

**Constructing play and the relational self: Chinese parents' narratives  
of parent-child relationships in early years**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of

Philosophy

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**07. 2022**

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to give my warmest thanks to my supervisor Prof. Tom Billington who made this work possible. His insightful guidance and advice carried me throughout my research journey. His patience eased my fear and doubt in this journey. His respect for my own way of writing encouraged my uniqueness.

I would like to give my special thanks to my parents, for continuously supporting and understanding me whilst overcoming their own life challenges. My father's braveness and perseverance in the face of difficulty encouraged me in my research journey and in my life journey.

I would like to give my sincere thanks to my family, for caring for me and supporting my parents.

## Preface

The project is a narrative-based investigation of Chinese parents' experience of play and the potential for self-discovery when playing with their children. This thesis is deeply embedded in the spirit realm of play. This means that I not only focus on the narrative-generating construction of the research subject but also place the researcher within the spirit of play. My language in this thesis serves as a way to 'read', 'name' and then 'construct' parents' own play experience combined with a theoretical basis to raise both participants and the researcher into the spirit realm of play.

In the spirit realm of play, I intend to harmonise two significant theoretical tensions under the research topic: the tension between western philosophy and Chinese philosophy and the tension between social constructionism and Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas. The conversational process involves a consideration of relationality. In other words, self-other dynamics are explored from the relational perspective. The vital importance of play within the thesis may speak for itself in this process. And so, I attempt to construct play in an in-between world where self-other configurations can be observed and cultivated. Through my engagement in reflexivity, my own embodied relational understandings of reflexivity are developed and, in turn, hopefully serve a sensitive and mindful exploration of play.

## **Abstract**

The project is a narrative-based investigation of Chinese parents' experience of play and of the potential for self-discovery when playing with their children. There are two primary research questions: How do parents experience play in their daily interactions? How is the relational self constructed in play-based interactions?

Narratives from six parents (Jessica, Rob, Jasmine, Mathew, Olivia, and Jason) are collected via free-association interviews. Gee's poetic approach is utilised in re-transcribing selected participant core narratives. 'Cues' internal to the text, which emerge from how the text is worded, provide the researcher with possibilities for analysis. The process of coherently representing core narratives then allows readers to link parents' accounts to their own narratives.

Data are analysed and discussed in a manner that accords with two theoretical frameworks: social constructionism and Winnicott's theory of transitional space while Wang Yangming's philosophical principle of 'zhi xing he yi' (the unity of knowing and acting) is used as an organising principle throughout. The main research outcomes of the research are as follows.

First, how parents experience play in their daily interactions: 1) play emerges in relationships with children; 2) play is constructed as different transitional spaces; 3) play is constructed as emerging in relationships between parents and family; 4) the capacity for play is in relation to emotions and the environment. From a social

construction perspective, play is multiple, relational, changeable and dynamic in the current research.

Second, how the relational self is constructed in play-based interactions: 1) in relationships with children, parents construct themselves in multiple roles; 2) in the transitional space, parents construct their experience, tending to be here fully; 3) in the transitional space, parents construct their experience in a state of flow; 4) in relationships between parents and family, they construct themselves to explore inner coherence and cooperation with the family; 5) parents' discourse contains cultural meanings

Key words: Parents, Play, Self, Experience, Construct, Narrative

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 At the very beginning**

Intuitively, the current research journey begins with my own concern about self-discovery and my relationship with my father. Discovering oneself and prompting others to discover themselves has been my intent. An encounter with a five-year-old girl strengthened my desire to carry out this research. In section 1.2, all these aspects will be explored by the researcher. The researcher in section 1.3 will discuss the relevant phenomenon and knowledge. In the family environment, the experience of two adults taking responsibility for their child/children contains endless possibilities, not only for the child/children but also for the parents. Before discussing play in ‘parenting’ and ‘parent-child relationships’, which may be viewed as more child-oriented constructs, we perhaps could separate the concept of ‘parent’ from that of parental obligation. Is it possible for us to show adult individuals more care and concern aside from their roles as parents? How are adults’ ‘selves’ re-sculpted in interactions with children? Are there any possibilities for adult individuals’ play to emerge in a family environment? In section 1.4, play will be explored in broader philosophical and theoretical contexts. I regard this section as playing with the term ‘play’ and ‘self’. In section 1.5, I define play based on the knowledge of social construction, Winnicott’s psychoanalytic ideas, and Wang Yangming’s doctrine. In

section 1.6, I present the focus of the research: parents' experience of play, along with the research questions. In section 1.7, summaries of the chapters will be presented.

## **1.2 My 'self' within the research journey**

God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny God. But when I encounter You I encounter him.

Buber (1970, p.28)

We can well appreciate Buber's romantic and spiritual words for the self and other. He provides a relational perspective and takes us into an experience of encounter, in which selves are born. Buber (1923) states that "the concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter[...]" (p.62). Buber's profound views inspire my reflections on the past and my playful explorations of relationships and authentic self.

### **Being alone**

As I sit here in my quiet apartment where I live alone, I have been reflecting on my past. I have become aware that critical reflection is a necessary process in qualitative research. Reflexivity is felt to be a kind of space in which I can escape; I can distance myself from the discipline, issues and situations and access clarity of thoughts. I also regard it as an area where different feelings and thoughts that cannot be directly

observed and are even denied can emerge. Doubts, isolation and depression sometimes appear. Those feelings aroused, I think, are one part of a much longer journey.

Chaos in the mind may create panic, and I frequently ask myself: What am I feeling? How am I to know whether my views are objective or just subjective? How am I to tell whether what I believe is rational or blind? After I started learning about Gergen's work (2009), I have frequently asked where my emotions are located. What is the relationship between the 'objective' and 'subjective'? What is the relationship between the 'rational' and 'blind'? If we are constructed in relationships, what is the point of putting one and the other into separate positions?

During my alone time and via a state of awareness in my relationships, my sense of self is becoming stronger. A sense of play emerges. At this moment, I do not doubt that these empirical questions will be understood through an excruciating, recursive process. However, I observe that this state cannot continue. The practice of meditation can lead me into this state again.

### **With my father**

As I review my journey, it is refreshing to note that my interactions with my father have taught me the value of introspection and being with others. Here, let me exemplify this point by painting my experience with my father. Although I love my dad, his over-concern for my studies has, historically, often provoked aversion in me.

Instead of quarrelling with him as we have done in the past, this time I chose to have a conversation with him. Before the extract of conversation below, I dug into what I felt and struggled with how to express it. I attempted to share my feelings rather than choosing to defy or avoid my father at this time. This conversation did not provoke a fight but introspection.

*I: I am not trying to blame you when telling you that I am not happy with you and I don't like the way you care about me. Instead, I am sharing my authentic feelings. Don't be overwhelmed. I love you [...] Please tell me your feelings. We are just learning to practice a better way of being with each other.*

*(silence)*

*My father: To be honest, I feel so confused about what you said. I don't know how to communicate with you. What do you expect me to do?*

*I: I want you to be yourself.*

*My father: Although I don't actually understand it at this moment, it does make sense.*

*I am willing to think about it.*

*An episode of conversation between my father and I*

I had to admit that sometimes I was just like a toddler, trying to balance different thoughts and feelings in my mind before putting them into words. I believe that words themselves do not contain meanings. When we speak, we carry the meanings we form

in our minds into words: “Meaning making [is the] historical precondition for language making” (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p.113). As a budding researcher, I presume that the meanings I construct through words can promote an examination of and deepened maturity in my inner world. How do we understand ourselves? How do we understand each other? As mentioned in Gergen (1999), “we cannot generate meaning together, cannot coordinate action, cannot co-exist without understanding” (p.48). When asked what the essential things in life are, it is evident that self-exploration and parent-child relationships play significant roles. The empirical questions have been iteratively explored in this research. Confidence follows. Gergen (1999) states that “life will be filled or emptied according to how we press them into action” (p.111). I am waiting for ways of being to occur spontaneously, then awakening will follow. Thus, is it playful when I am with myself? Is it playful when I am with others? The answer for me is yes for both questions.

*Jumping out of my secret self-space for a little while*

*Speaking with interest souls like lying on the grass and counting stars*

*Smiling behind boundaries*

*A space between you and me*

*I cannot feel me without you*

*I cannot accomplish me without you*

*Marvellous encounter*



I learn to understand that my self-discovery and playful creation take place in between one and the other. For me, encountering others invites opportunities to meet undiscovered aspects of self and possibly heal the wounded self. It is an adventure that is always worth the gamble.

### **An encounter with a five-year-old girl**

Something special happened to me during my research journey. This was a significant experience which strengthened my desire to carry out my research and promoted me to delve into adults' self and play with children. This encounter happened between me and a five-year-old girl, a unique young soul. I had faced some tough times during those two years for various reasons. I needed to be stronger to support my family emotionally and balance this with my research life. I was feeling stressed and upset one day. This little girl was playing with her toys and turned around to look in my eyes. Without saying anything, she took my hands, then turned back and kept playing. I was so touched in that moment; I felt the energy flow between us. It was magical. I realised there was something special in my heart; that was love. To feel love and to be loved supports and sustains me. That was a unique experience in which I, as a visitor in that young girl's life, was touched and healed by what she gave me in that moment.

I am curious about what happens between parents and their children in daily life and how adults narrate memorable moments with their children. How are adults' 'selves' re-sculpted in interactions with children? Are there any possibilities for adults' own play to emerge? So, in this research, I explore parents' experiences of play and

self-discovery in their narrative accounts of their relationships with their three to five-year-old children, collected via interviews which took place in their homes.

Reconciling with my personal experience, my deep engagement with others is the most important driver for me to do this project. I notice that I arrive at the interface between my personal inquiry and specialist phenomena, knowledge, and tools. By doing this well, I keep asking myself and exploring such questions as: ‘What is the meaning of my life?’, ‘What path will lead me to get there?’, ‘How do I get there?’ These fundamental questions are infinite in this research.

### **1.3 Specialist phenomena and knowledge behind my research**

Man [sic] only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.

von Schiller (1967, p.107)

Play is a central experience for children. Through play, they make sense of the world and learn to value themselves. When asking children what their favourite activity is, the answers usually involve some form of play. The importance of a child enjoying play cannot be over-emphasised. According to Saracho and Spodek (1998), there are two perspectives to play, including classical and modern dynamic approaches. The former focuses on explaining why play exists. In contrast, in modern dynamic approaches, the concern is the content of the play. Many researchers suggest that play is difficult to define given its dynamic character (Lakoff, 1973; Eberie, 2014). Here, I

introduce two psychologists, Freud and Winnicott. One is more oriented towards a classical approach to play and the other to a modern dynamic approach. In Freud's earlier theories, play is essentially viewed as "a form of wish fulfilment, a quest to satisfy libidinal desires" (Henricks, 2020, p.280), while play may also be "a form of instinctual renunciation, a process of holding off or controlling those desires" (Henricks, 2020, p.280). According to Winnicott (2005), an individual is creative and discovers the self through playing. He suggests that "it is in playing and only in playing that individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (2005, p.73). This accords with my own ongoing experience of re-sculpting the self through play.

According to Haight, Gaskins, and Lancy (2007), theories of play, including those put forward by Vygotsky (1978), Freud (1950), and Piaget (2003), reflect and reinforce the notion that play is significant to an individual's development. However, the seriousness and importance of play are usually underrated, probably because play, often regarded as a child's leisure, is undervalued by adults. As Greer (1975) argues, "work is productive and good; fun accomplishes nothing and is often evil" (p.165). Work is separated from pleasure and joy.

The research surrounding play is varied. While there is a great deal of psychological research focused on infants' and children's play, I have found that less research is focused on adults. Adults' play is only rarely studied in my field (psychology). In

particular, there is little research around parents' views on play in family settings (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Arguably, it is a precious life experience for a parent not only to rear the child he or she brought into the world, but also to re-establish contact with his or her child-self (Mannoni, 1999). I agree that a child can truly discover the world if they are healthy, in a state of inner security (Mannoni, 1999). To proceed from this point, if a parent's child-self can be explored in their own play experiences before they became a parent, is it possible for a parent then to provide a healthy secure model of valuing and appreciating play with his or her child? Before investigating this question, I explore parents' experiences of play in parent-child relationships in early years through their narratives. Play is very hard to define because of its complexities, which will be specifically discussed in the following sections. Here, perhaps our own experiences might help us understand play, when approaching the environment playfully or existing as an orientation of playfulness.

If we regard family as given, not chosen, this place where two adults together take responsibility for their children contains endless possibilities, not only for the children but also for the parents. The word 'parent' should be understood as both functional and relational. Before discussing play in 'parenting' and 'parent-child relationships', which may be viewed as more child-oriented constructs, we perhaps could disassociate the notion of the 'parent' in the relationship with parental obligation. Is it possible for us to show adult individuals more care and concern aside from their roles

as parents? Moreover, is it possible for parents and the researcher to then reconstruct parents' relationships with children?

In Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998), she doubts the principle of happiness in which pain and pleasure are regarded as separated and opposite; in the meantime, she proposes the principle of life in which "[w]hat pain and pleasure, fear and desire, are actually supposed to achieve in all these systems is not happiness at all but the promotion of individual life" (p.311). According to Winnicott (2005), "playing is doing" and "doing things takes time" (p.55). Playing here is more about the process itself and the individual themselves. From my perspective, play might be closer to this principle of life. I feel that the nature of play appears to counter the highest standard in classical economics - productivity - but might actually promote productivity based on the principle of life proposed by Arendt (1998). Furthermore, in Arendt's (1998) work, a kind of self-observation embodies the principle of life. As she suggests, self-observation can be viewed as a metabolic process between human and nature: "it is as though introspection no longer needs to get lost in the ramifications of a consciousness without reality, but has found within man - not in his mind but in his bodily processes - enough outside matter to connect him again with the outer world" (1998, p.312). Based on her perspective, I argue that self-observation emerges in relationships where one and the other are not separated but connected. In this sense, access to self-observation makes authentic happiness possible. Perhaps, therefore, exploring play and the relational self could bring new perspectives on our

relationships with others, not only as individuals but also as human beings. Even though adults may not feel as comfortable talking about play as children, I believe this is worthy of exploration.

#### **1.4 Congruence in what I stand for**

Imagined into life without a purpose, and indispensable,  
they reminded you of us. You studied the Great Dyings,  
sea shifts, supernovae, examined with surprise and terror  
the surprise and terror sealed on fossil faces.

Were you doing this for me? I thought you were.

Rollings (1989, p.61)

Based on my own play experiences and my observations of others, I note that play is one of the basic needs in life. Everyone I have encountered has their own understanding of play, just as the ways in which we express ourselves are unique. The parents I spoke to were very clear about their roles as parents, but rarely discussed their own play and playfulness. Perhaps we put too much emphasis on young children. We may have good reason to be concerned with cultural, social and personal expectations; however, we can still retain joy in our daily lives. It seems to me that play is a construct in which individuals attempt to realise and create ideas. My purpose in exploring experiences in this thesis is not to focus on distinguishing

between types of play. I am interested in parents' experiences of play, especially in relationships with children and how they discover themselves in play.

Here, I wish to share an extract of a conversation between my father and me. This is a valuable point for me and this research, as it shows that my father wants to be heard, not just because of his role as my father, but for who he is as a person.

*I: I don't want just to talk about the weather, food, movies and so on. I also want to talk with you and to talk about what inspires you, what interests you and what frustrates you. If you can share your feelings about these things, that is wonderful.*

*My father: Yes [...] it's just as I thought. You said what I wanted to say. All I want is for someone to listen to me.*

*Extract of a conversation between my father and I*

In this conversation, I can feel that my father really wants to be understood for his own sake. My father really enjoys his alone time. I know that he likes to do things and feel things in his own precious time. When we are together, we always share many deep insights on life with each other. We like to go into nature for expeditions and watch cartoons together, especially Tom and Jerry. We discuss how my father views and values those playful moments. In those moments, he feels like my little friend. For me, it is because of these playful moments that our relationship is refreshing itself and flourishing towards a pathway to the self. Gergen (2009, p.139-140) writes:

One of my greatest delights in life is playing with children. In these relationships, I draw from the residuals of my own childhood. The child I carry lives again, but now enriched through my playmate. What a relief to shed the responsibilities of my “adult identity!” What joy in the rollicking moments from which emerge worlds undreamt!

