

Becoming a Mother, Becoming a Therapist: A Heuristic Inquiry into Self-Identity Transformation and Its Impact on My Therapeutic Practice

Introduction

Motherhood is often described as a transformative experience, but what is rarely discussed is the profound shift in identity that can accompany it. Many women, including myself, experience a sense of self-loss after becoming mothers, as their personal needs, ambitions, and sense of individuality become secondary to the demands of caregiving. This research explores the experience of identity loss in motherhood and the journey toward rediscovering the self.

Heuristic research, as developed by Moustakas (1990), is a deeply personal method that allows the researcher to engage with their own lived experience while exploring a broader phenomenon. This study is rooted in my own journey as a mother who moved to the UK from Austria and struggled with a shifting sense of self after having children. The absence of close family support, the demands of full-time caregiving, and the transition into a new career as a psychotherapist have all contributed to my evolving understanding of identity.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which mothers navigate the tension between self-loss and self-discovery. Through daily reflection, journaling, and personal inquiry, I aim to explore how my identity has shifted, how I have worked to reclaim aspects of myself, and how these insights may resonate with other mothers facing similar challenges. This research is not only an academic investigation but also a journey of self-awareness, one that embraces the heuristic approach's core principles of immersion, self-dialogue, and transformation.

...the twilight zone between past and future that is the precarious world of transformation within the chrysalis. Part of us is looking back, yearning for the magic we have lost; part is glad to say good-bye to our chaotic past; part of us looks ahead with whatever courage we can muster; part is excited by the changing potential; part sits stone-still not daring to look either way. Individuals who consciously accept the chrysalis... have accepted a life/death paradox, a

paradox which returns in a different form at each new spiral of growth
(Woodman, 1985, p. 14).

Methodology

The term heuristic comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning "to discover" or "to find" (Moustakas, 1990). Clark Moustakas introduced heuristic research as a deeply personal and reflective process, designed to explore human experiences through self-inquiry and discovery. Unlike traditional research methods, heuristic inquiry places the researcher's own experiences at the center of the study, allowing for a profound engagement with the subject. It is a process of self-exploration, where the researcher not only investigates a phenomenon but also gains deeper self-awareness and insight along the way. By integrating creativity, intuition, and personal reflection, heuristic research offers a unique way to uncover meaning and develop a richer understanding of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1990).

Heuristic inquiry might start with a research question or problem, but it can also emerge organically rather than with a pre-structured hypothesis. It is a subjective, experiential method aimed at understanding meaning through personal immersion. Therefore, the research is both investigator and research subject and their personal experience is central to the study.

Polanyi (1966) famously stated that much of what we know cannot be fully explained in words. Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is intuitive, personal, and difficult to articulate. It contrasts with explicit knowledge, which can be easily written down, taught, or communicated. For example, a master baker will know when the dough has perfect consistency but a novice might struggle to tell the difference.

Heuristic research is characterised by six phases which are according to Kenny (2012) as follows.

The first phase is initial engagement. This phase involves identifying a passionate interest or problem that holds personal significance to the researcher. The goal is to discover a topic that resonates deeply, prompting an internal search to comprehend its essence.

The second phase is immersion. Here, the researcher immerses themselves fully into the topic, living and breathing the phenomenon in question. This may involve extensive

reading, reflection, and engagement with others who have experienced the phenomenon.

The third phase is Incubation. After immersion, the researcher steps back, allowing the information to sit with the researcher. This period of detachment enables new insights to emerge without active pursuit.

The fourth phase is illumination. In this phase, breakthroughs and new understandings will surface. The researcher gains clarity and recognises patterns or themes that were not clear previously.

The fifth phase is explication. The researcher examines the insights obtained during illumination, articulating and elaborating on their meanings. This involves a detailed analysis to fully grasp the nuances of the phenomenon.

The sixth and final phase is creative synthesis. Finally, the researcher integrates the accumulated knowledge and insights into a coherent narrative or framework. This synthesis often employs creative expressions, such as narratives, poems, or art, to convey the essence of the experience.

