresh, real and relevant.

Trevor Lubbe explains that weaning is about letting go and moving on (Lubbe, 1996). Therefore, the feelings of weaning are worked through at each life stage, especially perhaps in young childhood. I can see how weaning is very relevant to death, which for the survivors means letting go and moving on, or “mourning”.

Meltzer described the young child’s understanding of weaning as “the impending defection of his mummy-friend” (Meltzer & Harris, 2014). Here we have an indication that the infant finds his weaning mother to be treacherous and abandoning. And again, a link back to my theme of space, for “to defect” means to “change sides”, or “to move”.

The complexity of weaning is hinted at by Winnicott when he says that no baby is ever ready to be weaned, which is even more understandable when he describes it as the beginning of becoming disillusioned with one’s parents (Winnicott, 1957b). In weaning, the infant gives up their idealised parent figure, which no-one wants to do, but which is so important for healthy development. Thus the child develops a capacity to mourn which underpins how the child will deal with all future losses and which is reworked at each life stage. (Waddell, 2002). So, weaning and separation, although difficult and challenging, are also critical developmental steps.

### 3.5 Whai

Going back to my theme of space. I’ve talked about weaning and separation as a kind of “moving away” through space, from parents and caregivers. Moving away from the blissful time in the womb and from the timeless idyllic moments of being held in a caregiver’s arms. I’ve also talked about weaning as a metaphor for the huge loss that the child feels in response to the “movement away”, and how it sets the child up for dealing with future losses.

Now I want to talk about the creation of space. An infant does not have much space. We can think of the infant as being connected to its caregiver by a strand of wool; thick or thin, it does not matter which. The string is one-dimensional, and it does not make a shape between parent and infant. It just makes a line.

Psychoanalytic tradition teaches that the experience of young childhood is about how that string becomes triangulated with a third object or person (Britton, 1989). This happens when another person, perhaps a father, maybe a sibling or a cousin, reaches in a finger and

splits the string between primary caregiver and infant, stretches it into two strands and steps between the strands to make a triangle. Or another catalyst for the formation of the triangle is weaning, where the infant or young child is beginning to have new vantage point on their primary caregiver, and see her differently, with relationships outside of the dyad. Now there are three strings that make up the three sides of the triangle, with two parents and infant at the corners.

So now, we have a shape, and inside is a volume to be filled.

In my mind's eye I can see hands playing stringing games as I describe this process. This game is called whai, hūhi, mauī, or cat's cradle. Whai is a traditional Māori pastime, said to have been introduced to Māori by patupaiarehe (Wikaira, 2012). In the Māori dictionary, it is translated as

*A game in which a loop of string is placed around and between the fingers  
and complex patterns are formed(Moorfield, 2021)*

This description can easily be a metaphor for the young child forming new and complex relationships through psychic and physical space.



Figure 2. Māori children playing “cat’s cradle” or “whai” in 1913 (Guest, 1913)

In the old photograph shown in Figure 2 of young Māori children playing their string game, I am drawn first to the fact they are young children playing together. Perhaps they are siblings. Then I see their proud expressions, and then the square space that is made by the string held up by their hands and shared between them. We can think of that space representing the *space between* that is created in young childhood. The space created by new relationships, by an expanding world, and by weaning.

We can conceive that the space does not have to be a triangle between mother, father and infant as is proposed in the psychoanalytic tradition. For example, the shape can be a “whai” kind of shape, because “whai” means “stingray” as well as “string game”. This alternative definition suggests the possibility also of animals and the natural world being key child’s important relational figures for the child as well. This seems to be congruent with mātauranga Māori views on wellbeing (Mark & Lyons, 2010)

The point is that the string, when held between two or more people, makes a space.

Putting aside all the different shapes of the *space between*, I just need to address for a moment the triangulation between mother, father and infant, because under the guise of

the Oedipal complex<sup>2</sup>, it has traditionally been the central idea of psychoanalytic work (Segal, 1989) and I have read a lot about it which is important to this chapter.

The important thing about the “triangulation” between mother, father and infant, with the child as an apex in any shape that represents the relationships between them, is that it gives the child the opportunity to observe him or herself and to observe others. Observing the relationship between parents enables the child to realise themselves as “third”, and through this experience the child can come to terms with others having relationship in which the child is a witness but not a participant. Britton says that through this experience the child develops the capacity to see their own selves in relationship with others (Britton, 1989). Critically, the child starts to entertain the idea that other people have minds of their own, and the child learns to be open to the experience of others while retaining their own point of view. As an alternative to locating the child on an apex, Britton imagines that the child occupies a bounded mental space in the middle of the triangle in which the child has freedom of thought (Britton, 1989).

In her introduction to Britton’s writing, Segal offers a suggestion that the triangle offers an opening into which a sibling can be born (Segal, 1989). This suggestion imbues the space with creativity, the act of creation, and play, like the space shown between the girls in Figure 2.

So, I think we are establishing that, the young child starts to recognise, think and reflect upon their position in the family as they learn to think “triadically”. I say “triadically” in quote marks in recognition that the family constellation is not always a triad. The child becomes newly aware and sensitive to situations where they are excluded and rejected (Burhouse, 2014) The importance of the so-called mother-infant dyad recedes as other “third” relationships, such as with the father, siblings, extended family and caregivers and peers at preschool, gain importance.

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<sup>2</sup> The Oedipal Complex was discovered by Sigmund Freud in 1897 (Storr, 1989). A common contemporary interpretation is that the infant, frustrated by “weaning”, turns from mother, or primary caregiver, to the father, or other adult, and becomes aware of the “triangular situation”, meaning the infant becomes aware of the parents’ relationship as well as with the infant’s relationship with each parent.

Like Freud did many years ago, we still consider relational dynamics to be key to this age group, with the emphasis being on how the child's relationships start to change from "two going on three", in parallel with the child turning from two-years-old to three-years-old (Burhouse, 2014). However, we also bear in mind that young children, as do all of us, go backwards and forwards along the emotional continuum of their entire lives, so that all the emotional experiences of previous stages are relevant to the current one. A child of five-years-old can be a four-years-old, three, two or one-year-old, an infant or even a foetus in the womb (Winnicott, 1957a).

### 3.6 Dethroned by the worst betrayal

If weaning represents a loss, then the birth of the next child represents "the worst betrayal of all" (Meltzer & Harris, 2014). Juliet Mitchell, a psychoanalytic scholar, captures the poignancy of this event by saying it induces "sibling trauma" (Mitchell, 2003). Mother's pregnancy with a new baby fuels typical oedipal themes of "competition, exclusion and secretiveness" (Adamo & Magagna, 2014), and the young child's relationship with their parents is changed forever.

From the moment that the parents are aware of conception, there is at least part of their minds that are preoccupied with the new baby, growing in intensity and sensitivity throughout the pregnancy until the mother is attuned to the needs of new baby almost exclusively (Winnicott, 1956). There is an accompanying powerful change in the mother's relationship with the existing child(ren) and the young child can be left feeling that mother's lap is too full to accommodate them. This further accelerates the opening up the child's relationships and the turning to others, especially father, to meet their needs (Adamo & Magagna, 2014).

The child can perceive the pregnant mother's lap as hostile and rejecting, partly because there is not enough space for the young child with the unborn child taking up too much of their mother's mind and body, and also because the child may split off the aggressive parts of themselves and locate them in mother (Adamo & Magagna, 2014). Thus, the relationship with mother, once perceived as perfect by the child as an infant, becomes conflicted and complex.

Freud captures the experience of the older sibling upon the birth of a new baby; “He feels that he has been dethroned, despoiled, prejudiced in his rights; he casts a jealous hatred upon the new baby and develops a grievance against the faithless mother which often finds expression in a disagreeable change in his behaviour” (Adamo & Magagna, 2014; Freud, 1933).

This jealous hatred of the new sibling is well known and familiar in the popular imagination. It is depicted in Kate Grenville’s fictional memoir of Elizabeth McCarthur, immigrant to New South Wales in 1789, where Elizabeth describes her baby sister.

*“When baby sister Grace died I was five years old, too young to know the word. Dead. I barely understood what a sister was, still hoped this new creature in the house, this squalling red bully, was only temporary” (Grenville, 2020).*

Here we get an idea of Elizabeth’s jealous hatred. She refuses to admit that her baby sister is even human. We can tell this by her degradation of Grace into a lesser lifeform, labelling her “creature”. In retrospect, Elizabeth admits she didn’t understand fully what a sister was, but her description of her sister as a “squalling red bully” give us the sense that Grace was an abusive assault to her senses. A “bully” takes away power, esteem and agency. A “bully” has a victim, and perhaps being a “victim” was Elizabeth’s experience of being an older sister to a newly born sister. Based on this description, I wonder what Elizabeth felt when Grace died. Perhaps relief, perhaps sadness, love and even more hatred.