In this part, Gergen beautifully expresses his personal feelings about playing with children. Gergen seems to recognise that the experience of playing with children helps to release him from ‘adult identity’ and simply get back to who he was and what he loved as a child. Here, the encounter and experience between an adult and a child is not just based on moral choices, in which rational arguments and distinct boundaries may be emphasised, but also a sense of community, building in the flow of co-action, in which individuals’ values and experience can be shared and their differences are reflected on (Gergen, 2009). According to Gergen (2009), conflicting boundaries can turn into restoring peace in the dialogic practices. However, the challenge of developing approaches for inviting individuals into dialogic relations cannot be underestimated (Gergen, 2009). I’m wondering whether play might become a way of developing a sense of dialogic relations.

As a relational self, we live “in the reality of the ‘between,’ that urn-like form emerging from the co-existence” (Gergen, 2009, p.62). I intend to understand and construct play as an embodied action in relationships, deeply influenced by Gergen’s work (2009) and my personal experience in relationships with my parents. The



discussion and exploration in the research are based on this understanding of ‘reality’.

Our emotions, memory, thinking, words, experience and creativity are constructed as embodied actions instead of mirrors or maps of the individual interior (Gergen, 2009).

*I construct that locating myself in relationships is unstable and needs practice. At least, from my experience, regular meditation is a good way to lead me into a state of the ‘between’. Only in this state is what we call the practice of the relational self possible and meditation moves us closer to it.*

To understand and construct our mental vocabulary as relational, Gergen (2009, p.70-74) suggests that “mental discourse originates in human relationships”; “mental discourse functions in the service of relationship”; “mental discourse is action within relationships”; and “discursive action is embodied in traditions of co-action”. Based on Gergen’s suggestion, the psychological world is reconstructed. What we called the inner self and the external world are reconstructed as mental discourse and human relationships.

According to Gergen’s thinking, a state of ‘flow’ needs to be unleashed through discovering and developing ways of being in relationships. For me, a state of ‘flow’ requires deep engagement by the individuals involved. The quality of deep involvement that individuals experience in play is emphasised by positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. For Csikszentmihalyi, ‘flow’ means an individual is immersed in the stream of the event in which one does not think at all about what is happening beyond the boundaries of the occurrence (Henricks, 2020); it

is a state of complete involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). A state of ‘flow’ may be seen as an important manifestation and one of the benefits of experiencing play. Although what is ‘play’, ‘playing’ or ‘playful’ can vary according to different situations and experiences, ultimately, we may shift our intention towards achieving growth of the self as a purpose for choosing to play:

The self becomes complex as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were. When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable. And once we have tasted this joy, we will redouble our efforts to taste it again. This is the way the self grows.

Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p.42)

If we regard play as experience, if one is playing and enjoying it, we may want to keep playing. According to Henricks (2015), the experience of what is occurring now can be viewed as both a reward (psychic satisfaction) and motivation, which is fuelled by satisfaction. For Csikszentmihalyi, flow is connected with enjoyment, which “requires an investment of insights and energy by the player” (Henricks, 2015, p.38). However, besides play, this quality of experience called ‘flow’ can be found in other experiences (Henricks, 2015). Deep engagement does not always appear in play (Henricks, 2015).

To some extent, if we recognise ‘flow’ and let it flow, this quality of experience, and how it may happen in play, people might be freed to make authentic choices to invite this state into their experience (or not). In other words, flow performance may become a “crafted achievement” (Gergen, 2009, p.103). In this sense, we do ‘flow’ in relationships or co-action. Furthermore, we could understand how to harness this state for the growth of the self. As Henricks (2020) says, ‘playing creatures’ are individuals who are able to pause, plan and evaluate action on their own timing and terms. It may help to account for our own more self-conscious moments as adults. As a psychological scholar, this is one of the areas I investigate and address in this thesis. These investigations could serve to promote dialogic relations and crafted achievement, as suggested by Gergen (2009).

Specifically, it appears to me, based on my experiences of talking with parents, that the need for a playful state of living is necessary. This functional aspect of play is specifically explored in sociologist Johan Huizinga’s book, *Homo Ludens* (1998). Play is regarded as ‘a significant function’ which is generally taken for granted, he argues:

In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. if we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, ‘instinct’, we explain nothing; if we call it ‘mind’ or ‘will’ we say too much. However,

we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.

Huizinga (1998, p.12)

In Huizinga's opinion, "there is some sense to it" [play] (1998, p.12). He also argues that the 'why' of play is emphatically investigated in psychology and physiology, which tends to partially answer the problem but does not offer "a real understanding of the play-concept" (Huizinga, 1998, p.13). Play can be understood by enhancing its "profoundly aesthetic quality" but without first being paid attention to (Huizinga, 1998, p.2). Huizinga's work with the utility of play as a function suggests that "intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play" (1998, p.13).

What these perspectives suggest to me is that play itself is in parents' personal experience and is continually given, by its narrative expression in their own lives, "a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (Huizinga, 1998, p.15). As a psychological researcher, I aim to observe parents and understand play in the way in which the player themselves sees it without any predetermined hypotheses in mind (since hypotheses are not play). To my way of thinking, the spirit of play precedes and is higher than any form of its expression. Therefore, my own language in this thesis serves as a way to 'read', 'name' and then 'construct' parents' own ideas of play and what is going on in their minds when they play to raise both participants and

myself into the ‘spirit realm’ of play. Hopefully, in expressing these concepts, new possibilities for expressing this ‘spirit of play’ will be created.

My intension here is to explore ways that play might creatively enter into people’s lives. Winnicott (2005) suggests that the adult or child is liberated to be creative and feel a sense of aliveness in play. He further develops this idea of ‘creativity’ in play as a person’s ‘approach’ to the external environment. In this way, the functional aspect of play is also highlighted in Winnicott’s perspectives.

Freud (2016), in his *Moses and Monotheism*, describes ‘live creatively’ as a stage in human mental functioning. For Winnicott (2005), the quantity and quality of environmental provision is viewed as an important influential factor in creative living.

Culturally and philosophically, supporting viewpoints of the functional aspect of play can be observed in Wang Yangming’s (1472-1529) doctrine. Wang Yangming was a great Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming era. I discuss his views in detail in the following chapters. From Wang Yangming’s (1916) perspective, benevolence is constructed as the fundamental principle of continually creating and growing. ‘Benevolence’ is constructed by Wang Yangming as ‘love’ of things and love towards people. He likens benevolence to a bud, which then grows roots, and undergoes continuous development, started via respectfulness and manifested in relationships. In this way, the intension to see virtue and do good leads the mind to advance towards these qualities (Wang, 1916). But when a mind errs, it will reform. Wang Yangming (1916) describes this attained condition as ‘devotion’, a state of

being earnest to a thing. In this condition, an individual increasingly cherishes nature law, which means that he or she doesn't speak of results, force the growth and separate one and the other.

Pleasure here implies the pleasure arising out of righteousness principles-the pleasure of the mind. The human mind naturally finds pleasure in the principles of righteousness, just as the eyes take pleasure in color and ears in sound. He [sic] alone who is obscured and embarrassed by passion does not at first take pleasure in these principles.

Wang Yangming (1916, p.123)

I feel this philosophical perspective may help me to understand my actions in the current research and might encourage playful interactions with Chinese parents and their narratives in relation to their engagement and struggles in play. Within this perspective, can we observe righteousness when an individual is playing in relationships? Then is pleasure naturally observed by an individual?

Furthermore, in Wang Yangming's doctrine, the perspective of the original nature of mind may be also relevant to the functional aspect of play (1916). He argues that an individual's mind, being without desire, is tranquil. Whether this individual is in motion or at rest, fixing the determination is the same. In other words, an individual must master the original nature of mind and perform the state of harmony because the

mind is naturally never at rest. However, Wang Yangming's doctrine does not extend to the subject of play.

Huizinga (1998) suggests that the right way of living is living in peace as well as possible and accordingly living life as play. In this way, "we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it--in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred" (Huizinga, p.19). In my opinion, within these philosophical perspectives living life in peace and pleasure is a matter of 'play'. Therefore, in some respects, it seems that the functional aspect of play is something that can be viewed as an approach of the individual to a relational world. The themes I explore above are related to the discovery and possibility of 'play' and all the things associated with this.

The philosophical, cultural and psychological perspectives seem to support my thinking regarding parents' experience of play and self-discovery. In this research, I investigate six parents' experience in three families. How do parents experience play in their relational interactions, especially with children? And how are their selves constructed in what they experience? I'm curious about these themes within parents' experience and narratives in relation to a social and cultural context.

### **1.5 Defining the term: play**

#### **Play**

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.

Winnicott (2005, p.73)

Through our observation of play, we know what it is when we see it. However, observation may lead us only to a refined concept of play instead of moving us closer to a definition. As we take play into different settings, our confidence in our definitions of it may slip away as we observe more. I suspect that we *can* define what play is; however, I will not initially try to define it in this section. Instead, I will look at selected classical theories on play. As contemporary researchers, we continue to address concerns those great predecessors identified long ago and build on their visions with our own ideas. First, it is worth recalling Vygotsky and Winnicott's theories.

For example, Vygotsky states that the very means used in the process of social interaction are adopted in the process of an individual's internalisation (Wertch, 1986). That is to say, Vygotsky strongly emphasises the relationships between cognition's social foundations and internalisation. The support of others has a distinct role in developing children's understanding. Two levels of development are stated by Vygotsky (1978). The actual level of development is referred to as the developmental level of a child's mental function development which is built because of certain completed cycles of development. The potential level of development is checked in



the problem-solving process which is guided by adults or in collaborative situations with more knowledgeable peers. The zone of proximal development is viewed as the space between the potential level of development and the actual level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the way in which the individual's learning can be affected by social interaction is emphasised by Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development. Through this, Vygotsky expands his view of the zone of proximal development by describing playing as a way in which the potential level of development is created, going beyond the actual level of development. When it comes to the importance of play in an individual's development, Vygotsky (1978) notes, "in play a child always behaves beyond his [sic] average age, above his daily behaviour. In the play, it is as if he [sic] were a head taller than himself" (p, 102).

Children create play and move forward, according to Vygotsky. In this sense, play serves as the provision of space for encouraging creativity. In Vygotsky's (2004) view, every creative act is based on the operation of imagination, which means the process of imagination works as a powerful motivator for our human creative experience. As he states, imagination "manifests itself in all aspects of our cultural life, making artistic, scientific and technical creativity possible" (p.13). Thus, imagination is functionally essential to life.

Consistent with Vygotsky's notion, Winnicott (2005) suggests that creativity is necessary not only for artistic work. Winnicott (2005) states that creative impulsivity is present "when anyone – baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman – looks

in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately” (p.92). However, an individual’s creative process is stifled when he or she is ill or impeded by ongoing environmental factors, according to Winnicott (1968). It is necessary to construct “the initial creative approach to external phenomena” (Winnicott, 2005, p.92). It is of great importance to grant anyone’s right to creativity, for both theoretical and practical reasons.

Both Vygotsky and Winnicott emphasise the relationship between imagination and the human experience. According to Vygotsky (2004), elements taken from human life are the basis of imagination, which means that the operation of imagination depends on the variety and extent of an individual’s experience. Therefore, as Vygotsky mentions, an adult’s imagination might be richer than a child’s due to their breadth and richness of experience. In line with Vygotsky, Winnicott (2005) develops the important idea that the potential space between the child and the mother is the staging-ground for creativity and cultural experience in early childhood. The potential for a creative existence comes from the relational space between the inner self and external life. According to Winnicott (2005), creative playing is not only relational, but is also a healthy way of self-expression. Vygotsky (2004) also argues that imagination is closely related to emotion. As he (2004) suggests, emotions are real and lead to a process of imagination.

We might observe that play is loosely connected to a group of ideas which I have mentioned above, for example, ‘creativity’, ‘flow’, ‘imagination’ or ‘dialogue’. It

seems that these ideas contribute to the play-concept. As Huizinga (1998. p.6) suggests, these mutual relationships and their own rationale must rest with “a very deep layer of our mental being”.

Play might be understood in a flow of relation between one and others. Combined with the discussion before, the idea of play occurs against a background of social construction in this thesis. It is insufficient to consider personal encounters without individuals’ mental discourse or human relationships. Bakhtin (1984) provides a relational perspective on dialogue: “life by its very nature is dialogic [...] He [sic] invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium” (as cited in Gergen, 2009, p.251). Meeting to play and playing to meet might jointly contribute to self-growth. These wonderful thoughts lead me to explore this inquiry by philosophically defining ‘play’ as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts.

### **1.6 Focus of this research: parents’ experience of play**

This research investigates Chinese parents’ experience of play and self-discovery in their narratives of parent-child relationships in the early years. My research questions are as follows:

How do parents experience play in their daily interactions?

How is the relational self constructed in play-based interactions?

Since my focus on parents' experience of play and self-discovery is centred on relationships with their children in this research, I can obtain parents' in-depth personal experience. However, I also encourage parents to speak to these questions beyond their relationships with their children.

### **1.7 Summaries of the chapters**

Chapter 2 will explore the relevant philosophical and psychological literature based on parents' experience of play and self-discovery. In this chapter, play that is uncertain and complex will be discussed explicitly drawing on ideas from philosophy, culture, and psychology.

Chapter 3 will provide an in-depth discussion of the researcher's methodology for collecting and analysing data. Specifically, I will explain my philosophical stances in the current research. Then, I will provide my rationale for applying narrative inquiry. Descriptions of research procedures and ethics will then be presented. The next part will be the practicalities of analysing data. An outline of data outcomes follows.

In Chapter 4, the narratives of each parent's experience, re-transcribed and presented by utilising Gee's poetic approach, will be analysed and discussed in accordance with the research questions and theoretical lens discussed in Chapter 2. By utilising Gee's poetic approach, I will provide readers with an opportunity to 'play' with parents' narrative accounts. Then I will provide further discussions concerning research outcomes, methodology, literature review, and research questions.

Chapter 5 will consider the limitations of the current research, recommendations for future research, and a reflection for the current research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature review: A life that happens in play**

### **2.1 Introduction**

My own experience of self-discovery, my relationships with my father, and an encounter with a five-year-old girl inspired me to conduct this research. But this was all hazy; playing with the subject at the beginning of this exciting journey was somewhat intuitive. Then, as I explored specialist phenomena and knowledge, the subject of ‘play’ was gradually involved in its uncertainty. As Henricks suggests (2020, p.117): “[o]n occasion, play moves in clear directions, but often it reverses course or becomes entirely unpredictable in its path and implications”.

In this chapter, I will firstly provide an in-depth cultural and philosophical exploration in a consideration of uncertainty. The first section will consist of two parts (2.2.1 and 2.2.2). The first part will focus on uncertainty in play and will mainly explore Huizinga’s thoughtful ideas in which play’s nature and its significance in human culture are pondered (Henricks, 2020). The second part will focus on the influential Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming era, Wang Yangming’s idea of developing “the original nature of mind” (1916, p.96). In the second part, I will discuss the ethical value in play by combining Wang Yangming’s doctrine with Huizinga’s thoughtful ideas.

Considering the uncertainty in play, I will invite readers to consider play from a relational perspective. So, in the second section, I will explore play within a social

constructionist framework. Gergen's thoughtful ideas regarding relational being (2009), Buber's ideas about dialogue (1965, 1970), and Gadamer's philosophical resources for understanding dialogue and play (2013) will mainly be discussed in this section. I aim to develop a philosophical context that helps me understand the relational aspects of play and prepares me to move towards relevant psychology exploration gradually.

In the third section, the exploration of theory will be focused on the themes of parents, a way to self, creativity, and the transitional space in relation to play. My purpose is to understand the relationships between play and the other and create a theoretical space in which psychological ideas may comfortably coexist within the philosophical standpoints in the current research.

## **2.2 Ichi-go ichi-e: Embracing play in consideration of uncertainty**

*Ichi-go ichi-e* is a famous Japanese proverb that can be translated as “treasure every encounter, for it will never recur” or “one chance in a lifetime” (Fujihara & Hiroyoshi, 2014, p.1). To understand the beauty of play's uncertainty, it is essential to keep in mind this old Japanese proverb before starting this discussion.