These phases are repetitive and may overlap, reflecting the dynamic nature of heuristic inquiry. They provide a structured yet flexible framework for researchers to deeply engage with and understand complex human experiences.

I am the researcher and the research subject. I am a 42-year-old female who left her home country in 2007 to study at Swansea University and to be with her boyfriend. It was a gradual move, initially it was only for a year. I believe that it would have been far too painful to have made such a big decision at once. For a long time, I have kept one foot in Austria, I still have a bank account and a Nebenwohnsitz (place to live) there. I love my country, my family, my language, and the big social network I was embedded in, although I can feel this slipping away. As I am writing this and tears are rolling down my face thinking of home, I am noticing that this feeling of being homesick would be worth its own heuristic inquiry, but I will leave this for another day.

At the tender age of 25 I was also intrigued by new opportunities and friendships. I always felt like I had the option to go home any time. This only changed after I had three gorgeous children. I still sometimes tell myself that I could go and live in Austria any time I wanted but I also know that this is not an easy decision, due to several

reasons. My children consider Wales their home, their German language skills are poor, and their father does not want to move away from the beach.

I began my heuristic inquiry by focusing on a heavy sensation in my chest, an unexplained weight that I could not define. I chose to sit with it, to give it my attention, yet nothing surfaced. The absence of a clear explanation unsettled me. I searched for a matching feeling, assuming it must be sadness since it often brought me to tears, but I did not feel sad.

This sensation was particularly present during my first year on the MA in Therapeutic Practice, especially when I was met with kindness or attention. I felt overwhelmed, almost undeserving of being truly seen. Am I worthy of this attention? Of being acknowledged for who I am? It was not until a conversation with a friend from the course that I recognized what was happening, my identity was in crisis.

Being away from my children and on my own felt frightening. There was no one to hide behind. Had I been hiding behind my children all along? They had become a convenient reason to avoid stepping out, pursuing my own goals, or simply being my own person. But what came first? Did I willingly let go of my identity, or was I unable to hold onto it?

Motherhood, especially without the support of family and with a partner who worked long hours, left little room for self-care or self-reflection. I had no workplace to return to, no established network to lean on. It sometimes felt as if my old self had been erased, without trace, without reminders.

Research question: How has motherhood changed my self-identity and subsequently influenced me as a therapist.

To explore the research question, I dedicated an hour each day to deep immersion in the topic, walking while reflecting and journaling upon my return home. I revisited memories of who I was before having children, what I loved, what inspired me, and what made me feel like myself. I recalled how Ed and I bonded through shared activities, spending our days walking, mountain biking, running, or surfing. Cooking was another passion of mine; I found inspiration in dining out and challenging myself to recreate memorable meals at home.

I began my journey as a psychotherapist before having children, fully immersed in learning, and practicing skills alongside my cohort. I enjoyed the time I had to read,

reflect, and complete assignments with focus and dedication. Life looked quite different then. I also remember feeling a deep sense of security in myself, confident in my likes and dislikes, grounded in my identity. I walked with strength and purpose, carrying myself with certainty.

During this phase of reflection, I also experienced overwhelming anger that arose during the birth of my first daughter. I had no awareness of this persisting but when I got in touch with it during one of my walks, I stayed with it and allowed myself to be with it. I shouted in the air what I wanted to say to the midwife who I was angry with (it was a particularly windy day on the cliff path), I told her what I needed to say. Wolf (2001) emphasises the impact of medical staff's lack of compassion on the outcome of birth and recovery.

Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern (1998) explain that the mindset of motherhood does not instantly emerge with a baby's first cry. Rather than being defined by a single, transformative moment, a mother's sense of self unfolds gradually over time, shaped by the continuous experiences of the months leading up to and following the birth.