### 3.7 An internal theatre

One of the key features of the young child’s development is their increasing use of symbols. This is said to be linked to the resolution of the Oedipus complex (Britton, 1989). The young child starts to use language, play, mentalisation and imagination (Gilmore & Meersand, 2013). Waddell describes this phenomenon as

*“a kind of internal theatre, a theatre for generating the meaning of external experiences, one in which was enacted the stuff of fairy tales” (Waddell, 2002, p. 2).*

Klein proposed that the child uses play to give expression to anxiety and as means of overcoming it (Klein, 1975). I have previously talked about how weaning and separation is an emotionally turbulent time for the child. In play they find alternative forms of goodness other than the idealised parents that the young child is mourning and who seem so disappointing (Alvarez, 2012). Hence we see demonstrated in a young child's play, that their inner<sup>3</sup> life is extraordinarily vivid, populated by diverse and powerful symbols.

Images and symbols, as the potent basic units of mental functioning, represent or evoke something separate to what they really are (McCarthy, 2012; Music, 2011; Segal, 1998) revealed to the observer in the young child's budding imaginary play, art works, role play, fears, interests and obsessions. Selma Fraiberg coined the phrase "the magic years" in reference to the young child's imaginative life of fantasy and magical thinking (Fraiberg, 1950).

McCarthy, in describing the meaning and necessity of symbols, ascribes to them life-altering power through which we speak about what is otherwise unspeakable (McCarthy, 2012). Symbols are basic units of mental functioning, and young children who are able to symbolise through play benefit from them without needing or wanting to know what they mean (McCarthy, 2012; Whitmont, 1969).

The imagination, presupposed on both the ability to be alone and to be taken in, enables an understanding beyond the surface nature of things (Rhode, 1984). An example of symbolisation being used to make meaning is given by Music, where a three-year-old whose mother is away enacts a complex game about journeys and reunions (Music, 2011). Another example is the classic game "goodies" and "baddies" where children get to try on different identities, or playing with string and scissors, where the child gets to symbolise connection and severance.

Cultural opportunities for symbolism such as books, music, film and theatre start to appeal to young children's curiosity about the world and their desire to make meaning of it. For example, Merlin describes how the character Thomas the Tank Engine, written by a father for his son, allows the dynamics of family relationships to be explored by the oedipal child

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<sup>3</sup> Inner has the same meaning as internal- something that belongs to the psyche, the imagination, the mind



(Serlin, 2014). Themes like finding one's identity, sibling rivalry, oedipal desires and separation anxiety are present in the stories. The trains all have distinct personalities who have their individual strengths and ways of winning attention. Many of the stories are about how each train manages to secure their identity and place in the family. Thus, trains can represent rivalrous children who want to be noticed and appreciated by the Fat Controller, who symbolises the parental figure.

The fear of separation and abandonment, key anxieties of the oedipal child, is featured in some of the stories. For example, in *Stepney Gets Lost*, Stepney finds himself in scary fog amidst strange noises. When the fog clears he realises with horror that he is in the scrap yard (Serlin, 2014).

Because the family dynamics are displaced onto the relationships between the trains, ensuing anxieties can be more readily explored and worked through by the child at a safe distance from reality. Young children are especially receptive to stories which give form to the experience of their inner worlds, due to the fluidity of the boundary between their imaginations and the real world, as well as their openness to their inner states (Rustin & Rustin, 2001, as cited in Serlin, 2014). Parents and family members usually are not consciously aware of the psychic representations of the stories either, and so can also safely engage in supporting the child to work through oedipal anxieties without the challenges of thinking and talking about them in their real context. Hence stories such as Thomas provide the family with a shared symbolism for unconscious states of feeling.

### 3.8 The place where we live

Just as many parents find themselves interacting with characters from the aforementioned Thomas the Tank Engine, many others are drawn into peek-a-boo, playing tea parties, dress-ups, telling stories or playing music to their young children.

In order to give a place for this playing, Winnicott postulated a potential space between mother and baby (Winnicott, 1971b). This is where the infant has their first experience of playing. The potential space is neither an internal<sup>4</sup> “unreal” place, nor a wholly external<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Internal means the same as inner- something that belongs to the psyche, the imagination, the mind.

<sup>5</sup> External denotes something that belongs to the world outside of the psyche, the imagination, the mind.

“real” place. Nor does it belong to one or other of the participants. Instead, it is a joint, space, co-created by mother and infant. This space is paradoxical because “it negates separation and is simultaneously the fruit of it” (Seulin, 2015). It neither has to be resolved or called into question.

It is a psychic space between mother, or parental figure, and child, “the creative space between external reality and internal subjectivity” (Gilmore & Meersand, 2013, p. 85). As the infant develops, they use the experience of the potential space to gain the capacity to play with others, and to play with themselves. Soon the capacity for play develops into a capacity for creativity, learning and cultural experience.

*This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work (Winnicott, 1971c, p. 19)*

Winnicott gave other names to the potential space; “transitional” space and “the place where we live” and “the location of cultural experience” (Winnicott, 1971a, 1971c). I appreciate very much the name “place where we live”, because it conveys the sense of vitality and critical nature of the space, because the space and its contents seem essential to experience fully the sense of being human and the sense of being “who we are”. Winnicott says that the symbols within the potential space can “link the past, the present and the future; they take up time and space” (Winnicott, 1971a, p. 147).

### 3.9 The transitional object

Many times, we see the young child with a stuffed animal, or special blanket, dummy (pacifier), or thumb sucking, which is a source of comfort and security. Winnicott suggested that these objects are “transitional objects” because they belong to the transitional space (Winnicott, 1971c). Winnicott said that they are introduced by the child to represent the union between mother and child, and the child turns to them when they want reassurance.

The transitional object is for the child the first “not me” possession. However, the child does not view the object as a typical external world object. It has special properties. The transitional object gives the child a feeling of being close to their parent, which provides a

secure base from which to explore the world. That is why the child often wants transitional objects when separated from parents through going to bed, or going to day care, or when they are sad, scared, hurt or sick. On our part, we allow the child omnipotence over the transitional object, and we do not point out the object's futility, or that they stand for something else.

### 3.10 Chapter summary

The aim of this chapter was to set the scene for Chapters Four and Five by laying out some of the key emotions and experiences of early childhood.

I emphasise that young childhood is about space: physical space and psychic space. In young childhood, the child moves through volumes of space; triangles, squares and circles; space between. I discussed the triangulation of the Oedipus complex, and the potential of other family configurations and shapes illustrated in a photo of two children playing the string game "cat's cradle" or "whai".

The location of such activities is "the place where we live", that psychic space that originates between caregiver and child, that is neither real nor imaginary, belonging to both but to neither. The symbols that each participant introduces into this "potential space" link the past, present and the future.

The young child experiences anxiety in response to "ordinary" developmental tasks such as separation and weaning, and the trauma of the arrival of a new sibling. They use play, artistic expression and cultural artefacts such as stories and picture books as a means of overcoming and working through these anxieties.

## 4 Young Child Cognitions about Sibling Stillbirth

### 4.1 Chapter introduction

In the previous chapter, I looked at some of the developmental undertakings of young childhood. In this chapter, I overlay these challenges with the death of a younger sibling by stillbirth.

It seems obvious to say that stillbirth of a sibling has a devastating impact on the young child, as it does on the entire family and those impacted by the loss. However, while research concurs that sibling bereavement is a significant lived experience for children (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015) my research question appeals for an extension of the understanding of sibling bereavement by exploring the emotional experience which belongs specifically to the state of mind of the young child whose sibling is stillborn.

Earlier, I presented the psychoanalytic case for oedipal anxieties, namely the mourning and disillusionment initiated by weaning and separation, coming to terms with the parent's exclusive relationship and the betrayal implied by the pregnancy and mother's maternal preoccupation with the rival foetus.

In this chapter, I look at what meaning might be made by the sibling(s) and the family of the stillborn and how it could set up dynamics between them. I use the word meaning in the usual clinical sense. As Stern explains it, this is "explaining the present in terms of the past and establishing associative linkages that are interpretable" (Stern, 2004).

Here I engage exclusively with psychoanalytic texts, where the conversation leads to the intensification of oedipal anxieties brought on by sibling stillbirth, which make the child vulnerable to extreme feelings of loss, exclusion, rejection, loneliness, disconnection, rivalry and guilt. I then talk about some of the cognitions, and accompanying family dynamics, that develop in response to the experience of stillbirth.

### 4.2 Daughter not the princess

The pain of exclusion is felt by all young children. It's even more excruciating for the young child bereaved by stillbirth. As discussed in Chapter Three, the young child is dealing with ending of their once exclusive relationship with their mother. This loss is accentuated by

the pregnancy and maternal preoccupation with a subsequent sibling, and the realisation of the parental couple.