### **2.2.1 Uncertainty: let us recall Huizinga's words**

According to Huizinga (1998), the element of tension is viewed as a crucial part of play. In his opinion, “tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it” in play (Huizinga, 1998, p.22). Huizinga suggests that the element

of tension imparts a certain ethical value in itself. Here the player's "prowess" is tested in terms of resources, tenacity, courage, and "his spiritual powers - his 'fairness'" (Huizinga, 1998, p.23). Perhaps in the temporary world-play, the player's 'prowess' is tested by play, which in turn can be a reflective process for the player themselves. It is in its ethical value in the element of tension that play has its uncertainty. Huizinga's perspectives on uncertainty allow me to reflect on Henrick's observation of play. Henrick (2015) describes 'play' as a manifestation of the possibility to tinker and transform. He argues that a 'reflective', 'activist' self is the ultimate creation of play. Combined with Huizinga's discussion, I feel that an individual's 'effectiveness' may be increased through the uncertainty of play in his or her reflective ways. As Henrick (2015, p.24) suggests, play can be regarded as "a pattern of involvement with the world". Players do not rest and may be stirred to consciously take action - "to see what *they* can do" with the world (Henrick, 2015, p.24). In this process, players might try to touch 'a tipping point' between 'out of control' and 'being in' (Henrick, 2015). To some extent, players try to discover difficulty or resistance (Henrick, 2015), and they learn about their 'qualities' and 'character' so that new understandings and possibilities may be produced in the spirit of play. I understand it as that changes are bred in the realm of uncertainty in play.

Huizinga suggests that play, belonging to the dimension of aesthetics in which the effects of beauty are excavated, represents "tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc." (Huizinga, 1998, p.21). His words instructively enlighten



our understanding of players' attempts in play as we discussed above. I agree with Henrick's suggestion; a 'reflective' self is a creation of play. However, it might be better to view this reflectivity as a process, instead of a purpose, in play, because play is a softer and more emotional sphere of life (Henrick, 2015). Discussing the purpose of play in dispassionate, logic-driven processes may shift individuals' abstract ideas of enjoyment and beauty (Henrick, 2015) and perhaps, in turn, allow people to be willing to consciously and ethically practice this world.

I offer this discussion of uncertainty in play as I argue that it is play where people learn about their abilities and are energised to seek opportunities to act and react consciously. As Miller comments (as cited in Henrick, 2015), a 'bouncy' and 'spirited' quality - galumphing - can be portrayed in players' movements. From Miller's perspective, this "unique" quality is described as "the voluntary placing of obstacles in one's path" (Miller, 1973, p.92) to "prolong and increase the enjoyment of his [sic] play" (Miller, 1973, p.91). On the flip side, it is because a process becomes interesting in itself that it can be called play (Miller, 1973). As Huizinga (1998) suggests, play can be 'serious', but the movement of players is managed to balance seriousness and play, with the simultaneous result that the 'improved' act of doing (I understand it as one's own 'growth') contributes to a balance between the aesthetic content and play content. Thus, in seriousness, the sentimental excitement, this play quality, may be emancipated and experienced accordingly as deep as we imagine.

Huizinga's discussion reminds me of my own experience with my father in relation to parent-child relationships and play.

*I: I am reading a book with some ideas, and I want to share my opinions with you.*

*My father: Why don't you get to sleep now? Go to sleep. (He is angry and pointing his fingers at me).*

*I: I just feel so excited to get some ideas. And I cannot get to sleep. I'm not a child now. Why are you so angry?*

*My father: I care about your health. We are your parents.*

*An episode of conversation between my father and I*

This conversation will be discussed here by focusing on my own perspective as a child, which may provide insights into understanding parents' experience relating to play in our daily encounters. This conversation brought me to myself again. I experienced anxiety when these conversations occurred. The play mood was seriously interrupted. Sometimes, I felt that my parents treated me as a child who had done something wrong. I longed for warmth from them which I seldom obtained when I was young. I know they love me so much, but the way they love me sometimes makes me feel stressed. I long to be alone so that I might give full vent to my feelings and emotions. I struggle. Swinging between independence and dependence is a wandering and exhausting journey for me in my relationships. I never end my attempts to develop a coordinated approach to my relationships with my parents. However, I

suppose that this sense of coordination requires joint efforts by both sides. Is my play mood interrupted in such a situation? I think the answer is yes.

I offer this episode of conversation between my father and myself because the play mood is easily interrupted. As Huizinga (1998, p. 21) describes, “the play-mood is *labile* in its very nature”. I argue that this lability is one representation of uncertainty. From this perspective, play moves between two poles: ecstasy and frivolity (Huizinga, 1998). Play can be interrupted perhaps by “an offence”, “a disenchantment”, “a sobering”, and “a collapse of the play spirit” (Huizinga, 1998, p.21). My concern here is that interruptions might be caused in the relational process. From Gergen’s (2009) perspective, mental discourse is embedded within relationships, within relational processes. This relational view may allow me to interpret parents’ narratives regarding how they value interactions between their children and themselves from two aspects: parents’ attempts at play in parent-child relationships and the parents’ potential possibilities in playing with their children. However, it is worth noting that Gergen’s view of the function of such relational being does not mean “social life as manipulation” (Gergen, 2009, p. 72), even though the human experience is less simplistic and more complex. Thus, I argue that Gergen’s work on relational being has significant practical value for developing the dialogic, coordinated, relations which I mentioned in Chapter 1. In this way, some of my purpose in the research can be retrieved here, which is investigating parents’

possibilities for 'knowing' themselves in relational processes, which may relate to adults' play.

### **2.2.2 “It is necessary to develop the original nature of the mind” (Wang, 1916, p.96)**

Wang Yangming is the influential Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming era. His idea of developing “the original nature of mind” (1916, p. 96) is also relevant here. Wang’s work on ‘mind’ is better translated here into ‘mind-and-heart’. However, I will still use the term ‘mind’ in my discussion following quotations from his doctrine’s English version. Wang understands that “mind is nature, and nature includes law and order” (Wang, 1916, p.81). Further, Wang (1916, p. 81) suggests that “the path of duty” and “the original nature of mind” cannot be distinguished since the latter can understand the former. ‘Nature’ is also interpreted by Wang in his work which is embodied in his letters:

On another day I said, “Are the feelings of commiseration, shame, dislike, modesty, complaisance, approval, and disapproval to be considered as nature manifesting virtue?”

Benevolence, justice, propriety, and wisdom are nature manifesting virtue.

There is only one nature and no other. Referring to its substance, it is called heaven; considering as ruler or lord, it is called Shang-ti (God); viewed as functioning, it is called fate; as given to men it is called

disposition; as controlling the body, it is called mind. Manifested by the mind, when one meets parents, it is called filial piety; when one meets the prince, it is called loyalty. Proceeding from this on the category is inexhaustible, but it is all one nature, even as there is but one man [sic, throughout] (generic sense) (Wang, 1916, p. 83; for original Mandarin see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1

他日，澄曰：“恻隐、羞恶、辞让、是非，是性之表德邪？”

曰：“仁、义、礼、智也是表德。性一而已，自其形体也谓之天，主宰也谓之帝，流行也谓之命，赋于人也谓之性，主于身也谓之心。心之发也，遇父便谓之孝，遇君便谓之忠。自此以往，名至于无穷，只一性而已。犹人一而已，对父谓之子，对子谓之父，自引以往，至于无穷，只一人而已。人只要在性上用功，看得一性字分明，即万理灿然。”

--- 《传习录·上·陆澄录》

His ideas of “the connotation of the word nature” or “all one nature” (Wang, 1916, p.83) can be understood as manifesting virtue. Indeed, I argue that his discussion emphasises the ethical significance of ‘the original nature of mind’. However, I understand that Wang Yangming focuses on the values of ‘the original nature of the mind’, naturally manifesting virtue. Returning for a moment to the theme of play, in Chapter 1, I define ‘play’ as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. According to Huizinga (1998), since play is neither bad nor good, it has no moral

function or moral duty even though it is a non-material activity. However, as I discussed before, Huizinga suggests that a certain ethical value in play is imparted by the element of tension, which means the player's "prowess" is tested in terms of resources, tenacity, courage, and "his spiritual powers - his 'fairness'" (Huizinga, 1998, p.23). According to my current direction of thinking, discovering the meaning of play leads us to deeply consider the problems of nature (Huizinga, 1998). In the play-sphere, we unavoidably need to investigate the notion of 'virtue' and the 'ethical'. Huizinga's work of idea of virtue in Western culture suggests that the nobility:

must now, if they are to remain true to their tasks and to themselves, either enrich the ideal of chivalry by assimilating into it those higher standards of ethics and religion [...] or else content themselves with cultivating an outward semblance of high living and spotless honour by means of pomp, significance and courtly manners.

Huizinga (1998, p.65)

However, from his perspective, "the ever-present play-element" which acts as a "real factor" in shaping culture is now merely demonstrated (1998, p.65).

Let us return to Wang's suggestion of developing "the original nature of the mind" (1916, p. 96). Wang's whole doctrine aims to elaborate on developing the original nature of the mind, which is unsystematically embodied in his letters with others. He

moves from investigating Confucianism to studying Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and practices (Ching, 1976). According to Wang, things flow from the mind and return to the mind. Moreover, from his perspective, “true learning” is that one might cherish the mind and see the mind as continually present (Wang, 1916, p.103). I argue that his work on this theme in Eastern culture can be treated as a way of acquiring the state of equilibrium, a state in which one is in the present state of harmony and can then develop “in accordance with his [sic] capacity” (Wang, 1916, p.97). That is to say, the one only needs to preserve their own natural endowment as “guileless in natural law”, a state in which one is not a mere machine or utensil; then one’s ability is constituted to accomplish things (1916, p.97). Prominent within his work, I think, is the sense that developing the original nature of mind is of first importance; then, the one who cultivates themselves with ‘an upright mind’ can accomplish things (Wang, 1916). How close this is to the sense of play which I mentioned before. Players might try to touch ‘a tipping point’ between ‘out of control’ and ‘being in’ (Henrick, 2015). To some extent, players try to discover difficulty or resistance (Henrick, 2015), and they learn about their ‘qualities’ and ‘character’ so that new understandings and possibilities may be produced in the spirit of play. Here the sense of play is like a dance between inner and outer, enlightenment and cultivation.

### **2.3 Dialogue and play: Philosophical perspectives from Buber, Gergen and Gadamer**

It is worth mentioning the notion of dialogue again that I briefly discussed in Chapter 1. Play can be captured in dialogues. The idea of play can be enlightened in interpersonal interactions occurring against a background of social construction. As I discussed before, the notion of 'dialogue' is also relevant to play. Firstly, I invite you to join me in thinking through the significance and potential of dialogue within relationships. Buber and Gergen, in their unique ways, explore relationships and dialogue that are significant to people's mental health. I will lean on Buber's (1965, 1970, 1992) work and Gergen's (1999, 2009).

We can appreciate, for instance, Buber's (1965, 1970) well-known philosophy of dialogue. His writings are punctuated by a me-you-relationship (Buber, 1992). He emphasises how the growth of an individual is a lifelong process in the dialogical relation, a way of 'I' being and living with others. He distinguishes the I-it relations where we relate to the other in functional ways from the I-thou relations where we encounter each other in entirety. For Buber, I-thou relations refer to ways that individuals are open to each other in an inclusive reality (Guiherme, 2015). On the contrary, a meaningful connection fails to be established because one objectifies the other in I-it relations. As noted previously, Buber provides a relational perception on individuals and takes us into an experience of encounter in which dialogue emerges.

As Buber (1969) explains:

The life of dialogue is no privilege of intellectual activity like a dialectic.

It does not begin in the upper story of humanity. It begins no higher than



where humanity begins. There are no gifted and ungifted here, only those that give themselves and those who withhold themselves.

Buber (1969, p. 203)

For Buber, dialogue refers to one communicating with the other for no purpose and without expectations. One's experience of the other is not limited by what has been formed from the previous encounter (Gordon, 2011). In this sense, Buber's ideas, to some extent, are consistent with the perspective of social construction. Kenneth J. Gergen (1999) notes that dialogic interactions are often regarded as conversations and relationships where change, growth and new understanding are fostered. Dialogues serve as the key for deepening understanding of one's own and others' perceptions. Relationships with each other are also cultivated in dialogues. Both Buber and Gergen highlight the importance of relationships. However, it is also valuable to consider some thinkers' critical responses to these opinions. For example, as argued by Aspelin (2011), against Buber's notion that the I-thou relationship is of existential nature, Gergen emphasises that reality is understood as a social construction.

If we follow Gergen, co-action is a key concept in his theory. No action has meaning in itself, and all meaning emerges through collaborative action. More specifically, as Gergen (2009) emphasises, individual minds are the outcomes of the relationship. Intentions, motives, memories, and emotions of pain and pleasure are coordinated in a co-active process: "[i]ndependent persons do not come together to form a relationship; from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges" (Gergen,

2009, p. 38). However, Buber's I-thou relations are not regarded as a generation of social interaction due to the nature of dialogue he sketches. Compared with Gergen's perceptions of relational being, Buber identifies that one intends to encounter the other with an open mind and then listen and respond to you in one's entirety, not as a sum of one's qualities. As Aspelin (2011) claimed, Buber's ideas of a flowing relationship cannot be understood with constraint. However, according to Gergen (2009), what Buber sketches as I-it relations is similar to his instrumental orientation of relationships. Buber's I-thou relations and Gergen's mimetic orientation are resonant but not synonymous: "[r]elationships turn both artificial and threatening, and moral demands are infringements on our autonomy" (Gergen, 2009, p.27). Thus, the clear distinction between I-thou and I-it relations blur based on Gergen's theory. The possibility for transformation lies in a co-active process where individuals' constraints are incorporated. This aspect in Gergen's theory does not deny the significance of Buber's critique of the distinction between I-thou and I-it relations.

From a social construction perspective, dialogic interactions are regarded as conversations and as relationships where change, growth and new understanding are fostered (Gergen, 2009). Buber refers to dialogue as where one communicates with the other for no purpose, and without expectations, and that one's experience of the other is not limited by what has been formed from the previous encounter (Gordon, 2011). Therefore, dialogue serves as a constructional function in relationships, from Gergen's perspective, while dialogue emerges regarding its existential nature, as

Buber sketched. Both Gergen and Buber highlight the importance of relationships in which the self is born through dialogue. That is to say, an individual is embodied in relations through dialogue. As Bakhtin (1993) wrote: “consciousness is never self-sufficient; it always finds itself in an intense relationship with another consciousness” (p. 41). As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, the social process can be reflected by individual thought. Play is also embodied in this kind of dialogic relations between self and others. In turn, play may then become a way of developing a sense of dialogic relations.

*I: ...it's because of me; you become my father. It's because of you; I become a child.*

*My father: That's right. Then I live as your father, and meanwhile, you live as my child. We both can grow up together.*

*An episode of conversation between my father and I*

To some extent, I am pleased to say that the relationship between my father and me is a kind of co-creation because my own experience confirms it. Using the previous episode of conversation between my father and me as an example, both of us gradually live as who we are and what we are, gradually shifting the spotlight from requirement onto sharing helpful ideas of living. We gradually create mutual respect and ‘absorb’ each other’s actions into our ways of being.

Combining Buber and Gergen’s thoughtful ideas, meeting to learn and learning to meet as a joint contribution of relational pedagogy are emphasised by all authors in

the anthology *No Education Without Relation* (Bingham & Sidorkin et al., 2004). For example, in school settings, learning takes place when individuals meet together. Learning and meeting are inseparable. However, schools pay too much attention to gaining knowledge and forget that individuals are related to each other, and we must learn to meet (Bingham & Sidorkin et al., 2004).

Before proceeding further, let us imagine a new-born baby and a first-time mother. They encounter each other without experience. Then they start a co-operative journey to be with each other. Meaning emerges, and change occurs in every moment of feeding, gazing, facial and verbal expressions. There is no doubt that this is the very first relationship we encounter in this world. The early experience in which young children form relationships is significant for all future relationships (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997) and parents perhaps can also grow in such dialogic relationships, as we discussed before, with their children.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, provides rich philosophical resources for understanding dialogue and “genuine play” (Vilhauer, 2013, p.75). Gadamer perceives this “genuine play” as a “dance of presenting and recognising meaning” (Vilhauer, 2013, p.75). He interprets the account as promoting interpersonal engagements in dialogue-play with others to “facilitate mutual understanding for our common good” (Vilhauer, 2013, p.75-76). In Gadamer’s perspective, the practice of this genuine dialogic play with others is recommended as the interactive path for

developing ourselves, which contributes to education and our existence as human beings (Vilhauer, 2013), an ethical consideration.