It wasn't until my third child started full-time school that I finally had a moment to catch my breath and realise I had time to myself. The experience of not constantly having someone attached to me felt unfamiliar, almost foreign. Without hesitation, I enrolled in the MA course that same September, the moment my daughter started school. At times, I wished I had given myself a year to adjust, but I remind myself that this MA is an essential part of my journey. Babetin (2020) explains how integration of the old and new identity, after childbirth, can be an emotional rollercoaster.

In the beginning, I felt catapulted into solitude, adrift and uncertain. Yet, thanks to a supportive cohort and an intense sense of safety, I found comfort in returning every Thursday. Over time, I began to crave the feeling of being my own person again. I realised that pursuing my own passions and reclaiming my identity did not take away from my role as a mother; in fact, it made me a better one. Having my own needs met allowed me to be more present, engaged, and attentive to my children. It felt as though the boundaries had been redefined, restoring a balance that had long been missing.

The period of incubation during this research project got significantly prolonged due to having two sick children at home. I was unable to concentrate on any work and my research came to a halt and the process was interrupted. I found it hard to pick it up again once the children were back in school. I experienced the pressure of the

deadline and that kept interrupting the process. It was at this point that I contacted the Universities wellbeing service and asked for an extension, However, I have not heard back from them and decided that instead of chasing them I would be better off spending the time writing the assignment. However, it left me feeling alone and my motivation plummeted.

Although the process was interrupted, I came to recognize the fluidity of this journey and how moments of illumination had already begun to emerge during the immersion phase. One of the most significant themes that arose was the loss of autonomy. Being responsible for three young children means I am constantly on duty, always anticipating their needs. I now realize that when my children were little, I existed in a state of constant alert from morning until night, longing for a break, for solitude, for a moment to simply be.

My Jin Shin Jyutsu practitioner, Susa Hagan, once shared that it was not until her husband passed away and her children left home that she fully grasped how she had lived in a constant state of heightened attention. While I do not long to be rid of my family, I do wish to learn how to exist with them while also allowing myself to relax, to read a book, to write an assignment, to simply breathe. This brings me to the importance of boundaries and the balance between caregiving and self-preservation.

I now recognise the immense need for self-care in my life and, at the same time, how little space I must nurture it. I feel like my reserves are empty, in need of replenishment. I have come to understand that prioritising self-care is not a luxury but a necessity, both for my well-being as a mother and as a therapist.

Yet, in this realisation, I have also discovered something unexpected, I find the act of being a therapist itself deeply therapeutic. When I step into the therapy room, I am fully present. My mind is no longer scattered, preoccupied with meal planning, school forms, or the countless demands of motherhood. I do not check my phone or feel the pull of unread messages and unanswered questions from WhatsApp groups. Instead, I exist entirely in the moment, immersed in the connection between myself and my client.

In that space, I am not just a mother, not just a caregiver juggling responsibilities. I am me. In giving my full attention to my clients, I also give something back to myself. I find this process healing.

I suddenly remembered my mum's favourite book; *Little I Am Me* by Mira Lobe—a simple wholehearted story about the search for identity. She read it to me countless times when I was a child, and I loved it. It is surprising that I had forgotten about it for so long, and even more so that I never shared it with my own children.

The story follows a small, colourful creature who embarks on a journey of self-discovery after being questioned about who it is. Along the way, it meets various animals, each fitting neatly into a category, frogs are frogs, fish are fish, but the little creature does not seem to belong anywhere. Through its journey, it learns that identity is not about fitting into a predefined box but about embracing one's unique self.

Looking back, I realise how deeply the story resonated with me as a child, and now, as an adult, its message feels more relevant than ever. Motherhood had blurred my sense of self, and much like the little creature, I found myself questioning who I was beyond my roles and responsibilities. Recalling this book felt like comforting, reminding me of the importance of honouring my individuality. I now feel a strong urge to share it with my children, hoping it will inspire them to embrace their own identities as well.

Findings

Four overarching themes emerged during the process: The loss of self, the loss of the village, returning to myself by embarking on my own journey, and a balanced mum is a good mum.

