

Mothering and The Person-Centred Approach: A Beautiful Match

A Person-Centred Approach to Motherhood

My introduction to the PCA was through motherhood. Before I trained as a person-centred therapist, I trained as a breastfeeding counsellor with the National Childbirth Trust and this training was very firmly rooted in person-centred theory. Tutorials took place in my tutor's home, surrounded by her grandchildren's toys and family photos. We talked about our own experiences of motherhood and we were introduced to the work of Carl Rogers as the best way to support the mothers we were preparing to meet.

When I qualified and began to work with new mothers, it became abundantly clear how beautifully the PCA fits this work. I meet exhausted new mums who are battered by the constant and often conflicting advice they have received to the point they are stuck, overwhelmed and unsure what to do next. When I asked them 'and what do you think?' I can often feel an instant shift, even a shock, that someone thinks that they might be the best person to decide what to do. Even in short conversations, I've seen women grow in confidence when I hear their difficulties, accept their decisions and openly and honestly offer them the information they might need to move forward.

I was therefore very surprised when, during my person-centred therapy training, I searched for what had been written about the transition to motherhood from a person-centred perspective and found nothing. The two had been so complementary in my work that it feels like a missed opportunity to look at how and why I've seen them work so beautifully together. Since then, I have found a compelling chapter by Jo Cohen Hamilton (1999) about her personal experiences as a person-centred therapist and mother, but still nothing looking more broadly at motherhood.

An Opportunity

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Firstly, what I'm describing isn't an issue with a person-centred way of working. I see the theory as complete and not in need of a theory for motherhood any more than it needs a theory for any other group of people. Instead, what I see as missing is an opportunity to learn more about both motherhood and existing person-centred theory by looking at them together.

A Unique Experience

Motherhood is a unique experience. During my dissertation research, when I talked to trainee person-centred therapists, several of these women shared that there was something singular in their roles as mothers that they hadn't yet seen expressed in the PCA. What they described wasn't something categorically different, rather, they described their mothering as a far more intense relationship than anything they had seen recounted in any of the literature. The theory wasn't wrong, it just didn't go deep or broad enough for them to feel that it described their lives.

They described their interdependent relationships with their children. They had carried these children in their bodies before being profoundly linked to them both physically and emotionally. These children were vulnerable and reliant on them for all their needs for many years. In our discussions, we touched on so many questions about identity and self, many of which would also be present for non-birth mothers and other parents, who would similarly be closely bonded to their children.

Feminist Literature on Motherhood

Although the PCA is yet to explore motherhood, many writers in other disciplines have looked at this role. There is a huge library of feminist literature on mothering, which looks at this relationship and its socio-cultural contexts. Many person-centred themes can be seen just below the surface of these works.

These include:

- Mothers not being valued or really heard, due to a lack of understanding (Stadlen, 2004), respect and acceptance, along with the distress that this can cause (McMahon, 2018).
- Descriptions of powerlessness and invisibility (Brearley, 2021; McMahon, 2018).
- Persistent and forceful messages in society about what makes a 'good' mother, and a 'bad' mother (Stadlen, 2004a; Maushart, 2000).
- A taboo around common emotions and responses to the transition to motherhood, such as maternal rage (Stadlen 2020; Mir 2021) and maternal ambivalence (Cusk, 2001).
- A narrative that birth trauma and postnatal depression/distress are medical problems, rather than a normal reaction to difficult experiences (Svanberg, 2019; Scotland, 2015).

- And on a more positive note, stories of personal growth and shifts in self-concept by women who have adjusted to their new role (Stadlen, 2020; McMahon, 2018).

This list barely touches the surface of what mothering can bring. However, these examples raise some questions about how a person-centred approach to mothering might look. How might person-centred theory describe these experiences of motherhood? And how might looking at motherhood inform our understanding of person-centred theory?

Questions

If we start to look at motherhood from a person-centred perspective, what questions come up? While I feel like I'm still just getting started on this subject and research, so far I have wondered:

1. How is the Actualising Tendency impacted by motherhood? We often hear of the sacrifices mothers make for their children, sometimes even giving their lives to save their child. Is that the mother's own AT at work? Or is it a condition of worth? Or is there some kind of joint AT for the mother-child dyad? Biologically, mothers and newborn babies are sometimes viewed as a single organism because their bodies are so interdependent. However, the mother will certainly also be very aware of herself as an individual. How do these things sit alongside each other, and where does this AT drive her towards?
2. Similarly, how does a mother, whose wellbeing is acutely tied to the wellbeing of her child, find congruence? This was a question that came up in my dissertation interviews. I've heard mothers describe their struggle to find themselves, especially with young babies. If they focus on themselves, they feel selfish, and if they focus on their child, then they can feel that they're losing themselves. Is it possible to do both? Or is some kind of postnatal incongruence inevitable?
3. Are some mothering conditions of worth more easily seen as acceptable or even necessary? These conditions of worth are some of the strongest that I've observed. In our efforts to protect vulnerable children, many expectations are placed on the mothers who care for them, and empathy for these mothers can very easily be lost. I have observed this even in person-centred spaces occupied with deeply empathic therapists when the focus of empathy has been on a child, and judgment for that child's mother is freely expressed.
4. How is the self-concept impacted by becoming a mother? This is a very open question, as I have heard such wildly different descriptions from the mothers I have worked with, but a common theme is that a huge, life-changing shift is often felt, influenced by old and new conditions of worth.