Gadamer suggests that what is serious is especially related to play (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013), which is similar to that discussed by Huizinga (1998). This notion of “serious” can be understood from two angles in Gadamer’s work (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013, p.106-107). On the one hand, as Aristotle says, the purpose of play is recreation (as cited in Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013). On the other side, seriousness can be captured in play itself. However, the purpose of play is only accomplished “if the player loses himself in play” (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013, p.107). As I mentioned before, I argue that it might be better to view this purpose in play as fulfilment in play itself because play is a softer and more emotional sphere of life (Henrick, 2015). However, discussing the purpose of play in dispassionate, logic-driven processes may shift individuals’ abstract ideas of enjoyment and beauty (Henrick, 2015) and perhaps, in turn, allow people to be consciously and ethically involved in this world.

Further down the line, from Gadamer’s perspective, “purposive relations” in play are “curiously suspended” rather than simply disappearing (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013, p.107). When the player is into “the mode of being of play”, they still make choices: choosing whether to play or not and which way to play (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013, p.107- 111). Meanwhile, according to Gadamer, the special quality of human freedom, that an individual might intentionally restrain one’s

own effort to accomplish something, is involved in play (Vilhauer, 2013). Thus, human play has the special quality of human freedom which the player “chooses” even though Gadamer describes human play as the “to-and-fro motion” follows of itself (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013, p.109- 111).

Based on Gadamer’s investigation of play, as I mentioned before, Gadamer’s work on “dialogue-play with the other” provides crucial ethical values (Vilhauer, 2013, p.82).

In Gadamer’s work of understanding in terms of dialogue, he describes:

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.

Gadamer (2013, p.387)

In dialogue-play, we are open to others’ strange and new meanings. In this process, we experience transformative possibilities and cultivate our natural talents and capacities (Vilhauer, 2013; Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2013). In this way, right now, we move in a to-and-fro communicative dance with the other naturally and reach a mutual understanding for our common good. As Vilhauer (2013, p.83) describes, this way of being can be understood as “beings-at-play-in-the-world”. I argue that this way of being can be naturally enriched by itself. I appreciate Gadamer’s understanding of

dialogue and play, which offers a crucial philosophical standpoint for understanding play.

## **2.4 Psychological literature relating to parents, play and self**

### **2.4.1 Physical body behind the self**

In play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man [sic].

Huizinga (1998, p.7)

From Wang's philosophical perspective, body, mind, things, purpose, and knowledge are one unit (Wang, 1916). Wang states that "the true self is born from the body; without it, it is dead. If you devote yourself truly to the bodily self, you must protect and maintain the original nature of the true self" (1916, p.132). In the previous section, I understand his work on the theme of "original nature" in Eastern culture as a way of acquiring the state of equilibrium, a state in which one is in the present state of harmony and can then develop "in accordance with his capacity" (Wang, 1916, p.97). In Chapter 1, I defined play as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social, and cultural contexts. It seems likely that our physical body is the root of endless possibilities via which it may be possible to awaken our instinctual being which faces this natural world and bring us into a harmonious way of touching upon our experience:

Human emotion is not just about sexual pleasures or fear of snakes. It is also about the horror of witnessing suffering and about the satisfaction of



seeing justice served; about our delight at the sensuous smile of Jeanne Moreau or the thick beauty of words and ideas in Shakespeare's verse; about the world-weary voice of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing Bach's Ich habe genug and the simultaneously earthly and otherworldly phrasings of Maria Joao Pires playing any Mozart, any Schubert; and about the harmony that Einstein sought in the structure of an equation.

Damasio (2000, p.36)

From a modern neuroscience perspective, Antonio Damasio explores the evaluation of consciousness and brain-body connections (Henricks, 2020). In Damasio's work, in this physical body behind the self, human emotions are regarded as outwardly directed and public, while feelings are inwardly directed and private (Damasio, 2000). From Damasio's perspective, feelers know that they have a feeling only if consciousness is present (2000). Emotions and feelings have been unfolding as a 'biological process' before the moment of knowing. Damasio emphasises the significance of the biology of emotions, feelings and consciousness. When powerful emotions are invoked by mental assessments, the subject may "act quickly or, just as suddenly, freeze in place" (Henricks, 2020, p.129). These processes are viewed as 'indicators' of different levels of self (Henricks, 2020). According to Henricks, different levels of individuals' selfhood are engaged in play (Henricks, 2020). He suggests that, in play, "our highest levels of consciousness try to impose themselves on our more basic patterns of functioning. Our lower levels challenge, confuse, and

sometimes overwhelm our cognitive faculties with their demands” (Henricks, 2020, p. 130). In the next section, I shift my attention from a biological perspective to a relational perspective in psychological paradigms when considering play.

#### **2.4.2 Parents and attachment theory**

The critical notion, play, was philosophically discussed in previous sections. In this section, I want to devote attention to the notion of the attachment hidden behind relationships by presenting and discussing critical references. Let us first consider the notion of separation, related to solitude, aloneness, isolation and being unbound. I am concerned with the tension between conjunction and separation in an individual’s life. Some questions occur here: What does attachment mean to parents and the child? How does their previous attachment history impact on how parents interact with their children? Moreover, most importantly, how does attachment act as something in play?

Let us consider the notion of separation before the notion of attachment. Separation is a process by which children and parents learn to differentiate themselves from each other. It is also a process that may bring an individual a sense of contentment and achievement in growth and development through a sense of satisfaction experienced in a family. According to Winnicott (2005), the love from mother or mother-figure meets dependent needs and provides chances for an individual, supporting them to move from dependence to autonomy. If we regard separation as a “natural clue” to danger, as Bowlby (1973) argues in his work, an infant seeks proximity led by an emotional reaction to separation. Where the caregivers are failed to be found by the

infant when facing a threat, then the individual may not expect responsiveness from subsequent others (Bowlby,1973).

Similarly, Winnicott (2005) argues that there is no separation and is only a threat of separation within human beings, and early experience of separation influences the extent of trauma experienced by an individual when facing a threat. Further, as I mentioned before, Winnicott (2005) develops an important idea that the potential space between the mother and the child is a position for creativity and cultural experience in early childhood. As I supposed, the potential space makes reunion possible. In Winnicott's (2005) view, an individual (infant, child, adolescent, or adult) may develop autonomy and creatively enjoy the cultural heritage in play. However, based on Winnicott's (2005) theory, he mentions that a person's play capacity is cramped by a failure in confidence regarding the mother's reliability, relative lack of cultural eruption, and a lack of acquaintance with the cultural heritage.

This section will also consider the notion of 'boundary' before further discussing how an individual learns as a separate subject in relation to others. The issue of commitment versus individual freedom is the most intense battle in close relationships (Gergen, 2009). In Gergen's view, individuals within a bounded relationship seek their alienation through internal division. Additionally, Wood and Talmon (1983) specify the interactional and behavioural characteristics of boundaries in families and illustrate that the characteristics of boundaries in a family directly influence patterns of communication, control, and nurturance. Boundaries are applied to personal

systems concerning defence mechanisms through which experiences of painful emotions and thoughts are moderated (Cramer, 1991). Boundaries in families have been received attention in research and practice. For example, effective leadership is gradually developed through clear boundaries between parents and their children in a family (Meyers et al., 1996). In addition, many researchers emphasise that a sense of self and individuality is gained in the interpersonal process of differentiation and individuation within a form of relationship (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990).

Here in the thesis, we consider parents and their play. We cannot simply walk away from the individual's role as a parent. It is the condition where play unfolds in this research. In parenting literature, attachment theory is a fundamental theory in understanding parent-child relationships and experiences. According to Bowlby, attachment behaviour is defined as:

... any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other preferred and differentiated individual, who is usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser [...] In adults they are especially evident when a person is distressed, ill, or afraid. The particular patterns of attachment behaviour shown by an individual turn partly on his present age, sex, and circumstances and partly on the experiences he has had with attachment figures earlier in his life.

Bowlby & Bowlby (2005, p.154)

In considering the significance of the bonds of attachment in families, Crittenden (2016) claims that, in all cultures, individuals seek protective and enduring adult partnerships and parental relationships since family relationships best foster a healthy and long life. As Bowlby (2005) suggests, attachment is conceptualised as “a foundational form of behaviour with its internal motivation distinct from feeding and sex, and of no less importance for survival” (p.30). In Bowlby’s view, internal beliefs and expectations about self and others, regarded as mental working models, are generalised in an individual’s early experience with caregivers. The quality of subsequent development could be determined by the quality of previous attachment. The previous internal working models can be complexly reconstructed (Bowlby, 1980). However, relationship patterns are continually constructed in interactions with others. According to Sroufe and Fleeson (1986), relationship patterns that were previously experienced are recreated by individuals in present interactions with others.

It is also important to mention the empirical studies related to attachment that indicate how these mental working models work in an individual’s adulthood. For example, caregivers’ recall of their experience in childhood is associated with their relationships with their children (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). Bowlby’s theory is also criticised by some psychologists, such as Harris (2011) who proposes that peers are of great importance in shaping a child’s personality. Children learn how to behave from others in their social environment, not just from their parents. For Bowlby,

parents should not be blamed. The role of others in the social environment cannot be ignored.

When we discuss parents' role and parenting, it seems that literature around this matter is existing in emotional lacunae (Fogg, 2015). However, it is crucial to consider problems regarding the point of view of parents (Bowlby & Bowlby, 2005).

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the research surrounding playing is varied. While there is a great deal of psychological research focused on infants' and children's play, I have found that less research is focused on adults. Adults are only rarely studied in my field (psychology). In particular, the least research is around parents' views on playing in family settings (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Actually, being a parent, might be a valuable life experience for adults not only to rear the child they brought into the world, but also to re-establish contact with their own child-self (Mannoni, 1999). Bowlby's work mainly concentrates on attachment in infancy. Nevertheless, Bowlby regards attachment as a lifespan process 'from the cradle to the grave', by which human beings' feelings, thoughts and behaviours in relationships are guided (as cited in Simpson & Rholes, 2015). In Bowlby's work on attachment (2005), he argues that parents may have the same emotional problems as children. That is to say, parents' emotional experience should also be valued by themselves and researchers.

Bowlby captures the significance of parents' emotional experience thus:

Sometimes they have read all the latest books on child care and have been to all the lectures of psychologists in the hope that they will discover how

to manage their children, but yet things have still gone wrong. Indeed, the failure of many parents with “psychological ideas” to make a good job of their children has led cynics to decry the ideas. I believe this mistaken. What we must realise, however, is that it is not only what we do but the way that we do it which matters.

Bowlby & Bowlby (2005, p.24)

In the literature, as I mentioned before, attachment theory is formulated in a lifespan process. The vast majority of research on attachment looks to the context of children and their caregivers, and, in the last decades, attachment researchers have also given their focus to attachment in adulthood (Feniger-Schaal, Noy, Hart, Koren-Karie, Mayo & Alon, 2016). One core theme and one emerging theme in attachment literature are particularly relevant here. In attachment theory, one core theme is “whether and how attachment security can be instilled in people” (Simpson & Rholes, 2015, p.3). Mikulincer and Shaver’s studies on attachment in adulthood argue that a sense of attachment security, an individual’s confidence in feeling lovable and competent, can be viewed as a resilience resource and a building block of mental health and social adjustment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). Their model of attachment processes in adulthood continues Bowlby’s attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015) and moves into positive psychology’s focus on personal growth and social virtues (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). According to Mikulincer and Shaver, in this model or script called the secure-base script:

cycle-experiencing threats or distress, seeking protection and comfort from an attachment figure, experiencing stress reduction and felt security, and returning to other interests and activities-provides a prototype of both successful emotion regulation and regulation of interpersonal closeness.

Mikulincer & Shaver (2007, p.13)

The secure-base script, as they call support for autonomous and interpersonal closeness functioning, is mutually sustainable (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The attachment security allows for undefensive, creative engagements with other individuals and enhances an “accurate perception of and effective reactions to others’ needs” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015, p.139).

It occurs to me that in Gadamer’s philosophical work on dialogue and play, the mutual understanding for our common good can be facilitated by promoting interpersonal engagements in dialogue-play with others (Vilhauer, 2013). Furthermore, as I mentioned before, the practice of this genuine dialogic play with others is recommended as the interactive path for developing ourselves, which contributes to our education and our existence as human beings (Vilhauer, 2013), an ethical consideration. From a relational perspective, the function of this secure-base script suggested by Mikulincer and Shaver might be viewed as a practice in the spirit of genuine dialogic play. However, from Mikulincer and Shaver’s perspective, the sense of security investigated in their experimental psychological studies and its role in mental and social processes still needs to be conceptualised (Mikulincer & Shaver,



2015). They retain questions about this sense of security, whether it is an emotion, a feeling, or a background mood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). I argue that the identifying and functioning of this sense of security can be viewed as an individual's emotional learning experience which might lead to new possibilities in life. From a social constructionist perspective, "emotional performance is a crafted achievement" (Gergen, 2009, p.103). In Gergen's work, he suggests that naturally expressing emotions requires an enormous amount of cultural education. This suggests that emotions can be learned as a cultural achievement. However, the dance of the emotions depends on "its full sense of authenticity" in relationships (Gergen, 2009, p.106) and the re-negotiation of meaning, challengingly but potentially playfully. A question that remains here is whether and how attachment security works with the sense of authenticity.

In attachment theory, one emerging theme is attachment and parenting (Simpson & Rholes, 2015). In the last three decades, attachment researchers have investigated how parenting and the quality of parent-child relationships relate to parents' attachment (Jones, Cassidy & Shaver, 2015). For example, parenting is investigated by Jones, Cassidy and Shaver from an attachment perspective (Simpson & Rholes, 2015). Some significant outcomes organised by Jones, Cassidy and Shaver are listed below. For example, insecure mothers are less close to their children than secure mothers, prenatally and after childbirth (Jones, Cassidy & Shaver, 2015). Both anxiety and avoidance are related to more parenting stress in most studies (Jones, Cassidy &

Shaver, 2015). In parents' perceptions of themselves as parents and of parenthood, parents with a sense of security tend to regard parenthood as less concerning and threatening (Jones, Cassidy & Shaver, 2015). However, experiences in parenthood and potential changes in parents' adult attachment should also be considered in further research, as suggested by Jones, Cassidy and Shaver (2015). I haven't found psychological literature relating to the relationships between play and attachment. However, I argue that investigating parents' play in considering attachment would help me understand play, this functional experience, in relationships better, especially in parent-child relationships. Experience in parenthood is investigated in a play perspective in my thesis in a way that might lead adults to reflect on, re-evaluate, and potentially change their parenting, in terms of their attachment style, which needs to be researched in further studies.

### **2.4.3 Play as a way to self**

In his *Ambiguity of Play* (1997), Sutton-Smith, one of the foremost play scholars, suggests that children's play is associated with general adaptation, development, and growth. Then what are adults doing in play? Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that adults may not prepare for anything, yet children's play can serve as a preparation for maturity. However, for adults, play can be investigated as "the rhetorics of the self" which is viewed as some sort of valued personal experience (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.173). In this area, play is theorised in relation to the quality of the player's play experience (Sutton-Smith, 1997). According to Sutton-Smith (1997), the meanings of

play are interpreted in terms of individuals' subjective experiences in these theories. In this "rhetoric of the self", play is viewed as "a way of seeing and being", "a state of mind", "a special mental set towards the world and one's actions in it" and is more focused on individuals than groups (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.173). That is to say, how play is 'minded' is psychologically interpreted (Henricks, 2015).

I argue that these psychological aspects provide in-depth interpretations of adults' play. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), in 'the rhetorics of the self', psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow experience (2002) is regarded as an investigation of play as a peak experience. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) studies how individuals' enjoyment can be brought by individuals at play, at work or in relationships. He suggests that a state of mind-flow, one's own peak inner states, can occur in play or work. Furthermore, he supposes this state of mind-flow is universal across cultures (Sutton-Smith, 1997). From this perspective, I argue that the potential for transforming meaningless and boring lives into ones full of enjoyment, as Csikszentmihalyi mentions (2002), can perhaps be viewed as individuals' tentative, functional experience in their own lives. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, if we recognise 'flow' and let it flow in play, perhaps people can make authentic choices about whether to invite this state or not, and how to process it, for the sake of the growth of self. Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow helps individuals to construct themselves more positively:

After each episode of flow a person becomes more of a unique individual, less predictable, possessed of rarer skills.

Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p.41)

Csikszentmihalyi (2002) describes flow experience as the growth of the self because the self is integrated into a state of deep concentration, a state of harmony. When the flow episode is over, one can feel more 'together' than before (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). As a result, according to Csikszentmihalyi, one feels "together" not only internally "but also with respect to other people and to the world in general" (2002, p.41). In his theory of flow, flow is characterised as "the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (2002, p.6). By discussing the structure of consciousness and how this system works, he suggests (1988) that consciousness includes three functional subsystems: attention, awareness and memory; respectively, functioning as taking notice of information available, interpreting the information, and storing the information. These subsystems in consciousness allow that the anonymous instinctual forces are possibly controlled by an individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). In this sense, at a certain point, individuals start to realise their own powers "to direct attention, to think, to feel, to will, and to remember" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.20). That is to say, a new agency, namely self, develops within awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). It is consciousness that allows itself to be aware of self, as Csikszentmihalyi (1988) describes, an epiphenomenon of conscious

processes. Csikszentmihalyi's 'flow' can provide adult individuals with functional approaches to attain a state of harmony. From this perspective, Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory gives me a micro perspective onto understanding play as peak experience.

#### **2.4.4 Play as expression: Freud's psychoanalytic ideas**

Psychoanalytic theory was initially developed by Freud and is designed to represent the internal dynamics of the individual. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, humans are understood as psycho-physical creatures that are powerfully influenced by desires, anxieties, and impulses (Henricks, 2015). Based on Freud's views, our psychological conflicts can only be managed instead of eliminated (Henricks, 2015). By applying psychoanalytic theory, our earlier life dilemmas are revisited to assist individuals to identify the unresolved issues and construct narratives to effectively manage those tensions (Henricks, 2015). In Henricks' work (2015), *Play and the Human Condition*, he describes Freud's views of play as expressive behaviour. In this version of play, Henricks suggests that the psychic wishes behind individuals' expressive behaviour and how individuals channel these psychic wishes into conscious formulations are emphasised in Freud's psychoanalytic theory (2015). However, Freud's views of play mainly and frequently focus on children. Freud conceptualises child's play as such:

The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with his [sic, throughout] play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?

It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child's "play" from "phantasying."

Freud (1959, p.143-144)

This version of understanding children's play is represented in Freud's writing, *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* (1959). Freud suggests that when an adult who has grown up and ceased to play, "and after he [sic, throughout] has been labouring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and this shared. As an adult, he can look back on the intense seriousness with which he once carried on his games in childhood; and, by equating his ostensibly serious occupations of to-day with his childhood games, he can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by humour" (1959, p.144-145). However, Henricks (2015) suggests that adults in Freud's work on play feel pressure to behave in respectable, upright ways. In this sense, the adults' "play impulses" in Freud's work are expressed in different ways compared with children's play, including

fantasy and humor (Henricks, 2015, p.80). Overall, I think that perhaps Freud constructs and promotes the yield of pleasure in play, that values emotional experience.

Freud's perspective on play is portrayed as "how we work through issues that have been bothering us via solitary repetition-compulsions, socially protected performances, and enacted fantasy" (Henricks, 2015, p.82). However, as Henricks suggests, play cannot be merely portrayed by looking at past events, and play is also "a willful move ahead or a clever step sideways" (Henricks, 2015, p.82). Meanwhile, I agree with Henricks's view that it is exclusionary to consider uncertainty, tension and change in play in terms of "unpleasant psychic conditions" from Freud's psycho-physical perspective (Henricks, 2015, p.82). Freud's vision emphasises play's emotional value, which provides me with an in-depth understanding of play and is integrated into my knowledge when investigating this topic.

#### **2.4.5 Playing in an in-between world: Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas of transitional space**

##### **2.4.5.1 Transitional space, transitional object, and transitional phenomena**

Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well.

Winnicott (2005, p.54)

Before revisiting this topic, I want to express that reading his theoretical work makes me feel warm and touched. A deep understanding of life and a strong belief that life

can be creative are diffused in his words, his work. As mentioned in chapter 1, Winnicott (2005) suggests that an individual can experience creative living in a transitional space situated between the inner self (personal psychic world) and the external world (the fundamental reality of a person's experience). Winnicott describes the transitional space as follows:

...the third part of the life of a human being [...] inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.

Winnicott (2005, p.3)

The baby can pass from omnipotent control to control by manipulation that includes coordination pleasure and muscle eroticism (Winnicott, 2005). Most of the infant's experience is constituted by this transitional space throughout life (Winnicott, 2005). Winnicott's evocative suggestions on transitional space interest me in relation to my research.

This transitional space is designated in terms of the transitional objects and the transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 2005). Accordingly, in Winnicott's study of infants, he suggests that transitional objects, as a baby's initial 'not-me' possession, might be the corner of a blanket, a word, a finger in the mouth, or teddy bears for



babies. These objects are not the breast or the mother but stand for the breast or the mother and indirectly stand for the internal breast. Based on this point, transitional objects have symbolic value for infants. It is worth noting that the true quality of the transitional object relies on the fact that it is “more important than the mother” and is “an almost inseparable part of infant” (Winnicott, 2005, p.9). In other words, the transitional object is constructed as a possession, neither an external object nor an internal object (Winnicott, 2005). The transitional object, as Winnicott suggests, “gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity” (2005, p.8). Importantly, the transitional space is regarded as a journey of progress towards experiencing throughout life. His writing takes on an aesthetic sense and beautifully illustrates this tendency:

Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. By this I mean that in health the transitional object does not “go inside” nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between “inner psychic reality” and “the external world as perceived by two persons in common”, that is to say, over the whole cultural field.

Winnicott (2005, p.7)

This evocative piece of writing provides us clues for exploring how a person gradually widens into the experience that may belong to play, art, religion, imaginative living, etc. (Winnicott, 2005). Based on this point of view, I argue that the transitional object may have a crucial value for interpreting parents' experience in the current research. However, considering the nature of the transitional object 'diffused' in his writing of theory and the uncertainty of unconsciousness, I was immediately mired in questioning my capacity to translate parents' unconscious elements into a conscious level. It is not merely fiction for me. Thus, drawing on the psychoanalytical concept of the transitional object, transitional phenomena, and transitional space, parents' 'knowing' and 'becoming conscious' in their narrative are primarily analysed and interpreted.

Transitional phenomena, according to Winnicott (2005), is an intermediate area between the inner world and external life. For example, when the baby goes to sleep, the baby holds and sucks a soft external object, such as the corner of a blanket. The corner of a blanket goes on being very important to the baby for sleeping and becomes a defence against anxiety. The blanket may get dirty and smelly. According to Winnicott (2005), this soft blanket is a transitional object. The baby's experience is viewed as the transitional phenomena. Winnicott (2005) suggests that the original soft object continues to play a transitional role when depressive anxiety threatens. Gradually, an extension of the range of interest is developed and maintained. It is worth noting that the baby's transitional state can be interrupted by washing the

blanket and the meaning and value of the object to the baby may then be destroyed (Winnicott, 2005). As a result, the baby could not enjoy the transitional experience (Winnicott, 2005).

In Winnicott's (2005) theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena, illusion-disillusionment, as a crucial subject, is emphasised. Winnicott values the transitional space, seeing it as necessary "for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle or towards and beyond primary identification" (2005, p.13). However, the premise of "all goes well" is the good-enough "mother", as suggested by Winnicott (2005, p.14). The good-enough "mother" functions as one who makes an active adaption to an infant's needs, a gradually lessening adaption in accordance with an infant's "growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration" (2005, p.14). It seems to me that a first important relational factor in an infant's transitional space is emphasised by Winnicott. According to this point, I feel that the significant figure should have deep gratitude for devotion which can determine success in infant care. Such thinking might give the parents suggestions for attempting to encourage independence in the child while nurturing and supporting the child. Thus, I argue that his focus on the function of the good-enough mother may have practical value for building a good-enough environment of adaption. In the current research, I am concerned whether a good enough parent has a corresponding good enough environment for themselves to adapt to a parent's role and their other situations.

The illusion, in Winnicott's theory of transitional space (2005, p.16), is that "there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create" if the mother's adaption to the infant's needs is good enough. It is the main function of both the transitional object and transitional phenomena. Based on this point, the transitional space, as a neutral area of experience, as Winnicott (2005) suggests, will not be challenged. Disillusionment starts from the task of weaning and continues as a task for both parents and educators (Winnicott, 2005). Importantly, according to Winnicott, illusion belongs inherently to individuals and cannot be solved by them. It seems that the area of illusion belongs to a "problem" in Winnicott's theory (2005, p.17). I agree that through the illusion-disillusionment process (the intermediate area), an individual can find "relief" from the strain of relationships (Winnicott, 2005, p.18).

For an adult, enjoyment can be experienced and a degree of overlap can be observed in the personal intermediate area (Winnicott, 2005). A degree of overlap here, according to Winnicott (2005), is viewed as common experience between members belonging to art, religion, philosophy, imaginative living. As the infant's intermediate area of experience continues and cultural interests develop throughout life, the infant's transitional object is gradually decathected (Winnicott, 2005). Through this process, individuals launch into a journey of progress towards experiencing. Thus, throughout our discussion above, Winnicott's accounts of transitional space create a deep interpretive perspective for narratives emerging from my research.

#### **2.4.5.2 Playing in transitional space, developing self and creative living**

Playing is regarded as a “creative activity and the search for the self” (Winnicott, 2005, p.71). In other words, playing in the intermediate area of experience, according to Winnicott, is synonymous with self-experiencing and creative living (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). By following the idea of transitional space (the transitional object and transitional phenomena), Winnicott focuses on “the happy fate of the concept of transitional phenomena” and suggests that “playing has a place and time” (2005, p.55). He writes:

To control what is outside one has to do things, not simply to think or to wish, and doing things takes time. Playing is doing.

Winnicott (2005, p.55)

For Winnicott, playing emerges in a potential space between the inner world and the external interdependent world, the intermediate area of experience. In this sense, the functions of playing include processing self-experience and communicating (Winnicott, 2005). Notably, the capacity to play belongs to health (Winnicott, 2005). Here, according to Winnicott (2005), the transitional phenomena is developed through playing and then through shared playing, which is gradually extended into wider cultural experience.

Considering Winnicott’s belief of the significance of happy fate in his themes, Winnicott’s concern about ‘depressive position’ which is related to ‘weaning’ will be discussed here before we continue the topic of playing. As mentioned before, the

disillusionment process falls under the term 'weaning' (Winnicott, 2005). It is worth noting that Winnicott criticises Klein's term the 'depressive position' and opts for the term 'depression' in his work (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Winnicott suggests that Klein's term 'depressive position' implies a mood illness which is not part of normal emotional development (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Winnicott views depression as a mood and evaluates it in three main areas in his work. Firstly, depression is regarded as a capacity that leads a person from object-relating to object usage (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). This maturational process implies that the object has survived. Secondly, depression is considered as an affective disorder, resulting from a blockage in emotional development caused by a failure of the early environment (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In this area, depression indicates that "the object hasn't survived" and a person "hasn't reached to object usage" (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018, p.150). Thirdly, defences play roles in avoiding the pain of depression. Therefore, Winnicott's term 'depression' can be understood both healthily and pathologically.

In Winnicott's work, we can observe the happy fate of depression by suggesting that a person getting depressed or feeling sad is a sign of health. That is to say, a person has the capacity to sense "their own awfulness", and this may contribute to them taking responsibility (Winnicott, 2006, p.75). In this sense, Winnicott values depression and relates it to the "concept of ego strength and of self-establishment and of the discovery of a personal identity" (Winnicott, 1963, p.73).

After discussing Winnicott's term 'depression', or 'sadness', we can say that Winnicott's term 'depression' is one aspect of weaning in disillusionment. According to Winnicott, the capacity for depression or sadness, as a healthy and valuable depression, can lead an individual to work through the sense of loss (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Working through the sense of loss is the most important part of successfully working through the disillusionment process. The term 'depression', designated by Winnicott, tends to be more emotionally healthy or normal. In other words, Winnicott's theory of emotional development is centred on "the developing self" (Davis & Wallbridge, 2018, p.27).

Self can be understood as a personal identity, a notion embedded in Winnicott's work (Davis & Wallbridge, 2018). However, the term 'self' is not easily defined here. In his 1960 paper, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship", Winnicott describes a central self:

The central self could be said to be the inherited potential which is experiencing a continuity of being, and acquiring in its own way and at its own speed a personal psychic reality and a personal body scheme.

Winnicott (1960, p.591)

His perspective on the self encourages us to consider the experiencing self in terms of "growth" and "development" (Winnicott, 1960, p.589). Specifically, Winnicott suggests that "it is the self and the life of the self that alone makes sense of action or

of living from the point of view of the individual who has grown so far and who is continuing to grow from dependence and immaturity towards independence” (as cited in Davis & Wallbridge, 2018, p.30). Meanwhile, Winnicott suggests that the self, which is constituted of different parts, is not the ego but a person who grows under the operation of the maturational process in his work (as cited in Davis & Wallbridge, 2018). In this sense, I feel that the sense of self may be subjective, continuous, developmental, and gradually mature.

Notably, Winnicott proposes two concepts of the self, the false self and true self in his work. The false self, according to Winnicott (1960), has defensive functions, hiding and protecting the true self which has the potential to creatively use objects. The sense of false self tends to feel futile and unreal (Winnicott, 1960). To balance the false self, the true self is suggested as “the theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea” (Winnicott, 1960, p.148). He further suggests that “the spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real” (Winnicott, 1960, p.148). In this way, the sense of true self tends to be spontaneous, creative and feel real. Thus, I argue that central to the concept of true self might be the notion of flow. Winnicott seems to propose the true self works at this level by quoting William Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

...In this way we can take the advice:

This above all: to thine own self be true,



And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man [sic].

Winnicott (1964, p. 66)

Winnicott (1964) further suggests that searching for the true self is an evolution instead of a solution. Winnicott's ideas here are consistent with his hard-line focus on the developing self, as mentioned in the thesis. As Winnicott suggests, "it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers" (2005, p.116).

Now, let us look back at an individual's capacity to play in Winnicott's work. An individual's play, according to Winnicott (2005), emerges between inner psychic world and the external environment. Winnicott (1969) suggests that the capacity to play is associated with using an object, which is developed from his theory of the transitional object and the transitional phenomena. Based on his study, it is possible for individuals to gradually develop the capacity to play and to "find" and "use" external objects with their own "independence and autonomy" (Winnicott, 1969, p.711). In this sense, this can be viewed as a developing process from object-relating to object-usage, where "playing" is possible (Winnicott, 1969, p.711). As Winnicott (1969) suggests, his idea of using an object emerges from his psychoanalytical experience. This perspective might emerge in the narratives of parents and encourage parents or adults to discover the self, along with "the attendant risk of self-loss" (Mannoni, 1999, p.5).

Specifically, Winnicott regards object-relating as an experience in which the subject, as an isolate, “allows certain alternations in the self to take place” (Winnicott, 1969, p.712). Accordingly, the term ‘cathexis’ was invented in this area. In object-relating, the subject, to some extent, is depleted but is enriched by feelings that something of the subject is found in the object via operational projections and identifications (Winnicott, 1969). In this way, the object becomes meaningful for the subject. Winnicott’s concern here reminds me of the term “bounded being” in Gergen’s work (Gergen, 2009, p.3). In Gergen’s work (2009), he mentions that if we understand the fundamental condition of human nature as isolation, living alone may become natural, as might the loneliness associated with blood pressure, depression and suicide. I argue that living alone here might be oriented towards the subject as an isolate, as stated in Winnicott’s work (1969). Meanwhile, living alone here might likely be a state of withdrawal based on Winnicott’s theory (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). According to Winnicott, a state of withdrawal is reached by preserving the core self from violation (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Specifically, in the state of withdrawal, the defences are used against being found, and one’s loneliness is emphasised (Winnicott, 1968). However, it’s worth noting that the capacity to be alone is different from the state of withdrawal in his theory (Winnicott, 1958). Therefore, in object-relating, the subject is isolated in their own experience.