Then, because the parents' minds are closed off in grief and sorrow, the subsequent loss of their baby sibling deepens the feeling of the parents being inaccessible. It is said that the surviving sibling may live through a double trauma during the time following the death of their sibling, as they frequently experience neglect from a host of their usual support system at this time (Kempson & Murdock, 2010). Crehan names the emotional absence of parents as the primary deprivation of young children bereaved by sibling death (Crehan, 2004). This is supported by the findings of Jonas-Simpson et al, who report most children in their study used the word "sad" to describe what it was like when their baby died, with seeing their parents sad making them sadder (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Cleaver says that parents grieving perinatal loss can lose the ability to care about themselves and those they love, including existing children (Cleaver et al., 2018).

In an account of observational material of bereaved four-year-old Italian girl Giorgia, we see examples of how sibling stillbirth brings about a unique set of concerns due to the intensification of existing oedipal anxieties (Adamo, 2014). Adamo commentates a series of vignettes describing Giorgia's play, drawings, articulations and occupations, based on weekly hour-long observations of Giorgia over the period of two years. We see how Giorgia symbolises the "loss of her fullest bond", meaning the loss of the relationship with her parents, after the stillbirth of her baby brother when she draws a picture of a girl imprisoned in a long, narrow castle. The imprisonment gives the impression that the girl has no physical or emotional sustenance, an impression which is strengthened by Giorgia's declaration that even though the child is the daughter of a king and queen, "she is not the princess".

A theme that recurs throughout the observation of Giorgia is the need to find shelter and protection from a cold environment. We could see this as a desire of Giorgia's not to grow up, and to remain closely wrapped in the warmth and care of her parents, protected from the outside world like she was in the womb. I concur with what Winnicott says, every child is also an infant and a foetus (Winnicott, 1957a).

### 4.3 I killed the baby

To add to the young child's burden, guilt is reported as a common feeling for bereaved young children. As is natural for children expecting a new sibling, they harbour both love and hate for, both "yearn for and dread", the expected arrival (Mitchell, 2013). Combined with developmentally appropriate omnipotent and magical thinking, young children can develop a feeling of guilt that they are responsible for the death of their sibling (Leon, 1986b), which is increased by the apprehension of their own survival against their murderous impulses towards the new baby (Crehan, 2004). Cleaver writes that the belief they are responsible for their sibling's death sometimes can be an element in young children presenting with severe behavioural disturbances (Cleaver et al., 2018).

I have referred earlier to the conflation of the trauma of separation with the trauma of a new sibling which occurs for many young children. What then happens when the child is expecting a new arrival that does not arrive or arrives dead? Perhaps we can find some insights from Mitchell, who describes the situation of an only child, "the lonely only" (Mitchell, 2013). She proposes that from a psychoanalytic point of view, the only child is likely to have more rather than less brothers and sisters, because they are more active in the child's thoughts and feelings, unconscious and conscious fantasies. The expected child does not arrive, and the child wonders what they have done wrong.

Mitchell quotes clinical material from Klein, who worked with a Erna, an only child (Klein, 1932/1975). Klein proposes that 'only' children suffer great anxiety from the sibling who never arrives, and intense feelings of guilt on account of their aggressions towards their assumed existence in mother's body combined with the lack of opportunity to develop a positive relation to them in reality. With this mind, it is not too hard to imagine the feelings of aggression, anger and accompanying guilt that a bereaved young child feels when its infant sibling dies inside their mother's body.

Moreover, the child must not only contend with the rival's occupation of his mother's body, but also with her mind. Adamo suggests that the space occupied in the mother's mind by the dead baby is harder for the bereaved young child to cope with than a space occupied by a living child, because a living space can be explored, controlled and shared (Adamo, 2014).

The effect is that it sets up the dead baby as a more potent rival than a live baby that the young child can identify with, play with, love and hate.

In some families, intrapsychic dynamics of blaming and scapegoating, of which the family are often not aware, collude with the child's sense of guilt, and the parents directly or covertly blame the living child for the death. The living child becomes "bad, irresponsible and selfish" in the family dynamic (Leon, 1986b). I imagine this presentation could bring the family to therapy even years later, quite likely when the living child reaches the tumultuous years and individuation stage of adolescence, where earlier unresolved family conflicts can intensify.

It's not surprising to me that Leon reports that parental denial of loss, especially in early gestation stillbirths, finds a willing accomplice in the young child's inclination of defences against painful feeling. Leon claims that later we see the dramatic effects in adults with major episodes of psychosis, depression and suicide (Leon, 1986b).

#### 4.4 Mother killed the baby

The young child's natural reliance and belief in their parents' ability to keep them and their siblings safe can be challenged by a sibling stillbirth. The young child, intolerant of their anger towards the unborn child, may displace that on to their parents and blame them for the death (Leon, 1986b). This perceived culpability can be compounded by mother's own feelings of distress to which she is prone. It is common for mothers bereaved by stillbirth to have feelings of guilt, accompanied by depression, anxiety, panic attacks and post-traumatic stress (Cleaver et al., 2018).

When families present in this dynamic, often the parents are withdrawn which fuels the child's anger and sense of deprivation. Leon notes that this presentation can be more common in younger children, and can develop in older children as extreme hostility or paranoid psychopathology towards parents or people in authority, who represent the parents in psychic form, such as doctors, police and teachers (Leon, 1986b).

#### 4.5 I could die

The real or imagined death of a sibling is the closest possible encounter with one's own death (du Coudray, 2016), and the shock of an unexpected perinatal loss can powerfully

demonstrate to the young child the vulnerability of life (Leon, 1986b). Prior to the loss, usually the young child has yet to encounter death or have had a reason to think about it.

Betty Davis is a Canadian paediatric nurse who writes about her research on sibling bereavement in her book “Shadows in the Sun” (Davis, 1999). She equates the experience of sibling bereavement with having a shadow over one’s life forever, even when in the sun.

Davis uses staged cognitive development theories, the most common one being that developed by Jean Piaget in 1959, as a way to frame children’s understanding and responses to sibling death. These theories are based on a western world view, where the “adult” understanding of death is the target of a young child’s developmental trajectory.

Davis outlines a measure of the young child’s cognitive ability to understand death, which is premised on whether or not they understand the sub-concepts of “irreversibility”, “nonfunctionality” and “universality” (Davis, 1999). Having a firm grasp of these ideas is described as having a “mature” understanding of death which is said to be achieved by most children between the ages of five and seven (Speece & Brent, 1984).

Failure to understand *irreversibility* refers to the young child’s view that the dead will come back, and that are not permanently gone but just physically absent. Failure to understand *nonfunctionality* means that the child believes that the dead continue to have “life-defining characteristics” and eat, breathe, move, feel, think and dream. Failure to understand *universality* is a failure to understand that all living things die, including the young child and especially certain people, such as mummies and daddies, or lucky or clever people (Davis, 1999).

A typical picture of a young child’s understanding of death is given by the example of four-year-old Suzie sitting by her baby brother’s coffin, having placed her small stuffed rabbit beside him and whispering “You can play with bunny when you are deaded” (Davis, 1999, p. 33). One might say that Suzie has not grasped the concept of nonfunctionality because she thinks that her dead brother can still play when he is dead.

When a young child is confronted with death, they may wonder if they are going to die too. Separation anxiety is a typical presentation among these children, who often need the near-constant presence of parent comfort and protection. However, if this is over-provided, and



the child is met not just with reassurance and relief, but parental anxiety and compulsion, the child becomes more fearful of their safety. The child then presents with generalised anxiety, phobic responses or intense separation anxiety even as an older child. Occasionally this is manifested as somatic complaints such as chronic pain, its source outside the conscious awareness of the child or parents (Leon, 1986b).

#### 4.6 I will replace the dead child

The replacement child is the child who is set up by psychic forces to meet a complex range of needs within the family. The replacement child can be born subsequent to the dead child, which is the common presentation of this dynamic in the literature, but also it is feasible in my opinion for an older child to take on the role of replacement child to serve a need within the family.

Parents sometimes use the replacement child to contain all the wishes, desires and hopes they had for their dead child, which can stifle or distort the replacement's child own life path and identity as the child engages in a fruitless pursuit to become the idealised dead child. The child's own reparative wish to relieve parental grief, secure parental love or atone the death can drive their own motivations to replace the dead child (Crehan, 2004; Leon, 1986b).

When a dead child is unborn, fantasies for and about that child can make idealisation more pronounced and difficult to relinquish, for there is no "realistic image or picture which can modulate the idealisation" (Leon, 1986b). The dead child cannot be found lacking, or not good enough, or "naughty", or fail to win the approval of their parents. These are all the domain of the surviving child(ren). I proposed that this phenomenon can manifest as perfectionism or parentification.