I am sure that there are a huge number of other questions that I have yet to consider. But where might these questions take us? Is it purely a theoretical question?

Why Looking At Motherhood Is Important

Motherhood is everywhere. None of us would be here without it, and currently, 84% of women in the UK will become mothers (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Reflecting on our preconceptions isn't just a theoretical exercise, it's vital for our client work. As Carol Wolter-Gustafson writes in her chapter on gender and the PCA (Wolter-Gustafson, 1999)

'To allow data to be perceived accurately, without distortion, one must be radically open to a phenomenon without first filtering it through the preconceived forms and prejudices that we habitually take as knowledge or truth' (p202)

'Then the 'core conditions make Rogers' theory a brilliant match for the process of hearing women's experiences directly' (p205)

We therefore need to be aware of our own preconceptions and biases about motherhood and this can be especially challenging when these go unchallenged in so many places. As I have described, so many aspects of this role are invisible, unheard or taboo and others are judged and assumptions made. As Wolter-Gustafson writes, we need to be aware of this so we can empathise fully with our clients, but when we do, the approach is a 'brilliant match'.

The question now is, where can we explore motherhood? In the only article I have found addressing this gap, Naomi Stadlen, a psychodynamic psychotherapist who worked extensively with new mothers, wrote:

'I wonder if I am the only person in this country, or even in the world, to be teaching this material...there is a strong likelihood that there are many trainees qualifying as counsellors and psychotherapists who have never been in a class that calls into question their assumptions about mothering... But if a student has never had to think about them, then these strongly held assumptions are likely to come into play when relating to clients.' (Stadlen, 2004b, p.6)

We therefore need time and space, in training or beyond, to explore motherhood and the associations it has for us.

Moreover, this gap doesn't just potentially impact our clients. My dissertation research found that all the therapists-mothers that I spoke to had struggled with feelings of guilt around their parenting when they learned about Rogers' developmental theory. Most said that it would have been extremely helpful to have had time to share and explore that with others. We need to look after ourselves as well as our clients and engaging with the theory in training shouldn't be a source of distress. We need space to debrief our own stories and we need somewhere to share

our experiences of motherhood and its presence in our work. If that doesn't happen in our training, then we need that space elsewhere.

Conclusions

Looking at motherhood through the PCA gives us enormous opportunities. Motherhood is simultaneously a unique and ubiquitous human experience, and an examination of the narratives around it is vital for us to accurately hear what our clients are telling us.

I hope that this website can provide some space to start some of these conversations and that the articles here can help us to take an opportunity to explore this rich seam of human experience. The PCA is a perfect match to hear these lost voices and to allow the mothers we meet to grow into the parents they wish to be. I hope that I can provide an open place for us to question and explore what motherhood means for us, because for many of us, it means a lot.

Points for Reflection

How has motherhood come into your work, for you and for your clients?

What conditions of worth have you seen placed on mothers? Where do these come from?

How might personal growth be impacted by someone becoming a mother? What might enhance or hinder this?

Author's Reflections

Writing this piece has been challenging, as it is the justification for this whole website.

Nonetheless, I hope that it is the start of some discussion and I'm also sure that this page will also evolve as the rest of the site grows. As my child would say, I'm 'finding my brave' and putting my thoughts out here as they weren't going anywhere useful, just circling round my own head.

Resources and Further Reading

Virginia Axline – Dibs – Although this book is a case study of a child and play therapy, what really strikes me is Axline's acceptance of the child's mother. Although it was clear that Dibs' mother had had a severe negative impact on him, Axline's non-judgmental attitude towards her allowed both of them to benefit from the therapeutic relationship in an extremely powerful way. It's a great example.

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Lucy Jones – Matrescence – an exploration of the transition to motherhood

Naomi Stadlen – What Mothers Do, Especially When It Looks Like Nothing – a look at all the invisible work that many mothers don't even notice themselves that they are doing. Collated from the mother groups that Stadlen ran in her practice in London, UK.

Women Writing in the PCA – Ed. Irene Fairhurst – A collection of works, including a creative piece by Jo Cohen Hamilton about her experience of becoming a mother

Encountering Feminism – Eds Gillian Proctor & Mary Beth Napier – A collection of chapters exploring feminist perspectives within the PCA

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