Concerning object-usage, according to Winnicott, “the object, if it is to be used, must necessary be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of

projection” (1969, p.712). In other words, an individual might exist in between a world of ‘manipulating’ (object-relating) and a world of ‘manifesting’(object-usage). The clinical terms used in Winnicott’s theory can help us understand object-relating and object-usage better:

...two babies are feeding at breast; one is feeding on the self in the form of projections, and the other is feeding on (using) milk from a woman’s breast. Mothers, like analysts, can be good or not good enough; some can and some cannot carry the baby over from relating to usage.

Winnicott (1969, p.712)

However, changes from relating to usage cannot happen automatically (Winnicott, 1969). He emphasises the importance of m/other figures. One thing is worth noting here. For paradox and the acceptance of the paradox in the transitional space, Winnicott says: “the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object” (Winnicott, 2005, p.119). It seems that the mother figure’s realness and capacity for love are being tested, which means whether the object can tolerate being created and wait to be encountered, as real.

Accordingly, Winnicott (1969) suggests that the capacity to use objects develops depending on the facilitating environment: the object is placed outside the area of the subject’s omnipotence as an external phenomenon instead of a projective entity. The capacity may develop by the subject destroying the object in between relating and

usage (Winnicott, 1969). Winnicott employs a metaphor to describe the changes from relating to usage. He mentions that an armchair philosopher should leave his chair and sit in a chair with the patient, but this philosopher will observe there is an in-between space (Winnicott, 1969). In this intermediate space, the philosopher's subject may go through four stages. Firstly, the subject relates to the object (subject as an isolate). Secondly, the subject destroys the object. Thirdly, the object may or may not survive the subject's destruction. In this sense, it seems that the object's own autonomy may be gradually developed and the object's value may be recognised by the subject. Fourthly, the subject can use an object. In a world of objects, the subject will continually destruct or destroy objects through unconscious fantasy (Winnicott, 1969). In return, the subject's gain is immeasurable (Winnicott, 1969). Protective mechanisms, according to Winnicott (1969), can help the subject to notice what is there instead of explaining why the object is there. Up to now, I see the happy fate of protective mechanisms here in the theory of object-relating. I argue that the capacity to use objects is suggestive of an orientation towards shared reality and co-creation in relationships suggested by Gergen (2009).

In accordance with Winnicott's ideas of transitional space, I discussed above some significant concepts related to the research and how the capacity of play develops. Now let's specifically focus on what play really is in Winnicott's play theory which may be suggestive of analysing whether elements of play emerge in parents' accounts. According to Winnicott (2005), play starts from the mother/mother figure feeling

confident in between being the object that the baby has the ability to observe and being herself waiting to be observed, or begins with the subject repudiating the object, re-accepting the object and perceiving the object as an external phenomenon. The playground in the relationship as a potential space emerges, and it also implies trust (Winnicott, 2005). In playing, as Winnicott suggests, “the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling” (2005, p.69). It’s worth noting that excitement is immensely felt by a child in playing (Winnicott, 2005):

It is exciting not primarily because the instincts are involved, be it understood! The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable.

Winnicott (2005, p.64)

In this way, it seems that the destructiveness in changes from relating to use may be not scary for the subject but is oriented towards potentials. There seems to be an overlap between a child’s play and an adult’s play. However, mindful of the intermediate space between the infant and the mother, this kind of in-between space may potentially emerge through an individual’s confidence in others’ or things’ reliability (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). According to Winnicott, there is no separation but only a threat of separation (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Overcoming this threat of

separation (separating the Not-me in Me) can lead an individual from dependence towards autonomy; from isolated being towards relational being (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018).

Now, let's turn to the functions of play in Winnicott's work. As mentioned before, playing in the intermediate area of experience, according to Winnicott, is synonymous with self-experiencing and creative living (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In this sense, I argue that there might be two significant functions of play in Winnicott's work: search for the self and creative experiences. It seems that Winnicott might elaborate more on self-experience and creativity than on play itself in his work. In this sense, I suggest that play will also be observed in parents' accounts as something is both changing and developing.

In Winnicott's theory (2005), a sense of self is formed in experiences of relaxation in states of trust and physical, mental and creative activities manifested in playing. As mentioned before, the sense of true self tends to be spontaneous, creative and about feeling real in Winnicott's work. I suggest that a sense of self here could be a sense of authentic self which Winnicott discovers in his work. That is to say, in these non-purpose or formlessness experiences, a sense of self naturally emerges. According to Winnicott (2005), everything is creative from this state. Furthermore, he suggests that the existence of 'me' comes out of questioning because it is the moment of being aware of a sense of self from desultory formlessness (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). This desultory formless experience belongs to the neutral zone (the third area).

In his writing and theories, I observe that Winnicott may emphasise the importance of building up a supportive environment for an individual's exploration. These ideas are very suggestive of providing such a space for parents to associate their experiences freely.

As for the theme of creativity, primary psychic creativity, an innate drive towards health, is emphasised in Winnicott's theory of creativity (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). As an example, an infant creates the breast over and over again, which is illustrated in his theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. It seems that Winnicott values an infant's experience of omnipotence as an infant's ability for creative activity. In this sense, the notion of creativity is rooted at the very beginning of life in Winnicott's theory (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018).

Cultural experience, as a crucial aspect in Winnicott's theory of creativity and a continuation of play, is located in an individual's subjective experiences of 'remembering', his or her mother's good object-presenting and protection at the very beginning of life (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Specifically, the experience is internalised, then exists as an internal resource, and thus leads to creative living. In this sense, creativity for Winnicott is universal and is regarded as the approach to being alive or to external phenomena (Winnicott, 2005). It seems that Winnicott focuses on developing the capacity for creative living and seeking the possibilities of hidden creativity:

The creativity impulse is therefore something that can be looked at as a thing in itself [...] an artist is to produce a work of art, but also as something that is present when anyone-baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman-looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately...

Winnicott (2005, p.92)

Thus, Winnicott highlights living creatively within the context above, creativity in relation to the infant's ability to create the world. It's worth noting that creativity in Winnicott's theory is referred to as creative living in which no special talent is needed (Winnicott, 1970). In this way, creative living is different from and more general than artistic creation in his theory. When it comes to art and a search for the self, Winnicott (2005) suggests that the self may not really be found in the artist's finished creation, something which is produced and is valuable in terms of skill, impact and beauty. However, he posits that the urge to create for an artist is associated with the location of cultural experience and an infant's seeking to merge with the mother (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). From here, a sense of self may begin to grow. It seems that the finished creation might be just an expression of an artist's relation to the experience, but an underlying lack of sense of self may not be healed by the creation (Winnicott, 2005). To discover and understand both creativity (artistic creativity and creative living), these two interpretive stances are invited into my analysis and the researcher's self-reflection. Admittedly, I intend to approach parents' narratives more from



Winnicott's interpretive stance. There is a general emphasis in Winnicott's theory of creativity on the value of living (Winnicott, 2005). According to Winnicott, it differs and is rooted in quantity and quality of environmental provision at the beginning of life. In this sense, creativity may come into being or not, which depends on an individual's dynamic development and defence organisation (Winnicott, 2005). Therefore, the environmental provision is taken into consideration as an essential aspect of parents' creative living.

#### **2.4.5.3 Male and female elements in an individual**

In Winnicott's theory of creativity (2005), the sense of self contains a mixture of male and female elements and depends on an appropriate integration of both male and female elements. I think Winnicott's comments on male and female elements are similar to an emphasis on the harmony of yin and yang in Chinese philosophy. From Neo-Confucianism, yin, representing femininity, is related to weakness, hiddenness, and softness (Cheng, 2006). Yang, representing masculinity, is related to strength, brilliance, nobility and goodness (Cheng, 2006).

According to Winnicott (2005), female elements are rooted at the very beginning of life. At the very beginning of life, the infant and the object (m/other) are merged with one another and they are one instead of feeling one (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In this way, the pure female elements, according to Winnicott (2005, p.108), are related with the breast (or the m/other), at the basis of the infant "being" the breast. In

Winnicott's theory, the female elements are placed at a central position on 'the environmental-individual set-up', as well as culture and creativity.

The pure male elements, according to Winnicott (2005), relate to struggles of the infant to separate Me and Not-me. In particular, identification of the object depends on complex mental mechanisms which need time "to appear, to develop, and to become established as part of the new baby's equipment" (Winnicott, 2005, p.110).

Male elements are based on the capacity to do. In other words, the male element relates to 'do'. However, the female element relates to 'be' (Winnicott, 2005).

Based on these points, I feel that the dance between the male elements and female elements in an individual can be viewed as a micro-world of continuous movement with rich potentials (Gergen, 2009). Drawing upon ideas from a relational perspective, the flow of actions may begin within our own body and then continuously become spread out worldwide. We dance between being and doing in an endless movement, continuously forming, but we never ask "if it were possible to separate the dancer from the dance" (Gergen, p.61). As I mentioned before, play is philosophically defined as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. Utilising both psychoanalytic and relational ideas in the current research helps me to coherently explore the philosophical definition of 'play' given in the introduction.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will invite readers to join me on my methodological journey. As I discussed in the previous chapters, this research journey starts from my own self-discovery and my relationships with my father. An encounter with a five-year-old girl strengthens my desire to carry out my research. My initial curiosity about ‘relationship’, ‘self’, and adults’ ‘play’ has grown along with my theoretical explorations. Just as what may happen in the realm of uncertainty in play, the researcher, I think, is tested in terms of resources, tenacity, courage, and fairness (Huizinga, 1998).

To stay anchored in the realm of uncertainty in play, philosophically, I choose to locate my research and practice from within to without, which I will discuss in the first section. My ‘within’ journey, referring to my self-manifestation, has led to my authentic choices of tools, others’ voices and my words in this research. In this sense, the Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming era, Wang Yangming, who was mentioned in Chapter 1, has provided one of the most fundamental philosophies for my research’s ‘knowing’ process. Locating my research and practice in the ‘external’, referring to applying social constructionism into my practice, has led me to negotiate with, address and construct parents’ voices as unique to their own experiences.

In the second section, I will discuss ‘narrative knowing’ and explain my reasons for utilising a narrative approach. In the following sections, I will discuss how I deal with my own location in the current research by focusing on two methodological issues: positionality and reflexivity. In addition, a description of methods will be outlined. I utilised semi-structured interview schema for structuring and guiding, but intervened as little as possible. I used free-association interview techniques to respect their own meaning-frames. I will then introduce the participants in the research before going to outline ethical considerations, the practicalities of analysing data, and a summary of research outcomes and their locations in this thesis.

### **3.2 Philosophical research experience: ontological and epistemological stances**

#### **3.2.1 Locating my research and practice from within to without**

First, the use of multiple voices makes it more difficult to identify who I am, as the author. Without a single, coherent voice it is more difficult to define the boundaries of my being.

Gergen (2009, p.xxv)

According to Creswell (2013), the methodological assumptions and frameworks we apply in research are closely linked with where we stand philosophically. Before understanding the ontological and epistemological base of my research, the term ‘knowing’ should first be explored. In the previous chapter, I discussed how my curiosity about parents’ constructions of self in parenthood and the possibilities of

re-observing their playfulness of their childhood has developed in my psychological research practices. My 'within' journey, referring to self-manifestation, has led to my authentic choices of tools, others' voices, and my words in this research. However, my expanding self-knowledge and the complexity and fluidity of self-awareness have made me realise that as a researcher, I can never know my participants holistically. Instead, exploring in-depth personal experience in research can provoke questions regarding the possibilities of growth for researchers, participants, and even related theories. Frosh (2007) makes an important point about polyvocality and multiplicity of context, in which the subject remains elusive and can't be fully understood or fixed. Hence, knowing self and others is a crucial and complex process for us as human beings in relationships.

The Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming era, Wang Yangming (1472-1529), who was mentioned in Chapter 1, provides one of the most fundamental philosophies for my research's 'knowing' process. His philosophical wisdom has provided guidance in dealing with my anxieties concerning how I respect participants' voices, understand 'self', and adjust my research practices with reflexivity. As a Chinese researcher in the UK, I endeavour to learn and draw upon Western philosophy in my research practice. As a traveller, my keen sense of awe and interest in Western philosophy will never abate. But as one wandering far from home, I always feel a sense of deeply rooted belonging in Chinese wisdom.

The forms of Chinese authors' thoughts may not be well adapted to a Western reader. Wang Yangming's thoughts were embodied in letters with others rather than in a systematically developed form. This very form is a respect for his personal resource of thoughts. To put it another way, we cannot see that in his work, Wang Yangming's ideas consciously chosen by himself are presented in a logically planned and systematic narrative of an essay. Unlike the act of construction, Wang Yangming's thinking is directed more by the spirit of discovery than by the desire to build a system upon the primary sources extant on the subject (Tu, 1976). This can be viewed as a characteristic of Chinese culture (Wang, 1916). In fact, it is our choice to uncover the hidden meaning in his words.

Wang Yangming's study was once characterised by himself as "learning of the body and mind" (Tu, 1976, p.188). His doctrine claims a unitary relationship between *zhi* 知 and *xing* 行 (*zhi xing he yi*), which suggests the unity of knowing and acting, and:

[t]he principles of things [that] are not to be found external to the mind.

To seek the principles outside the mind results in there being no principle of things. If I neglect the principle of things, but seek to attain the original nature of my mind, what things are there then in my mind? The mind in its original character is nature (disposition), and nature is principle. Since the mind has the experience of being filial, there is a principle of filial piety. Since the mind lacks filial piety, there is no principle of filial piety.

(Wang, 1916, p.298; for original Mandarin see Box 3.1)

**Box 3.1**

爱（徐爱）问：“至善只求诸心。心恐于天下事理，有不能尽。”

先生曰：“心及理也。天下又有心外之事，心外理乎？”

爱曰：“如事父之孝，事君之忠，交友之信，治民之仁，其间有许多理在，恐亦不可不察。”

先生叹曰：“此说之蔽久矣，岂一语所能悟？……都只在此心，心即理也。此心无私欲之蔽，即是天理，不须外面添一分。以此纯乎天理之心，发之事父便是孝……。

--- 《传习录·上·徐爱录》

According to Wang Yangming (1916), knowing and acting are already separated by selfish desires if a person has knowledge without practicing it in action. For example, a person claims he or she fully knows how to exhibit filial piety, but he or she still fails to do so accordingly.

Epistemologically, in Wang Yangming's doctrine, "to know is not a purely cognitive function without involving the whole existence of the knower and to act cannot be isolated performance devoid of the broad context of the self" (Tu, 1976, p.194). The unity of knowing and acting cannot be simply understood as applying theory in practice. Instead, it is the process of self-realisation and then the full actualisation of what should be done into concrete actions and behaviours.

It is at this point that Wang Yangming's doctrine guides me in a way of accessing reflexivity and reflecting on my actions in research. In knowing myself, research occurs naturally. I am still practicing at 'being me' and doing my research harmoniously. If the term "reflexivity" evokes thoughts and emotions in me, the term

*zhi xing he yi* (the unity of knowing and acting) is a spiritual awareness which leads the way to wholeness and peace (Tu, 1976, p.176).

### **3.2.2 Turning to Western ontology and epistemology: applying social constructionism to my practice**

As I mentioned before, my curiosity about parents' constructions of self in parenthood and the possibilities of re-observing the playfulness of their childhood has developed through my psychological research practices. How best to respect and work with my participants' voices is an on-going consideration within my research. In qualitative research, researchers focus on different ways to inspire confidence in the value of their outcomes (Rogers & Willig, 2017) rather than following positivist traditions, in which claims and methods are made about how to obtain legitimate knowledge about the world (Rogers & Willig, 2017). I agree that diverse methods should be inspired and suggested in qualitative research, instead of following one single authority. Especially in family settings, qualitative methodologies are often applied to gain access to 'real life' and a more contextualised understanding of bounded phenomena (Asay & Hennon, 1999). The possibilities for richness of data and thickness of description can be accomplished by a qualitative researcher in order to potentially reveal the complexities of a family unit.

In educational psychology, diverse epistemological and methodological approaches have continually been developed in qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest, qualitative research is mainly related to the interpretivist/constructionist



paradigm and critical theory, as opposed to positivism. It is worth noting that narratology, phenomenology and ethnography are increasingly popular in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, methods in this area of inquiry have developed within psychology, shifting from a positivist towards a constructionist orientation.