#### 4.7 Learning difficulties

Beaumont contributes a thesis on the implications of the preservation of the dead baby within the mother's body and mind, the mother's mind being "container of all marvels and all knowledge" (Beaumont, 2011). Beaumont describes the case of her twelve-year-old psychotherapy client Jackie, who had severe learning difficulties and a sibling who died at birth. She describes Jackie "constantly destroying anything creative that might be

happening between us". Her thesis is that due to an unmourned dead baby, the surviving child can develop learning difficulties.

Unconsciously, the child envies the baby living within mother's womb, and feels rejected and pushed out, wanting to be back there too. At the same time, she feels frightened of the death and destruction that mother's body can inflict, evidenced by the death of the baby. Beaumont quotes Klein as saying that "it is essential for a favourable development of the desire for knowledge that mother's body should be felt to be well and unharmed" (Klein, 1931). The child cannot take in knowledge from a destructive mind and the wish to take in "food for the mind" is permeated with dreads and inhibitions. Beaumont also equates the surviving child's guilt and need to guard against retribution from their dead sibling with a need to limit their achievements and "spoil her space" (Beaumont, 2011).

#### 4.8 Chapter summary

Conversations with psychoanalytic texts led to the conception that oedipal anxieties of the typical young child, discussed in the last chapter, leave a young child bereaved by sibling stillbirth especially vulnerable to feelings of loss, exclusion, rejection, loneliness, disconnection, rivalry and guilt. Of great impact to the young child, grieving parents have a reduced capacity to parent their living children. The surviving young children, already coming to terms with the loss of their parents as a developmental milestone of the oedipal years, have to contend with their parents' emotional absence due to an idealised rival dead sibling who will exist forever unequalled within their parents' mind. Typical cognitions of the young child, which can exist outside of conscious awareness, are that they killed the baby, their mother killed the baby, or that they must replace the dead child. Struggles such as learning difficulties can be observed in surviving children. The absence of a real relationship, picture or image of the dead baby makes identifying and resolving both the loss and the resultant dynamics complex and difficult. As a result, we sometimes see families and children in crisis even some years after the death and into adulthood.

## 5 Nebulous Creatures

### 5.1 Chapter introduction

The young child's relationship with their stillborn sibling is a vital part of their life, which is often overlooked and even denied, in large part due to the dominant cultural norms in Western society.

In this chapter I interact with texts that suggest something about how I might have a relationship with my brother, and how other young children may have a relationship with their dead infant siblings. I converse with academic writing from the fields of psychology, obstetrics, nursing, public health, medicine, sociology and social work, written from a Western worldview. I find that their words illuminate my understanding in a sensible kind of way.

Looking for more, perhaps researching with "soul in mind" (Romanyshyn, 2020, p. 4), next I invite quite a different kind of text to join the conversation. These are texts that use symbolism and creativity to represent the lived experience of sibling stillbirth. I dialogue with a range of these texts including an autobiographical text, pūrākau, painting, a picture book, an immigrant ship and my ancestors. These texts speak to my own felt experience and deepen my understanding of my research topic. They provide symbols to represent my embodied knowing and sometimes help me with metaphors and similes to describe it.

Romanyshyn describes the "sweetly bitter" knowledge of the "difference between the fullness of an experience and the failure of language to say it" (Romanyshyn, 2020, p. 5). I wonder if this describes the realm of the preverbal and the early verbal child, who understands their world in symbol form but is expected to communicate in words. For them, as for me in this chapter, myths, fantasy, dreams, art and the imagination offer a way to bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious and can so often express more than what is possible in academic writing.

### 5.2 A different kind of loss

Stillbirth has been described as a "different kind of loss" (Leon, 1986a). It seems that in Western societies at least, it is an especially difficult kind of loss to resolve. One of the reasons is because we find it very ambiguous and hard to grasp. The nature of stillbirth

tests our Western understandings of birth, death, beginnings, endings, living, dying and relationships. Miranda Featherstone, writing for the Yale Review in an autobiographical text, reflects on mourning her dead infant brother she never knew and captures the difficulties of coming to terms with such loss. She describes her brother's ghost as a nebulous creature:

*Sometimes such nebulous creatures are squirmy and slippery: tough to grasp, they are difficult to put to rest (Featherstone, 2019).*

Irving Leon, an Adjunct Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, from the University of Michigan says that psychologically birth is simultaneously a beginning (of a separate life), a continuation (of a bond established at conception) and an ending (of pregnancy) (Leon, 1986b). When a baby is born dead though, everything changes. It doesn't seem right to call the birth a beginning anymore. We might call it a continuation if we consider that the family are still bonded to the child. And we are inclined to call it an ending if we consider that it's an ending of pregnancy and the hopes, wishes and fantasies for a child that began at conception (Leon, 1986b).

But surely, if we have established that the birth of stillborn baby is not a beginning, but maybe a continuation, we cannot just rely on the word "ending". It has to be so much more than an ending. The word "ending" seems entirely inadequate and inappropriate. For example, the time of birth is the first time the mother, father and family see their baby and hold it in their arms. It's the first time they see what their baby looks like, and who they look like.

### 5.3 The relationship in the academic literature

The nature of the relationship between the living young child and their deceased baby sibling is not often considered in academic literature, perhaps a reflection of the young child's experience of being "invisible mourners" (Kempson & Murdock, 2010).

In the following four sub chapters I dialogue with each of four academic studies.

#### 5.3.1 Imagined bonds

The term "imagined bonds" is used by Marcella Cameron Meyer and Steve Carlton-Ford to describe the type of bond that they observed during interviews with forty-nine adults who

had a sibling die they never knew (Cameron Meyer & Carlton-Ford, 2017). They used grounded theory to identify themes and theories they heard their interviewees talk about. Cameron Meyer and Carlton-Ford have positions at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and the University of Cincinnati, USA.

"Imagined bonds" provokes for me a sense of being dismissed. It says to me that my bond with my brother is not real and is not valid. Cameron Meyer and Carlton Ford claim that the relationship between living siblings and siblings they never knew is entirely constructed by others, through narrative, memories, rituals and emotions and ideas. Their intention is to show how children who die can have legacies beyond people who loved them during their lives. However, I find the idea that our lives are biologically defined quite troubling. I also find it tiresome that the parents are placed in the central role, as "proxy constructors of the bond between siblings never known to each other". All in all, the paper contributes to my sense of being disenfranchised by a society who expects our grief to be less because we "didn't know" our sibling.

### 5.3.2 Always with me

In contrast, I find the research described by Jonas-Simpson et al to be affirming of my experience (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). A predominately Canadian research group, they studied a group of European Canadian children whose baby sibling had died either in utero or very young (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). They used an arts-based qualitative method. Their main finding was that the children connected with and integrated the sibling into their lives through art, poetry, dance and music. They found that surviving siblings not only have a relationship with or "sense of" their stillborn sibling, but this relationship continues and evolves as the surviving sibling develops.

To be eligible for the study, the parents had to have been part of a bereavement support group or supported at least one family ritual that acknowledged the infant sibling. I suggest that these preconditions meant that the studied children were likely to be able to use the transitional space, "the place where we live" (Winnicott, 1971a), within the family to facilitate their relationship with their dead sibling.

### 5.3.3 Memory keepers

The role of “memory keepers” is assigned to surviving siblings by Diane Kempson and Vicki Murdoch, from the Division of Social Work at the University of Wyoming, USA. They conducted a narrative study with adults who as children had endured a loss of infant siblings never known (Kempson & Murdock, 2010). In this study, the research subjects demonstrated through narrative that they had a continuing and personal connection with the sibling. The authors suggest that holding the notion of a relationship in the mind’s eye is sufficient for human resiliency, and that relationships do not require the physical presence of another who “thinks about me”. They propose a “transcendence of the temporal nature of being” as an enduring component of wellbeing. The transcendence of time is a feeling that I can relate to, as I feel like the relationship with my brother exists in a place which is not bound by the type of space and time that we refer to in our embodied world.

### 5.3.4 Mental interconnectivity

A study which was willing to accept a type of disembodied relationship that is not bound by time or space was that by Janet Hayman et al (Hayman et al., 2017). They are researchers from the School of Psychology at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. In their study they undertook to explore disembodied relationships through a qualitative analysis of Facebook memorials for the born-still.

The text responds to the question “how do relationships fluidly transcend time, space and even death?”, a question which seems very relevant to my search for understanding of the relationship between the surviving sibling and the born-still. To underscore the importance and utility of their question, they point out that we retain relationships with those that are physically absent, whether it be because they are dead, or because they are living but not physically there with us. Because the born-still never inhabit live bodies outside the body of their mother, looking at relationships with the born-still can tell us a lot about the contribution of the body to relationships.