I never anticipated how fully I would dissolve into the role of "mother." Before children, I had a clear sense of who I was active, independent, and deeply engaged in learning. But somewhere between sleepless nights, school runs, and constantly being needed, I lost touch with that version of myself. It was not a sudden event, but rather a slow erosion.

Through journaling, I revisited my past self, the woman who once took long walks simply for the joy of it, who experimented with new recipes, who thrived on intellectual challenge. In these reflections, I saw how much I had abandoned, not just in terms of activities but in terms of me.

Moving to the UK from Austria was exciting at first, a fresh start, a new adventure. But when I had my first child, the absence of family support became a painful reality. Motherhood can be isolating under any circumstances, but without grandparents, aunts, uncles, or childhood friends nearby, the weight of it felt heavier.

There were moments, particularly in the early years, when I craved a sense of belonging. I longed for the casual presence of family, the ability to share responsibilities, or simply to have someone reassure me that I was doing okay. Instead, I often found myself pushing through exhaustion alone.

It was not until my third child started full-time school that I finally had space to pause. Suddenly, there were hours in the day that belonged to me. It was an unfamiliar, almost unsettling feeling.

Instead of easing into this newfound freedom, I immediately enrolled in the MA course. In hindsight, I sometimes wonder if I should have given myself more time, but I also recognise that this decision was an essential part of my journey.

At first, the transition was overwhelming. I had spent over a decade immersed in caregiving, structuring my days around other people's needs. Now, I was sitting in classrooms again, engaging in discussions, writing assignments. I felt both exhilarated and lost. There were moments when I questioned whether I belonged in this space, whether I could reclaim an academic and professional identity after so many years away.

However, something shifted as the weeks went on. Every Thursday, as I returned to my cohort, I felt a growing sense of belonging. I was surrounded by people who saw me not just as a mother, but as a student, a thinker, a professional in the making. I began to look forward to these moments of intellectual stimulation, of reconnecting with a part of myself that had been dormant for years.

As I reclaimed pieces of my identity, an unexpected realisation emerged I was becoming a better mother. For so long, I had believed that being completely available to my children made me a good parent. But in neglecting my own needs, I had been running on empty.

The more I engaged in something for myself, the more patience and energy I had for my children. I noticed that I listened more attentively, that I responded with more presence rather than exhaustion. The boundaries between "mother" and "individual" were slowly being redrawn.

One moment stands out. After a long day at university, I came home feeling fulfilled and tired but not depleted. My daughter, sensing my energy, excitedly asked about my day. As I shared what I had learned, I saw in her eyes something I had not expected,

admiration. In that moment, I realised I was not just reclaiming my identity for myself, but I was also setting an example for my children. They were witnessing the importance of growth and self-care.

Discussion

The findings of this heuristic research project are in line with other findings such as Leany, et al (2015) who found that becoming a mother often brings a sense of losing oneself while also forming a new identity. The authors explain that women go through a process of reshaping who they are, integrating motherhood into their sense of self. This transformation can feel like both a breaking apart and a rebuilding, as they try to hold onto their pre-motherhood identity while adapting to their new role. Over time, many mothers feel they regain a sense of self, but one that now includes their identity as a mother. The authors further identified three key stages in this process: the transition into motherhood, the experience of self-loss, and the eventual rediscovery of a redefined identity.

However, the immigration to the UK by the researcher and the loss of family has been identified as a significant contributor to the struggles of motherhood. Another aspect that could be taken into consideration, but did not arise during the heuristic process, is the impact of Brexit. Brahic (2020) writes about the impact of uncertainty on self-identity of expat/migrant mothers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research shows how important it is for mothers to focus on personal growth, self-care, and balancing caregiving with taking care of themselves. It suggests that when mothers nurture their own identities and engage in activities that boost their self-worth, they can become more patient, present, and effective parents. The process of moving from losing oneself to rediscovering one's identity can be life-changing, and personal growth benefits both the individual and the family. Further research into the challenges faced by immigrant mothers, especially in relation to factors like Brexit, could offer more understanding of how identity, motherhood, and migration are connected.

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