In my research, I contend that both social and personal experiences are of value for a researcher's methodological and theoretical choices and practices. My research choices and practices are deeply embedded both in Western systems of knowledge and Chinese culture and social relations. In the social constructionist paradigm, the importance of people's words in constructing their realities is highlighted. In this research on parents' voices in constructing self and playfulness, three main aspects must be considered. Firstly, my own positionality as a researcher having grown up in China and now studying in the UK, I must consider how my 'self' is constructed culturally, socially and personally. Secondly, how my own positionality and knowledge interacts with my understanding of parents' voices. Thirdly, the Chinese cultural context must be considered when understanding parents' voices. As Stake (1995) claims, a qualitative study is field oriented. Four essential ingredients of fieldwork are emphasised to be woven into meaningful data, including establishing research-entry, developing trusting relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) and working effectively in language (Asay & Hennon, 1999). In addition, a reflective orientation should also be underpinned in research practices (Tselious & Borcsa, 2018) which is an important resource in my research practices. To summarise, attention

must be paid to cultural sensitivity, values and differences for meaningful conversations and interpretations to take place.

In line with the reflexive and critical context of social constructionism, Gergen's (1999) work, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, served as a theoretical guide to my research, which is aimed at exploring parents' experiences within family settings. There is no appropriate description of social constructionism which could encompass the views of all social constructionists. Like other theories, social constructionism sometimes includes conflicting and disparate opinions. Instead of defining what social constructionism is, I draw on considerations highlighted by different social constructionists. Critiques from different theoretical frameworks and discussions from different social constructionists provide ways of understanding social constructionism more creatively. For example, in Gergen's (1985) view, social constructionism may be referred to as a standpoint from which human life exists under the influence of interpersonal and social experience. Individuals are thus regarded as integral to history, politics and culture at a certain place and time. In addition, Burr (2003) suggests that social constructionism takes a critical view on easily-overlooked ways of understanding the world and ourselves and challenges the standpoint that knowledge is developed through objectively observing the world. Thus, as a theoretical movement, it offers an alternative theoretical perspective regarding the socially constructed nature. Focusing on the socially constructed nature, theoretical assumptions of social constructionism have been applied to diverse empirical and

clinical practices in organisations, healthcare, education, conflict resolution, and community work (Garbin, 2014). Gergen and Gergen (2012) state that social constructionism cannot be represented as a clear set of principles, but that practices are enriched, and innovative practices emerge with the underpinning support of social constructionism.

I now explore this theoretical inquiry further with a discussion of arguments from different theoretical perspectives. Language is not only a way in which individuals are connected to each other, but also a possible world in which individuals 'exist'. Indeed, Burr (2015) suggests that language makes knowledge possible by constructing all other concepts. Similarly, Wittgenstein (2010) regards the potential of language as a natural bridge between the world and thoughts concerning its logical structure. Furthermore, language is generated, sustained, and abandoned within social interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Thus, meanings and knowledge in this world are socially created. According to Vygotsky, we become who we are by being who we are not (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). However, as Bradley (1998) argues, although the language is positioned as a central element of social constructionist inquiry, some social constructionists regard language as the only reality. Indeed, language serves as a fundamental aspect of the process of producing knowledge and should be enhanced as a way in which social interactions and transformation are sustained, rather than an adequate representation of reality.

Concerning these aspects, I choose to conduct my research in a social constructionist paradigm, utilising narrative methods and reflecting Wang Yangming's doctrine. In the following sections, I will address my considerations based on principles consistent with social constructionism and narrative inquiry. My research questions are formed in line with my philosophical considerations and methodological choices. The purpose of this research is to negotiate with, address and construct parents' voices as unique to their own experiences. More importantly, I hope that my co-construction of critical issues with parents in this project will contribute to psychological research in family settings.

### **3.3 Narrative inquiry: knowing narratively**

Stories animate life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided.

Frank (2010, p.3)

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a plethora of paradigms, methodologies and strategies are available for qualitative researchers to choose from. In previous sections, I discussed my epistemological and ontological positions which shape the approach and methods in this research. As Willig (2013) defined in her work, epistemology is "a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge" (p.39). Ontology is referred to as a "philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality"

(Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p.4). That is to say, the researcher focuses on the nature of the world in choosing an ontological position. The researcher focuses on how we understand the world in choosing an epistemological position. Phillion (2002) notes that “narrative inquiries almost always are about people’s lives, their interests, concerns, and passions” (p.17). In this sense, narrative always firstly serves as a kind of language in which the narrator’s meaning and positioning are produced and reflected. I share the epistemological and ontological perspectives of ‘narrative knowing’ (Polkinghorne, 1988) from Riessman (1993, as cited in Brown, 2017) who writes:

Skeptical about a correspondence theory of truth, language is understood as deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning. Informants’ stories do not mirror a world ‘out there’. They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive. (p.3)

According to the philosophical positioning of narrative, researchers within the area of narrative inquiry agree that we construct ourselves and live within narratives. I agree with this claim; narrative needs to be viewed as the ‘portal’ to an individual’s thinking and experience (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). Sarbin (1986) notes that the term ‘story’ can be seen as a synonym for ‘narrative’. Similarly, as Schafer (1980) observes, we are always telling stories about ourselves and others. These can be described as narrative actions. In line with Frank (2010, p.44): “the capacity of stories

is to allow us humans to be". Most importantly, a sense of identity is created by an individual's engagement with both the story itself and the way of telling the story (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). I contend that narrative is a major contributor in exploring what people bring to any situation. Moreover, narratives can uncover a participant's subjective truth in order that it is explored and re-experienced in the research relationship.

Focusing on narrative research practices in psychology, diverse fields, including human condition, social positioning, personality studies, autobiographical memory, organisational and health psychology, illness narratives in medical psychology, and psychotherapy and counselling, have been influenced by narrative inquiry (Hiles & Cermák, 2008). Considering the unique value placed by narrative inquiry on co-constructing stories between the speaker and listener, and on broader socially constructed stories which are interpersonal, social and cultural, this inquiry is located within both socially-oriented and individually-oriented research (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014). Unlike individually-oriented research, which draws on narratives as expressions of a person's internal state, socially-oriented narrative research is focused on the states socially constructed by narratives; they are viewed as social phenomena (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014). However, considering that stories are made not only for people but also by people, Hiles, Cermák and Chrz (2017) suggest that psycho-narratology should be developed in psychology for exploring the notion of a human narrative mind. In particular, a focus on explaining people's experience and

action by emphasising stimulus conditions needs to be expanded by taking what people bring to any situation into consideration (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). This is also reflected in Harré and Moghaddam's work (2012), which claims that psychology can be a space for both event-causality and agent-causality into a coherent hybrid. Event-causality is stimulus driven and agent-causality is mind driven (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). The notion of agent-causality can be understood as "beings with powers to act, which are shaped and constrained by all sorts of environmental conditions" (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012, p.6). In line with my personal position, which I will discuss further in the next section, I hold the view that the narrative methods utilised in my research focus most sharply on how to shift our attention to what an individual can bring to a situation.

For my theoretical orientation, narrative inquiry is more than a label positioned in a research tradition. It is a way of being for me in both my personal life and research. Narrative fits into my research as a method of meaning-making for individuals and the researcher. Instead of testing hypotheses and generating results, narrative enquiry involves understanding the subjective reality of an individual's experiences. This is positioned in an interpretive approach, which is consistent with my research purpose as discussed in previous chapters. Hiles, Cermák and Chrz (2017) express a similar position when they claim that *how* an individual is telling their story should be emphasised, rather than measuring an outcome. Meanwhile, as Creswell (2007, p.55) suggests, "narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life

experience of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals”. Private constructions of the individual’s relationships with others, as well as the contribution of the researcher’s interpretations, will both be explored in the narrative inquiry in my doctoral research.

Personal narratives can be studied from different theoretical perspectives. According to Patterson (2008), narrative is defined in terms of representing events. The focus on events is primarily the recapitulating of events, instead of “reconstructing the told in the telling” (Mishler, 1995). The Labovian model is regarded as an exemplar of approaches in narrative inquiry, which is event-centred (Patterson, 2008). In Labov’s six-part model, six elements, including abstract, orientation, complicating action, result, evaluation and coda, can be utilised for analysing narratives of personal experience and provide an exceptional starting point for analysing transcripts (Patterson, 2008). However, the limitations of the Labovian approach, arising from its event-centred definition, cannot be underestimated. An objective reality is constructed as ‘what actually happened’ by utilising the Labovian method and model. Patterson (2008, p.17) argues that it would be pointless to deal with the subtlety and complexity of the narration of experience as if “it should have an orderly, complete structure by reducing it to the one type of text that conforms to the paradigmatic model”. Given my philosophical and theoretical choices, an event-centric narrative and Labovian model were not applied in my own research.



Squire (2008) emphasises that narrative research can be studied as stories of experiences instead of events. Unlike event-centred research, personal narratives are viewed as meaningful and sequential, defined by themes instead of structure in an experience-centred approach (Squire, 2008). Ricoeur (1984, as cited in Squire, 2008, p.43) claims “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode”. From psychoanalytic perspectives, emotions, instead of the temporal sequencing of narratives, are represented as a route into unconscious logic (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Moreover, both speakers and hearers of stories might take roles in projects, involving research participants and researchers (Squire, 2008). Similarly, narratives are viewed as jointly told between hearer and speaker by Ricoeur. Taking the experience-centred approach into consideration, I hold the view that I can identify significant narratives by utilising this approach.

How I understand parents’ constructions of self in parenthood and the possibilities of rediscovering the playfulness of their childhoods has developed in my psychological research practices. I work towards an in-depth understanding of narrative in parent-child interactions and how their narrative practices serve as possibilities or threats for adults’ creativity and playfulness. I place great importance on how parents portray themselves in naturally occurring family settings, how these experiences serve as an instrumental function or a free space for individuals’ creativity and playfulness, and how adults’ emotions flow by discovering narratives in parent-child interactions.

Such questions lead firmly to situating the approach in line with an experience-centred approach to narrative inquiry.

### **3.4 Dealing with the researcher's words in narrative inquiry**

I smell a rose and immediately confused recollections of childhood come back to my memory. In truth, these recollections have not been called up by the perfume of the rose: I breathe them in with the very scent; it means all that to me. To others it will smell differently. It is always the same scent, you will say, but associated with different ideas.

Bergson (1910, p.161)

#### **3.4.1 Positionality**

To define positionality in qualitative research is to value how the researcher's characteristics may impact the research process. According to Berger (2015), a researcher's positionality may influence the research in three different ways, which include influencing access to the 'field'; formulating the nature of the researcher-researched relationship and influencing a researcher's approach of constructing the world. More importantly, utilising ways to address a researcher's positionality may "invite the reader into a mimetic state of becoming the story-teller. One begins to 'feel with' the author, blurring the distinction between author and reader" (Gergen, 2009). For a researcher, addressing positionality will let their own stories breathe and assess how they influence the research process. For readers, it

provides a “portal” for them to see who a researcher is, as their reference point for understanding and evaluating the research, which is also reflected in Horsburgh (2003, p.309):

Given that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research enterprise, it is necessary for the reader to evaluate the extent to which an author identifies and explicates their involvement and its potential or actual effect upon the outcomes.

My positionality in this research will be explored below to illuminate how this influences my research. Moreover, this illustrates my approach to understanding myself and constructing myself in line with the structures of social constructionism, narrative inquiry and Wang Yangming’s doctrine. The specific and unique self-positioned and research-related narratives will be addressed as reflections in the research, which will be discussed in next section.

### ***Daughter***

*Detailed episodes of conversation between my father and I were included in the previous chapter. This research was initially motivated by my own experiences with my parents, especially with my father. As I review my journey, it is refreshing to note that the relationship and interactions between my father and I have assisted me to achieve a way of being with others which contains both opportunities and challenges. I have appreciated these interactions as a journey through the pure joy of play and*

*with the feeling of being united despite all our differences. Our interactions have deepened my curiosity about parents' 'selves' and how they are aware of themselves before considering their role as parents. It is in our interactions that self-exploration becomes possible. I love to discuss philology with my father. Based on our conversations and my observations, both of us observe conflicts and unsolved traumas within us, and both of us are developing ongoing strategies and techniques for healing ourselves. My father used to ask me, "if I quit my job, what can I do and who am I?". I observed that my nearly 55-year-old father still had such questions about himself. I am very curious about parents' self-exploration in relation to their children, and their possibilities and challenges in re-observing their own happiness in life.*

### ***Teacher***

*My experience of teaching young children in a Confucius institution led me to explore interactions within the social constructionist framework. For example, I felt excited as a Mandarin teacher replaced traditional paper-based exams with different means of expression, such as painting, play, technological presentations, diaries and singing. Considering how these expressions work for students' creativity and improvement also provides a narrative insight into my teaching practices. It was one of the most joyful experiences when interacting with children. Their stories, paintings, and interesting questions allowed me to admire their creativity and playful states. It was*

*refreshing to interact with them. They inspired me to use more creative ways to explore my 'self', which has become an interest of mine.*

### ***Friend***

*As I mentioned in the first section, I have a very young Chinese friend. She was five years old when we met. I remembered I felt stressed and upset one day. This little girl was playing with her toys and turned around to look in my eyes and without saying anything, she held my hands, then turned back and kept playing. I was so touched in that moment; I felt the energy flow between us. It was magical. I realised there was something special in my heart, which was love; the most supportive feeling I can experience. That was a unique experience in which. I, as a visitor in that young girl's life, was so touched by the healing she gave me in that moment. I am curious about what happens between parents and their children in daily life and how these adults narrate memorable moments with their children. How are adults' 'selves' re-sculpted in interacting with children? Are there any possibilities to develop adults' self-constructions and their own playfulness?*

### ***Researcher***

*I am a researcher who is more focused on exploring and reflecting on my own life experiences. Before utilising tools properly in research practice, I prefer to understand much more about my 'self' as one of the most important things for a researcher and for a human being. This is an ongoing process of self-observation and*

*self-realisation. As a psychological researcher, I believe my self-concept will strongly determine my ontological and epistemological choices, theoretical choices and methodological choices in service of my research subjects. Understanding my 'self' is as important as understanding the people in my research, which will influence how I express and analyse data as an important foundation for addressing my research values. In short, I want to ensure that I have the confidence on which to build my research when entering others' worlds through literature and research fieldwork. I am not afraid of the complexity of the self. I am afraid of doing things with a feeling of uncertainty, especially when I make my academic choices in research. I ask myself, "do I really understand the literature I choose?", "how do I understand those choices without immersing my whole self into them?" and "how do I understand myself more to orientate myself properly to my research practices?". Culturally, I am a Chinese researcher studying in the UK. I am therefore experiencing the construction of myself through the lenses of two different cultures. I cannot say that my own conscious self and approach to self are fully developed only within me; they are also embedded in my choices where I co-construct with others. It's a process of flowing and developing for the purpose of expanding myself and providing references for others to approach to themselves. My own experience gives me unique opportunities to look at 'self' and research how to tune into self. However, there are also obstacles in observing my own cultural and personal bias when interacting with and analysing my participants' narratives.*

## ***Human***

People said: 'Oh, be yourself at all costs'. But I had found that it was not so easy to know just what one's self was. It was far easier to want what other people seemed to want and then imagine that the choice was one's own.

Milner (2011, p. 69)

*I took a lot of time to consciously observe my thoughts, emotions and choices without others' input. I have gradually enjoyed being with myself and observing the things that happen in my mind of which I can consciously be aware. I gradually practice expanding my conscious awareness. Every day is so busy. In the flow of thoughts, I capture key ideas which inspire me as observations and show me how important it is to understand the self. Even though I take considerable time in observing myself and understanding myself, sometimes I still struggle with negotiating others' ideas. But there is a principle I keep in mind, which is that I am trying to be aware of my initial ideas, which in turn come from exploring my complex self. Then, I explore tools to visualise and achieve those ideas, being aware of setting my boundaries with others. And meanwhile I practice questioning others' stances before utilising them myself. I'm still practicing it. What I try to do is expand my understanding of myself for the purpose of working better with my research participants and developing a more nuanced sense of my own positionality in this research. How can I research how others understand themselves before researching and understanding myself? What is*

*my basis for doing research to learn about others before learning about myself? How can I respect my participants' voices without exploring and being aware of my bias? I always bear these questions in mind. Meanwhile, I am sometimes still puzzled and sceptical about narrative inquiry and doubt my position. As Strawson (2017) notes in The Subject of Experience, "self-knowledge comes best in bits and pieces" (p.133). Are we sometimes uncomfortable about understanding the world in stories? Are we living in the structure of stories? There should be more consideration of how to understand and define 'story' and 'narrative'. Most of the time, however, I still see life as a narrative.*

### **3.4.2 Reflexivity**

To draw upon one's own subjectivity in the research process does not mean that one is not being "objective", but that one actually comes closer to a truer account.