The researchers propose that the bodies of other selves can play a subordinate or even an entirely absent role in our relationships. They make a strong case for the legitimacy of relationships with the deceased to be recognised in a mainstream society. Current mainstream thinking is that relationships with the deceased, especially with those one has

never known in embodied form, are not only odd but impossible. Behaviour that deviates from dominant understandings of life and death risk being “misunderstood, pathologized, criticised, ignored or silenced” (Hayman et al., 2017)

I agree that the dominant understanding of life and relationships in my community is dependent on the autonomous embodied self. Hayman et al challenge the dominant understanding by establishing inner representations as a means through which people can have relationships with the dead, including those who they never knew in physical form. They use the concept of “mental interconnectivity” as a basis for their proposals, with the main point being that relationships are socially constructed.

I wonder if there are more ways of looking at it, some other way to describe relationships with the dead. As Winnicott says, “the written words of psychoanalytic literature do not seem to tell us all that we want to know” (Winnicott, 1971a). So next, I enter a dialogue with some indigenous writers, Māori and Pasifika, to see what I can learn from matauranga Māori and indigenous ways of knowing.

#### 5.4 Pūrākau- we live in the whisper of the page

Whiti Hereaka (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Arawa) is a playwright, novelist, screenwriter and barrister and solicitor. She describes the power of words and stories to enable us to live in the past, present and future within endless and countless lives. Perhaps she has something to contribute to my research.

*We are creatures of words. We are creatures of imagination. We live on the edges of dreams and the margins of thought. We live in the whisper of the page. (Hereaka, 2019, p. 27).*

Is this too dissimilar to what Winnicott says about the “place where we live” (Winnicott, 1971a)? Could indeed I find my brother on the edge of a dream, in the margin of thought, in the whisper of the page? Is this where our relationship exists?

Pūrākau are Māori narratives that are crafted and shared in ways that are engaging and provoke a process of meaning making. They use the power of words and symbols to create a place to live. Pūrākau are often used to describe ancient stories of ātua, heroes, well-known people and places (Lee-Morgan & Hutchings, 2016), and also transcribed and retold

in modern times (Ihimaera & Hereaka, 2019). Pūrākau and Māori myths, stories and folklore can be fabulous and fantastic, but they are not considered imaginary. They are history, fluid, holistic, inclusive, generous, real and relevant (Amopiu, 2020; Ihimaera & Hereaka, 2019). Pūrākau can be used to understand the experiences of young children, which are considered to be rooted in whenua, wairua, and whakapapa, like all pūrākau and all life experience (Ihimaera & Hereaka, 2019; NiaNia et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2017). Next, I will immerse myself in two Pūrākau and consider what I learn there.

#### 5.4.1 Born.Still

The pūrākau “Born.Still” by Māori contemporary writer, Briar Grace-Smith (Ngā Puhi, Ngāti Hau) encourages us to contemplate the enduring relationship between a surviving sister (six-year-old Hina) and her stillborn sibling (Grace-Smith, 2019). The title of the story “Born.Still” invites us to reconsider the meaning of the word “still” in “stillborn”. In “stillborn”, “still” seems to mean “lifeless”, “silent”, “at rest”. But in “Born.Still”, “still” could mean “enduring”, “in spite of everything”, “even so”, maybe referring to the enduring bond between sister and stillborn sibling and validity of the birth, life, and death of the infant, despite the circumstances. Indeed, a theme of the story is Hina’s relationship with Māui. I will recount key points of the story before talking about how it relates to my research question.

The stillborn sibling of the pūrākau is Māui. The legend of Māui’s birth and death is said to explain both the first death of a human being and the introduction of mortality to humankind, as well as referring to stillbirth (Culling & Mitchell, 2015). As is in the nature of pūrākau, things happen that are not possible in the “real” world. For example, Māui returns to the story as a grown man, ten years after he is born dead. Māui is the main character of many well-known Māori legends where as an adult his adventures include fishing up “Te Ika a Māui” (North Island) of Aotearoa New Zealand and slowing down the sun by catching it with flax ropes.

In “Born.Still”, Grace-Smith tells the story of Māui’s stillbirth from the perspective of his six-year-old sister, Hina. The story is set in an apocalyptic future, when the sea and the land are dead. Hina has four brothers already, Māui-mua, Māui-tahi, Māui-pae and Māui-roto. She lives with them and her mother Taranga.



One day, Taranga gives birth prematurely to an infant who in this story she names Māui-Tikitiki-a-Taranga at birth, the “last child ever to be born into this world” (Grace-Smith, 2019, p. 100). Taranga encourages Hina to help her birth the placenta which is “purply and translucent, like a jellyfish, with what looked like a tangle of blue and purple electrical wiring showing just beneath its surface” (Grace-Smith, 2019, p. 100).

Then Taranga instructs Hina to cut off Taranga’s hair and make a basket for the baby. Hair is considered a tapu part of the body which holds magical powers, and this is Taranga’s way of protecting her baby (Culling & Mitchell, 2015). They go together to the sea and throw Māui into it. Hina never forgets that morning and her little brother, and sometimes she closes her eyes and imagines Māui swaddled in hair, being led by his charged jellyfish placenta through the ocean to a new life.

Ten years later, Māui returns to his home. Hina knows he is her brother and that he is not like her other brothers. She knows that “he will be her friend and they’d have many adventures together” (Grace-Smith, 2019, p. 102).

I am struck by how Grace-Smith captures so much of the multi-layered complexity of the impact of having a stillborn sibling from the perspective of the young child. Her use of symbolism, creativity and intuition gives the story a heart and soul, and a richness that reaches into my being.

It is clear from the story during Māui’s long physical absence, Hina maintains a relationship with him. We could say that Hina uses fantasy and imagination to make sense of her brother’s death, as do many young children. For example, Hina maintains a sense of her brother through the narrative of his birth and the imagery of him charging through the sea attached to his placenta, like the “memory keepers’ of the Kempson Murdoch study (Kempson & Murdock, 2010). She doesn’t need a physical body to keep her brother alive in her mind, which reconciles with the research by Hayman et al (Hayman et al., 2017).

What I am most interested about in Hina’s story is that we could see it as taking place *in* the transitional space while also being *about* the transitional space. The story could also be seen as a story about transitional space between Hina and her mother, and how it is enriched with symbols that Hina uses to have a relationship with her dead brother. Through the relationship with Hina’s mother, her mother’s provision of and sharing of the rituals of

cutting her hair and making the basket, and together throwing Maui into the sea, provide a story and meaning for Hina about her brother, and underpin her enduring relationship with him.

I am also interested in the setting of the story in an apocalyptic future, when the sea and the land are dead, the story speaks to our past, present and future. It is not strange that an ancient legend is set in the future because in certain abstract places, the past is happening at the same time as the present. I have already mentioned these places. Some of them are the transitional space, the “place where we live”, dreams, the unconscious, “the edges of dreams” and in the “whisper of the page”.

Daniel Stern writes about time in his book on his clinical and theoretical observations about the phenomenon of “the present moment”, which he discovered through observing mother-infant interactions. He talks about Freud’s psychic time which “shifts speed of passage” and “doubles back and forward on itself” (Stern, 2004, p. 5). Anne Salmond quotes Patu Hohepa talking about a Māori space-time concept,

*Time is a moving continuum if seen through Māori language, with ego being a particle whose own volition and direction is not bound to time. Time swirls like koru patterns, three dimensional spirals (Salmond, 2018, p. 406).*

Terry Marks-Tarlow is a clinical psychologist practising in California, USA. In her book on clinical intuition, she writes that intersubjectivity is “a spatial and geographical coordinate system that extends through time” (Marks-Tarlow, 2012, p. 187). I sense that all these phrases capture something of the relationship and its location between Hina and Māui, and my brother and me. Perhaps because our relationships were never embodied, they are not bound by space or time, or by anything at all.

#### 5.4.2 Ka puta rā koe ki te whai ki te ao mārama: Where do babies come from?

In Te Ao Māori, there is an assumption of interconnectivity between everyone. Relationships endure across time and space, embodied or not. A person is always relationally connected, and not just to the living. “Whakapapa” describes one’s connection to one’s ancestors, going all the way back to the atua (gods). Fiona Cram describes the importance of whakapapa in her paper on Kaupapa Māori Research:

*“Te ao Māori – the Māori world – is whakapapa – the genealogical ties that bind people with people, with the environment, and with the cosmos”  
(Cram, 2017).*

Debbie Broughton (Te Aitanga a Huiti, Ngāpuhi, Taranaki, Ngāti Porou) is a Kaupapa Māori researcher who writes poetry that centres on how tūpuna impart knowledge on our everyday lives. She offers to my research a pūrākau about a woman she calls “Mum” and her relationship with tūpuna in her daily life (Broughton, 2016). For the character “Mum”, relationships with the dead are part of her normal life.

The title of Broughton’s essay is “Ka puta rā koe ki te whai ki te ao mārama: Where do babies come from?” In response to her question, she says that at every life stage, even when we are infants, we are ourselves tūpuna. She writes about “whakapapa etched on faces before birth” and says to her young daughter, “Well bubba, you’re a tūpuna and when you die, you will still be a tūpuna”. Her ideas about relationships go beyond the mortal world, illustrated by her saying, “in a world of cycles and circles, death and birth are but layers of our journeys”.

What Broughton says to me is that my brother and I are both tūpuna, and that we are both journeying through life, death and beyond. We don’t need to be both in live bodies to know each other. We are intimately connected in this journey through ways we don’t really understand.

## 5.5 Your people will gather around you: love after love

Pasifika poet Karlo Mila writes about a mystical journey with loved ones, who she calls “your people”, which I understand to mean groups or individuals to whom I belong, or who I am descended from, or who are descended from me. This includes my dead infant sibling.

This is an excerpt from Mila’s poem “Your People Will Gather Around You: Love After Love”(Mila, 2020, p. 5):

*Yes your people  
will hold fast within you.  
In the marrow of your bones,  
waiting to be known.  
Travelling with you*

*along the soft breathing  
curves of an infinite circle  
that has no circumference,  
and whose centre  
is everywhere*

It is very interesting that Karlo Mila locates “our people” inside of our bodies “in the marrow of your bones”. So, she looks within our own bodies to locate our dead, but also references a perpetually expanding circle along which we travel with our dead, whose centre is everywhere. This gives the impression that the space within our bodies is infinite and contains “everywhere”. I have discussed the notion of disembodied relationships: Mila makes us think about relationships being located within our own bodies.

With this poem in my mind, I went to yoga one sunny Saturday in February 2021, reluctantly. It felt good to be in my body.

*My yoga teacher said, “feel the space between your ribs” and I held a pose and thought about my ribs. I imagined the off-white bone of one of my ribs, and a tiny girl and her tiny little brother, holding hands, running and skipping along it. There they were, running slightly downhill that slightly sloping rib, around my torso and towards my back. They were travelling along Karlo Mila’s “soft breathing curves of an infinite circle”, where the “soft breathing curves” were actually my curving ribs. And my ribcage is like a circular spiralling staircase that never ends. And so, the little girl and her tiny brother run forever and ever, round and round, in the space between my ribs (journal entry).*

Does that lead to the possibility that contained within our bodies are such places as heaven and it is *within* us that our dead go to live, making our bodies a kind of “kingdom of heaven”?

## 5.6 For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven

“For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Bramley, 1891) is said to be one of the most popular works in the Auckland City Art Gallery Toi ō Tāmaki (Auckland City Art Gallery Toi ō Tāmaki, 2021)



Figure 3. *For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven*, by Frank Bramley (Bramley, 1891)

The oil on canvas painting depicts a young girl in a funeral procession. The setting is a road beside the sea, in England, my ancestor's homeland and was painted in 1891. The painting is shown in Figure 3.

The girl walks with other girls in front of a group of women carrying a small coffin. The size of the coffin, the costumes, hymn books and demeanour and composition of the group suggest it is a family group mourning their dead child and sibling. What is striking about the painting is the apparent loneliness of the little girl, perhaps a bereaved sibling. She walks alone and stares straight into the eye of the viewer. Her expression is hard to read but it could be described as serious, plaintive, sad and searching. The artist has captured well some of the experiences of the young child bereaved by stillbirth that I discussed in Chapter Three. I notice that the five young children of the procession lead the way and are not accompanied by adults, have no source of parental comfort or reassurance as they walk their way past onlookers. Another character stares straight at us as well. She is presumably the mother of the infant, and her expression is blank and numb. It seems the bereaved

sister has very definitely has been weaned and separated from her mother and conveys exclusion, loneliness and maybe bewilderment.

### 5.7 The Amelia Thompson

I have referred already to texts by Irving Leon, an Adjunct Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, from the University of Michigan. He suggests that “perhaps the most remarkable aspects of this case is how the dynamics of perinatal loss are bequeathed to the following generation” (Leon, 1986a). My call to research my family tree during this research process perhaps was driven by my recognition of, and curiosity about, the impact of past losses in the family, and the influence of past generations on each new generation. Perhaps the most compelling metaphor for the intergenerational transmission of loss and trauma is Selma Fraiberg’s “Ghosts in the Nursery” (Fraiberg et al., 1975).

As part of the hermeneutic process, I have been vigilant for how the research process influences my wider life. Some life activities which might appear as if they are outside of the hermeneutic circle but actually are in dialogue with the research process. One such activity of mine has been my recent interest in researching my family tree back to the first immigrant ships that brought my ancestors to their new place.

I found that in each of the six generations of my direct lineage, since James and Ruth Oliver arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1841 on the immigrant ship Amelia Thompson, there were at least four recorded deaths of infants (Timothy, Wilfred, Martha and Joy) and three of children (two named James and Charles). Miscarriages and early stillbirths are not recorded. I found myself thinking about the siblings of these babies and children and what their experience was like. Was it like mine?

### 5.8 Where are you Lydie?

Bereaved children and adults are reported in clinical material to seem to be looking for their dead (Davids, 1993). For example, the nonverbal toddler, bereaved of his twin in the womb, who upended the therapist’s office (Waddell, 2002), and six-year-old Alfredo who, in his therapy, zooms his baby brother off to Mars and then frantically searches for him (Davids, 1993).

As I have already recounted, I looked for dead babies in my family tree. I also looked in my therapist’s office.

*I sat with my new therapist and told her about my dead brother. About how I didn't even know where his body was. I thought his ashes had been sprinkled on a rose garden, and yet my sister had found his burial plot. Later in the session, I said to the therapist, "I can't stop looking at your roses", (she had a vase of roses on a shelf in my line of vision). She replied, "perhaps you are looking for your brother" (journal entry)*

Dauids describes this searching for the sibling by the child as a desire to know where the sibling is, but also a passionate yearning to be reunited. (Dauids, 1993) I think there are two other considerations that make the location of their dead a significant proposition for young children.

First, children, especially young children in the age of "magical thinking" develop fantasies to help them understand death. I speculate that having theories about the location of the dead sibling is important to the child because compared to the abstract concept of death, physical location is easier to understand through the relative nature of their own bodies in space. Using physical locations as metaphors can help children symbolise the nature of their sibling's existence and their relationship with that sibling. And they can use what they know about the location to create some understanding about what has happened to their sibling. For example, a fairy garden might be known to the child as magical, pleasant and pretty. Outer space is inaccessible. Under the ground is dark and scary. This isn't really different to adults' use of metaphorical locations for our dead: in the sky, inside us, at home, or at a favourite beach. We often choose places where we can have a relationship with our dead.

The other explanation for bereaved young siblings of stillbirth is that the live physical embodiment of the sibling is never experienced by young child, other than "in mummy's tummy". Without ever having experienced the sibling alive, separate from mother, the existence of the infant, and therefore their life and death, is even more abstract. The physical location of "where" can explain to a young child perhaps, the more difficult question of "why?", or "who?".

Emma Poore's daughter Lydie was born still. Her son George was three-years-old at the time. She explains in a video interview that George did not understand what happened and was "very worried about where she (Lydie) was" (Open to Hope Foundation, 2020).



Witnessing George's distress about the death of his baby sibling inspired his mother Emma, with a background in theatre design, to write the picture book "Where are you Lydie?" (Poore, 2017). The book features the young English children Henry and George looking for their baby sister Lydie on her birthday, on the premise that birthdays are "happy days, full of excitement, fun and laughter". They look in a "beautiful magic land", where mummy says she is a fairy and in outer space, where George thinks she is. They ask questions like "Where is she? Why did she have to die?" but these are never explicitly answered. Instead, the brothers decide to have a party to celebrate her birthday after they have "searched" all the locations they can think of.

To me this book feels satisfying, because it makes use of young child's playful, imaginative and fantastical approach to searching for their bereaved sibling and working through their loss. It doesn't provide the young child with any concrete answers, but I find it soothing, maybe because it describes Henry's and George's experience in magical way, which suits the developmental stage of the young child. It feels relatable. I mean, I'm forty-five and I found myself looking for my brother in the roses in my therapist's office.

The story is an account of how Henry and George use the transitional space, and the symbols within it, to think about their sister and come to terms with her absence. They use the symbols and locations that have been introduced to them by their mother, father and grandmother in their search for Lydie. They use the transitional space.

## 5.9 Chapter summary

Stillbirth is a "nebulous creature" that is slippery and hard to hold. In an attempt to understand the relationship between surviving children and dead siblings they never knew, I engaged with four academic studies. All the studies affirmed, to varying degrees, that the relationship was largely socially constructed by parents and other adults in the child's life through mechanisms such as rituals, sharing memories, narrative and symbols introduced and maintained by adults. They demonstrated that relationships can transcend biology, bodies and time.

The hermeneutic methodology encourages us to look beyond what we know, and this can mean entering into relationships with all kinds of texts from different media, disciplines and worldviews. So, after having dialogued with four academic texts, I turned to a pūrākau



about six-year-old Hina and her stillborn brother Māui (Grace-Smith, 2019). This text contained illustrations of some of the theories that psychoanalytic theory talks about. For example, the exclusion and rejection felt by the oedipal child, the use of imagination to make sense of and process life experiences, and the importance of the transitional space and relationships between Hina and her mother.

The influence of people from the past, and their presence in our everyday lives, is taken up in another pūrākau about tūpuna, which asks the question “where do babies comes from?” (Broughton, 2016), introducing the idea of relationship within a timeless and spaceless dimension.

Next the action of looking for my brother came up for me, which a common grief response according to the literature. I found a bereaved little girl just like me, from the land of my ancestors, but from the past, in 1891, in a painting in the Auckland City Art Gallery Toi ō Tāmaki (Bramley, 1891). I looked for the dead babies and children, and their siblings, in my family tree. I looked for my brother in my therapist’s roses. I found kindred spirits in the characters of Henry and George who look for their dead sister Lydie in a magical garden and outer space (Poore, 2017).

## 6 Discussion- A Constant Companion

### 6.1 Chapter introduction

Understanding stillbirth is like trying to resolve the unresolvable, or make tangible, the intangible. Stillborn children make imprints upon our lives. They are woven into the universe and yet they are nebulous and hard to grasp, slippery and ethereal. By entering the subjective reality of the young child, the place of fairy tales and pūrākau, we can recognise our dead in different forms and shapes.

In this chapter I discuss the main findings of my research and propose how they may contribute to a body of knowledge that informs psychotherapy praxis. The research outcomes may also be of use to parents, whānau and caregivers and other adults who support young children.

My key finding is that we can regard the dead sibling as a lifelong constant companion for the surviving child. The dead sibling is present for the young child, and the grown-up young child, and can have a significant lasting influence.

### 6.2 A unique set of concerns for young children

As result of this research, I confirmed that there is an unique set of concerns for young children following sibling stillbirth, attributable to the specific developmental stage of young childhood. These findings were made through dialogue mainly with psychoanalytic literature.

This finding affirms the basis of my research question; that it is worthwhile to consider through a developmental lens the experience of young children bereaved by sibling stillbirth. My findings are in line with, and expand on, the one text I could find which specifically addressed the intersection of all the elements of my research question (i.e., young sibling stillbirth and young childhood). This text was “The observed child, the observing child: the complexity of a child’s response to the stillbirth of a sibling” (Adamo, 2014).

The unique set of concerns are:

1. Young children bereaved by sibling stillbirth are vulnerable to intensification of the oedipal anxieties that form the basis for the developmental stage of young

childhood. These may present as extreme feelings of loss, exclusion, rejection, loneliness, disconnection, rivalry and guilt. This vulnerability may remain for life.

2. We may attribute this vulnerability to a “triple trauma”. There is first the preoccupation of parents with a rival before baby arrives, accompanied with acceleration of the weaning process, second there is the grief of the loss of their sibling, and third the loss of part of their grieving parents which would have otherwise been available to them for development and growth.
3. Meanings about the stillbirth may be made, again both consciously or unconsciously, by the child and their family. These are influenced by the developmental stage of young childhood, in particular omnipotence and magical thinking, combined with the aforementioned oedipal anxieties. For example, the child may believe that they or another family member are responsible for the death. Or they may wish to atone for the death, or to replace the idealised dead child. These meanings can manifest as a broad range of concerns which can bring the child to psychotherapy, such as separation anxiety, aggression and perfectionism.

### 6.3 A different kind of reality

An objective of my research was to understand my phenomenon in ways that privilege the subjective reality of young children, which is a different kind of reality to those of the other life stages. What I found was that this lens brings to light a way of being that recognises our continued relationship with our dead and their ongoing presence in our lives.

In Chapter Three, I presented the idea of the “internal theatre” to describe the young child’s vivid imagination and use of symbolisation in their play. They live in a kind of magical world, a world of fairy tales, where things are not always, to the child, as they seem to the onlooker. The play happens in a dimensionless place, the place where we live, and the place of cultural experience.

The most rich and powerful responses to my research question came from cultural artefacts, which I described in Chapter Five. The process of engaging with these texts required me to enter the natural habitat of the young child. Being open to the messages from these texts, including the emotions and bodily sensations they invoked in me, led me to findings, some of which I was not expecting, when I started this research.

What I learned from engaging with these creative texts was

1. Young children use symbols and play to process and express the experience of bereavement by sibling stillbirth. Through play, the young child has evolving relationship with their sibling. I experienced this myself through doing this research. Art-based research validated these examples by showing that children connect with and integrate the sibling into their lives through art, poetry, dance and music (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015).
2. Stillbirth is a beginning with no ending. Our still babies are born, but into a different realm. They are not biologically defined. Instead, they are our constant companions, and they are with us all the time. For indigenous cultures, such as Te Ao Māori, this is an ordinary way of experiencing reality. The idea of “whakapapa etched on faces before birth” (Broughton, 2016) suggests, through life and death we are simultaneously tūpuna and mokopuna. Karlo Mila suggested in her poem that we feel our dead within our own bodies (Mila, 2020).
3. I propose that to young children, the daily presence of their dead sibling is also quite ordinary. The young child also inhabits, for a part of their time, a different realm; the imaginative magic realm. The adult has access to this realm through engaging in culture, narrative, the visual arts and the written word. This is where our dead live.
4. The experience of sibling stillbirth in young childhood draws us to whakapapa. The presence of the dead baby is passed from generation to generation through the transitional or transpersonal space that each generation shares with the one before. Losses experienced generations before, either earlier deaths or losses due to colonisation or immigration, can be extenuated and refreshed by a stillbirth in the family.

#### 6.4 The dead sibling as a phantastical transitional object

There are certain characteristics of the experience of the bereaved young child that suggest that we can regard their dead infant sibling as a phantastical transitional object.

Phantastical means that the infant sibling is an unconscious construct that does not require conscious thought to have an impact on the surviving young child. The dead sibling is a permanent feature of the young child’s unconscious mind.

The idea that the infant is a transitional object refers to Winnicott's description of a transitional object that I wrote about in Chapter Three. The dead baby is not a transitional object in exactly the same way as Winnicott described. The dead baby object is not from the real world like a stuffed animal, special blanket or a thumb. However, it meets the criteria for being a transitional object in other ways.

First, we can regard the dead sibling as a transitional object because the dead baby lives in the transitional space between parents and surviving sibling. The baby's presence as a phantastical transitional object can disrupt the relationship between parents and surviving child. The baby preoccupies parents and can block creativity and learning for the sibling. The young child knows that their sibling will forever be with their mother and will never have to separate in the same physical way that their own weaning entailed. Preserved in infancy, the dead baby can be idealised by both parents and child and is an unbeatable rival.

A further basis for describing the dead infant as phantastical transitional object is that transitional objects represent the union between mother and the surviving young child. Dead baby siblings are, to the surviving sibling, permanent unconscious reminders or representations of their own infancy and union with their shared mothers. The dead infant can give the child a feeling of being close to mother, because they both share an intimate knowledge of being inside mother that others cannot share.

Another reason we can place the dead sibling in the transitional space, is because it is the home of culture and creativity. I have learned through this research that this is where the child forever more can relate to, recognise and encounter their dead sibling. Cultural activities and artefacts such as waiata, dance, creating art works, books and the spoken word create portals to the transitional space. Young children use play to access the transitional space. This is why I found that cultural artefacts gave such powerful responses to my research questions.

The nature of the transitional space and its objects are that we do not need to resolve them. This is the same with stillbirth. It can seem contradictory in nature: the dead sibling is born, but dead. The sibling is there, but not there. Birth is a beginning, but an end. In the same kind of paradoxical way, the transitional space is mine, but not mine.

## 6.5 A spiritual extension

Having reviewed my suggestion that the dead sibling is a phantastical transitional object, I now want to say that this idea does not go far enough. As a surviving sibling, my lived experience is that my sibling is more than an object of my unconscious.

I feel that an extension is required to frame the dead sibling not just as a psychological construct but an actual alive spiritual presence. My brother is alive, but in another dimension. Occasionally our dimensions overlap, and I catch a glimpse, or have an intense encounter.

The transitional space is one name for this dimension that I have proposed. Another name might be the transpersonal. The transpersonal is the spiritual encounter between people where the mysteries of life can be held and felt, and do not need to be resolved. It is said to be an aspect of the therapeutic relationship (Clarkson, 1999)

Another perspective which holds the presence of our dead is that of mātauranga Māori. The texts that I dialogued with taught me that our dead are us and are with us all the time. I reported earlier how the Canadian nurse researcher Davis assigns to bereaved siblings the metaphor of living in a shadow forever, even when in the sun; “shadows in the sun” (Davis, 1999).

Babies come from the dead, and the past is our future. That I can understand.

## 6.6 Implications

I started my introductory chapter by saying that young children can be regarded as “invisible mourners”. A common experience for the family bereaved by stillbirth is that their grief is disenfranchised because they didn’t “know” their baby. This is perhaps a collective societal defence against knowing the family’s suffering. I propose that for young children, there is an extra invisibility. This extra invisibility comes from our cooperative tendency to dismiss their experience based on our understanding of their limited capacity to understand a Western concept of death. However, when we view the young child’s experience from their subjective reality, such as I have done, we can see how they sibling stillbirth affects them. Here, I suggest implications for the psychotherapy profession and parents and caregivers.

### 6.6.1 For psychotherapists working with children and adolescents

I have talked about how the the trauma of sibling stillbirth can manifest as learning difficulties, feelings of rejection and expressions of rage and anger at parental figures. Separation anxiety, generalised anxiety, somatic symptoms, perfectionism, rebellion and behavioural challenges may all have sibling stillbirth as a contributing factor. My impression is that these have as contributors the unacknowledged loss and grief of the young child. Helping a bereaved young child and their family acknowledge the child's experience in a developmentally appropriate way is the work of the child and adolescent psychotherapist.

It is worthwhile for the child and adolescent psychotherapist, for all clients of all presentations, to discuss with the parents and caregivers the developmental history of the child and family history. Ask specifically about infant sibling losses due to stillbirth, as well as infant losses due to illness, miscarriage or infertility, as these will sometimes not be mentioned otherwise. Acknowledging and welcoming discussion about whakapapa, as is usually done during taking the developmental history, will also inform and assist the work.

Psychotherapists work with relationships. It is important for psychotherapists to know that the young child has an enduring and evolving relationship with their dead infant sibling. The argument is made in the academic literature that the relationship is "socially constructed" through the young child's interactions with adults in the family. What I learned from this research is that this is not an adequate argument. Young children have their own relationships with their dead siblings. In therapy, young children can be given the opportunity to connect with and integrate their sibling into their lives through play and symbol-based activities such as art, music and language. This is the natural habitat of the young child and "magical thinking", rather than labelled a deficit, can be considered part of the young child's subjective reality and used as part of the therapy process. Educating children on a "mature" understanding of death (i.e., irreversibility, nonfunctionality and universality) in an explicit way is not necessary.

Psychotherapy takes place in the transitional space between client and therapist. In this space, there is no time. The past, present and future are lived simultaneously within countless and endless lives (Hereaka, 2019). I specifically recognised this space in the pūrākau about Hina and her dead brother Māui (Grace-Smith, 2019), a Maori space-time concept (Salmond, 2018), in descriptions of psychic time (Stern, 2004) and intersubjective

time (Marks-Tarlow, 2012). This is the time and space in which our clients will encounter their dead siblings.

We know that play is used by children to overcome anxieties. Psychotherapy is a specialised form of playing. It is here, through play within the relationship, that the child will be able to recognise and relate to their sibling. Play is not as threatening as thinking directly about the issues at hand, but is located close enough, within the overlap of the therapist's imagination and attention, for the play to be meaningful and the anxieties perhaps become more digestible for the young child. With a child and adolescent psychotherapist, the surviving child can meet their young sibling in a healthy reparative way, in a way which grieving parents may not be able to provide.

Another description of the therapeutic relationship is the transpersonal: a space between that contains the "mystery" of human experience, which in psychotherapy is sometimes referred to as the spiritual, the soul, the religious, the sacred and the unknown. (Clarkson, 1999). I have talked about the spiritual aspect of sibling loss. Psychology's original roots are from philosophy and religion and heavily imbued with magic and mysticism (Clarkson, 1999). For Māori and indigenous clients especially, wairua and spirituality are key and core parts of bereavement, and the psychotherapist could reflect on how this impacts the work.

From this perspective, joining or witnessing a young child in creative play, may be viewed as a divine experience. The young child can be very adept at transmitting archetypes and symbols of the individual and collective unconscious through their use of play. If we are in the presence of such play, the role of the psychotherapist is perhaps to receive the inexplicable. And stillbirth is immensely inexplicable.

#### 6.6.2 For psychotherapists working with adults

For many adult clients, a loss from sibling stillbirth will most likely not be thought about very much, due to the tendency for these losses to be unacknowledged, especially in the times gone by, and hence may well not even be mentioned in therapy. Hence, it is worthwhile, specifically, to ask about these losses.

The bereaved young child is vulnerable to intensification of oedipal anxieties at all life stages, especially of loss and separation. These may be evident in the therapeutic relationship and material of adult clients. It is through "play", dreams, language and cultural



activities that adult clients will encounter their long-lost infant siblings, acknowledge and come to terms with their loss.

### 6.6.3 For parents and caregivers

This research has shown that it is vital for young children that parents are supported in their grief process and access their own therapeutic encounters. In addition, I offer that when parents can appropriately share their grief process with their young children, the parents remain more accessible to their living children both in their own grief process but also in growing generally.

I recommend that parents acknowledge the loss of the bereaved young child by talking to them about their sibling and modelling healthy ways of expressing feelings. This can be considered an enduring and ongoing conversation.

It is immensely helpful to the grieving child for symbols to be introduced to the child to symbolise the dead sibling or the loss. Examples of a type of symbols are representations of the physical baby such as photos of the dead sibling, locks of hair, clothes, hand or foot casting. Other symbols to facilitate the grief process may be a gravestone, special necklace, book, story, tree or plant, rock, candle or a special place such as a beach. And words (as are waiata and music) are a type of symbol also. Ideally the child would have had the opportunity to be with their dead sibling once they are born. Annual rituals such as commemorating the sibling's birthday provide impetus for the family to acknowledge the impact on the child as they move through different developmental stages.

The important thing with the symbols is that they are introduced by the parents, and that they are shared. However, the child may choose their own symbol of reminder of the dead sibling, and they should retain the agency to do this and power to use it as they wish.

Imbuing the child with a sense of whakapapa and place, and knowledge of their tūpuna, provides them with a sense of connection to their dead sibling which can provide a sense of hope and security in times of intense feelings of loss.

## 6.7 Strengths and limitations

This study has focussed primarily, but not exclusively, on a healthy young child located within a nuclear family of European culture, living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The nature of hermeneutic research is that it relies on the researcher's prejudices and life experience. Due to my own personal limitations and prejudices, combined with those of a mainstream training programme in an academic institution, this research is a version of "mainstream", where Kaupapa Māori is not "normal" (Hudson et al., 2010). This is a limitation of my research. Further research could address the experience of Māori whānau and tamariki, perhaps using a Kaupapa Māori methodology.

Further research could address the role of nature in a young child's bereavement experience. I hypothesise that dialogue with natural world would provide a stimulating response to my research questions.

A strength of my research is that I have been able to draw on my own experiences as a young child bereaved by sibling stillbirth. This could be considered also a limitation because it is more difficult to envelop experience of the the research phenomena that differs from my own. However, the hermeneutic methodology welcomes acknowledged prejudices.

Another strength is the use of the hermeneutic methodology. The hermeneutic methodology privileges the symbol, playing, the cultural and even the spiritual experience, which are all features of the developmental stage of young childhood. Hence the research methodology enabled me to access the experience of young childhood that perhaps other methodologies would not have permitted.

## 6.8 Conclusion

The young child and their sibling are connected in ways we don't really understand. By privileging the subjective reality that belongs to the young child, by inviting play and culture into our lives, we can bridge the gap between the fullness of experience and the failure of language to describe it. As therapists working with children, this is what we do; we help bridge the gap by recognising the young child's experience, with or without the use of language.

With our clients we enter a timeless intergenerational meeting place, located in the transitional space, and in the transpersonal space, enriched with symbols, ancestors and tūpuna. The location is Winnicott's "the place where we live" but it's also "the place where dead people live". We must also regard it as a spiritual place, imbued with wairua and the energy of ātua, the place of pūrākau.

It's the place where my stillborn brother lives and all the other dead children descended from the Amelia Thompson, the ship that brought my ancestors to Aotearoa New Zealand. It's a place where tūpuna watch over mokopuna, where mokopuna are tūpuna. This is the timeless, spaceless place where young children are in relationship with their dead infant siblings, and with their homelands. The place was created by them, for them and with them by their caregivers. It's not always a nice place, it can be a bleak place, but also a hopeful place.

I reflect on my travels through the topic of how surviving siblings have a relationship with their still born sibling. I think about all the texts I interacted with and what they told me and each other, and what I told them. About my visions and dreams. About searching. I feel like there is peace, and something has shifted.

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