Frosh & Young (2017, p.127)

Before starting this section, I will address two questions which I kept asking myself about my participants throughout the whole research process:

Who are they outside of their role as parents?

Who am I outside of my role as researcher?



In settling into roles in life, do we lose connection with ourselves? How do we balance our human selves and the roles we play in life? As a researcher in the familial environment, it would be too arrogant and presumptuous to work with participants and only listen to their narratives through the lens of my own strong personal perspectives. My 'self' exploration in this aspect functions to modulate the space between researcher and participants in research practices. Firstly, I make sure that I show participants respect and patience as they express their own stories, being aware of my corresponding thoughts and emotions. Secondly, I make sure that I respect and protect myself as a researcher both physically and mentally. I question to what extent I can achieve these two aspects professionally. There is an urgent need to turn into being human in my 'dance' with participants ('dance' here refers to spontaneous encounters between the participants and myself). At this level, both participants and researcher have opportunities to explore undiscovered, unaware and emerging consciousness in their self-constructions. I hope that my professional concerns may be answered and be constructed alongside my exploration of self at a human level. Billington (2006) addresses his concern about whether "professionals [can afford to] be human". He goes on to suggest:

...an acknowledgment here of the human living inside the professional is clear. To what extent, though, can the long-term insistence on a more clinical "objective" approach destroy our human responses and if this is so,

to what extent will such a position ultimately restrict, even disable, our powers of analysis? (p.58).

I notice that we approach this issue from different positions. He addresses this issue from the clinical discipline of assessment. I am concerned with this issue as a narrative researcher developing professional skills. No matter which position we take, however, the imperative to balance professional needs with our humanity is stressed in our practices and reflections. If we put professional needs aside, as a human being, is it possible to be more emotionally balanced and coherent without our own judgements and emotions disturbing the process when interacting with others?

In awareness of those concerns, the notion of reflexivity and its practice are invited into my research. Reflexivity in qualitative research is “where researchers engage in explicit self-aware meta-analysis” (Finlay, 2002, p.209). By contrast, the subjectivity of a researcher in quantitative research in psychology is regarded as causing bias or contamination (Gough & Madill, 2012). As a narrative researcher, I have made my way into forming knowledge as positioned, negotiated and fluid. At this point, researcher reflexivity is viewed as an opportunity to enrich the research process and results rather than a problem (Finlay, 2002). I wholeheartedly endorse what Hiles, Cermák and Chrz (2017) call “the need to develop a psycho-narratology with a focus upon understanding the fundamental competence that lies at the heart of the human narrative mind”. Specifically, this fundamental competence, which is viewed as a narrative intelligence, lies at the heart of making sense of things in human beings’

everyday lives (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2010). To invite narrative inquiry into this research is to stress human nature as impacting on the narrative-generating construction of the research subject. Therefore, reflexivity is a resource for a researcher to know the impact of the self on others and of others on the self. Firstly, reflexivity for me is a space to embrace my academic concerns at a human level. As Damsa and Ugelvik (2017) suggest, “the construction of one’s field persona is thus seen as a fundamental part of the data production process”. Secondly, reflexivity is viewed as a secondary data source in which I observe and understand myself in practicing my philosophical and theoretical choices. I agree with Frosh and Young (2017, p.127) that “research, therefore, is not a process of uncovering even relative ‘truths’ about people but rather exposes the way in which people are positioned by the theoretical structures used (by them as well as by researchers) to understand them”. Being reflexive about one’s own personal subjectivity creates a place for evaluating one’s humanity and one’s uniqueness and authenticity. Balance and self-awareness are encouraged in working with participants, resources and data.

As critical and responsible researchers utilising a reflexive approach, we cannot ignore its challenge. I am conscious of this challenge for the purpose of evaluating my choice of approach to this research. Three questions are therefore posed of my research process. What is the challenge? Why is this challenge important to my research? How do I utilise this challenge for a better reflexive approach? According to Finlay (2002), the use of personal revelations is not an end in itself, but a springboard

for research results, an understanding of links between knowledge claims, the experiences of the researcher and participants, the social context, and more general insights. Furthermore, the difficulties of obtaining access to personal motivations should also be highlighted in reflexivity (Finlay, 2002). Especially, the dynamics between researcher and participants adds complexity in understanding personal motivations. A focus on how the self influences knowledge production in my research should be encouraged in the reflexive process. In other words, reflexivity is used here to assist with ethical interpretations (i.e., the avoidance of bias).

Let me use the example of my initial impressions of Jiahao's father, Jason. He was cautious and avoided making eye contact with me when we had our first interview. Olivia, Jiahao's mother, informed me that Jason 'was quiet'. After the first interview, I noted that he was 'naturally making eye contact with me when we had our conversation' and he 'provided abundant and insightful details of his interaction with Jiahao'. I felt that 'he was quite chatty and really friendly'. Jason's active involvement in his parenting activities and playful interactions with his son enabled me to be a better listener and deepened my understanding of him. The interview with Jason flowed and was enjoyable. However, I gained a different impression of Jason from Olivia. On reading the transcripts, I noticed that more in-depth details emerged than those I had collected in my direct contact with him, but I felt less emotion when reading Jason's account in transcript form. My concern here is how to utilise theories

and deploy my subjective experiences to assist in the interpretation and co-construction of Jason's narrative.

Four crucial questions are posed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p.55), which can be used in reflexivity:

What do we notice?

Why do we notice what we notice?

How can we interpret what we notice?

How can we know that our interpretation is the "right" one?

According to Hollway and Jefferson (2000), the exploration of these four questions takes place through a series of stages, the 'tell it like it is' common-sense approach; evidence from the whole context; using theories, and utilising reflexivity. In this research, the reflexive answers aim to evaluate "the credibility of the outcomes by accounting for researcher values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases" (Cutcliffe, 2003, p.137) and also "strengthen a theoretical conviction or alert us to misreading" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.67). In interacting with Jessica and dealing with her narratives, I noticed that she repeatedly mentioned '*should*' in her interviews. For example, she emphasised the things her daughter, Yaya, should do and what she should do in her interactions with Yaya. Jessica's narrative evoked my own memories with my mother. In my own childhood, my mother taught me to resist expressing my own unpleasant feelings towards certain things and people in most cases. I was

educated to understand others, which meant they were the emphasis rather than admitting my own emotions. My mother told me that ‘suffering a loss is a blessing’ after I was treated unfairly, which felt unjust when I was a child. Later, I became more understanding of her way of educating, but that understanding no longer compromises taking care of my emotions. After our interviews, I noted that “sometimes, I must say I get tired of hearing we should do something. I cannot ignore this feeling. It feels like boredom. And then I try to take a deep breath in my mind and keep concentrating on her words and try not to judge this kind of expression”. Because I felt uncomfortable, does it necessarily mean that discomfort also presents in Jessica’s case with her daughter? Or am I projecting my own feelings onto her account? Asking reflective questions when checking back over my experiences and answering these questions made my interpretation of participants’ narratives more reflexive and coherent. However, Spence (1987, as cited in Frosh & Young, 2007, p.130) claims:

No interpretation is sacred. If context is boundless and ever-expanding, the grounds for reaching a conclusion about this or that meaning are forever shifting. An archive can be constructed, but its contents will always be open to interpretation and elaboration.

My participants’ narratives are “a form of evidence about that life” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005, p.151). In other words, as the Personal Narrative Group (1989, as cited in Riessman, 2000) states, personal narratives reveal ‘truths’ rather than ‘the

truth'. Given that my interpretations of participants cannot exactly represent who they truly are, a further discussion will be outlined in the following section, evaluating the research.

### **3.5 Description of methods: theoretical rationale and producing data**

The self is not an aggregate of conscious states. Freedom is self-expression, admitting of degrees, and may be curtailed by education.

Bergson (1910, p.165)

#### **3.5.1 Eliciting data in narrative inquiry**

In the current research, a semi-structured interview method was applied for the narrative inquiry, combined with free-association techniques. In narrative inquiry, stories about the breadth and depth of human experience are listened to, honoured, constructed and reconstructed (Huber et al., 2013). As a primary mode of human knowing, narrative inquiry is regarded as a 'portal' to human values, concerns, and actions, which are practically implicated in personal communication, social interaction and cultural experience (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). Hence, many data collections with a small number of participants are involved in narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). In this section, I discuss how a semi-structured interview method combined with free-association techniques was utilised in the current research.

## **First impressions**

First impressions contain much that eludes our conscious assessment of another person. Moreover, these feelings continue in the relationship.

Hollway & Jefferson (2013, p. 43)

The participants were three families with children aged between three and five years old in a local kindergarten in Zibo, China. Three families was considered a suitable number to fulfil my research aims based on the practical demands of exploring and analysing each family as a separate case study. Acquiring permission from the children's kindergarten, parents and children was necessary for increasing opportunities to gather more reliable information. The participants were recruited using the following steps. First, I contacted the local kindergarten in Zibo, China. Contact was made initially by telephone and a letter was sent to the headmaster of the kindergarten via email to acquire permission for conducting research. The headmaster of the kindergarten allowed me to obtain access to the upper classes in the kindergarten after a discussion. Next, the head teacher of that class sent copies of an invitation letter to parents when parents picked up their children after school and invited parents to volunteer by contacting the researcher via telephone or email. Then, the three volunteer families were sent copies of the information sheet and the consent form via WeChat (social software) and invited to schedule our first meetings for planning interview times. With the three families' permission, our first meetings were conducted at their homes.



Before I met the three families, it was relevant to imagine how these three families viewed me: a PhD candidate from a well-known foreign university. Before conducting our first meetings, I had consciously prepared myself as an attentive listener with an aim of amplifying the parents' voices. Admittedly, I was very nervous at our first meetings because of a fear of the unknown and perhaps falling short of my aims. By being aware of the potential that unpredictable issues may appear in relationships between the researcher and participants, I generally followed White and Epston's (1990, p.39) suggestions for dealing with problems:

1. Decreases unproductive conflict between persons [...]
2. Undermines the sense of failure [...]
3. Paves the way for persons to cooperate with each other [...]
4. Opens up new possibilities for persons to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships [...]
5. frees persons to take a lighter, more effective, and less stressed approach [...]
6. Presents options for dialogue, rather than monologue.

This practice of dealing with problems was utilised in interactions between myself and the participants. Keeping this approach in mind from my first meetings with the three families, I grew more confident in observing and managing my feelings. As a result, it helped me to represent myself as an authentic researcher in front of six participants, which served as the interviewees' first impressions of me.

To illustrate my first ‘dance’ with participants, I select my first encounter with Jasmine, a mother in Xixi’s (Jasmine’s daughter) family (participants’ information will be specifically discussed in the following section):

*I was invited to go to Jasmine’s apartment on a Saturday night. Her daughter, Xixi, opened the door immediately with Jasmine’s permission when I knocked. Xixi gave me a big welcoming smile. Jasmine had introduced me to her daughter and son in advance before my first visit. Her daughter and son seemed excited when I arrived at their home. Jasmine and Mathew, her husband, were in their pyjamas. They were nervous and a little bit embarrassed. We firstly discussed our following interviews, two interviews with Jasmine and two interviews with Mathew. Mathew was only willing to take part in one interview. He was not sure if he would like to take part in the second interview. I told him that it was ok for him to make a decision after the first one. I told them that they could freely withdraw from the research at any point if they felt uncomfortable.*

*In the first meeting, Jasmine talked about her experience of raising her two children. Meanwhile, Mathew played building blocks with his two children and occasionally joined our conversation. In that process, Hanbo, Jasmine’s son, came running and introduced his book on dinosaurs to me. I think this playful interaction between Hanbo and I made both of Jasmine and Mathew more relaxed. Jasmine told her children about my educational background and emphasised my academic degree. She also asked me questions about how I learned languages in front of her children. Later,*

*I learned from the interviews how important Jasmine felt education was to her children. She admitted that it was her main source of anxiety.*

At the very beginning of conducting the data collection, I had formed relationships with these six participants before the first interviews. The initial meetings with the three families firstly provided a significant chance for the participants and I to get to know each other. Second, these initial meetings may have helped to encourage parents to talk freely in the subsequent interviews as they had already spoken to me and understood my research purpose in advance.

### **Semi-structured interview method**

For Kvale (1996), an interview is defined as “an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, [which] sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasises the social situatedness of research data” (p.14). The collected data in the interview process is co-constructed between the interviewee and the interviewer. From a social constructionist perspective, as Fylan (2005) suggests, a participant’s attitudes would emerge as part of the interview. In my research, interviews bring possibilities for parents to express their ideas and feelings in their own words. A semi-structured interview method with flexible questions was applied to capture in-depth information about attitudes, thoughts, and individuals’ actions. Another reason to apply semi-structured interviews is that sensitive and complex topics can be appropriately discussed and collated (Kidder, 1981). It brings into conscious experience that which the participants may

regard as private and personal and creates a rich space for sharing between the participants and the researcher.

A key aspect of structured interviews and most aspects of semi-structured interviews is the question-answer schema (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000, p.4), the interviewer imposes structures in three ways in the question-answer schema: “(a) by selecting the theme and the topics, (b) by ordering the questions and (c) by wording the questions in his or her language”. As a self-generating schema, narrative is different from the question-answer format of interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). As I mentioned in the previous sections, I choose to work with narratives as experience-centred, which I hoped would reveal something in the relationship between my interviewees and their lives. Semi-structured interviews are mostly applied in experience-centred narrative research (Squire, 2008). In my research, a semi-structured interview schema was utilised for structuring and guiding, but with my intervening as little as possible.

### **Free-association interview techniques**

We are encouraged by psychoanalytic ideas to seek things deep inside us as a resource in research. Hollway and Jefferson (2003) recommend that:

By asking the patient to say whatever comes to mind, the psychoanalyst is eliciting the kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic; that is, the associations follow

pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions

(p.34).

The emotional sense of the narrative, which indicates a person's subjective meaning-making process, is crucial. (Frosh & Young, 2017). Psychoanalytic approaches were applied in data collection, data analysis and reflexivity in my research project. Narrative data is produced by encouraging participants to express themselves on and around the research topic (Frosh & Young, 2017). According to Frosh and Young (2017), psychoanalytic strategies are applied to core stories to enrich the reading of them. Furthermore, narratives are viewed as dynamic processes mediated by individuals, who are embedded in their social and cultural relations. These relational contexts can be studied in their narratives in different ways and can be influenced by unconscious and conscious processes.

In accordance with my emphasis on emotional concerns, the free association technique was utilised when collecting data. This technique was developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), and may subtly help to access a person's concerns. The participants are encouraged to explore whatever comes to mind. That is to say, a safe place is created for participants for exploring vulnerabilities and unconscious motivations. Parents were generally encouraged to freely associate in the following ways in our interviews.

First, neutral queries were intentionally employed, such as "can you say more about that?" and "can you tell me more about what happened between you and your child?".

I should admit that the free association technique that was adopted here could not be objectively neutral. I kept checking with myself during interviews as to the extent that my interventions were positive and where understanding could be improved and trust enhanced by these interventions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

Second, I adopted a listening position to generate data. For a researcher, the free association narrative interview method involves not only interview skills, but also therapeutic skills (Garfield, Reavey & Kotecha, 2010). Clear and compassionate boundaries between the researcher and a participant in interviews should be kept in mind. In addition, as Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue, the impressions made between a researcher and a participant are not only worked out simply from the 'real' relationship but are also influenced by our own histories of significant relationships. It follows, therefore, that it is valuable to explore the dynamics of research relationships in terms of emotional data in and around the interviews. Listening to participants' voices in my practice gave both of us space for reflecting on our ongoing interactions and to make conscious choices.

Third, pre-prepared interview questions were only there for situations in which participants' answers did not provide systematic coverage of issues and where parents found it difficult to tell stories. By using the free association narrative method, interviewees are taken seriously and encouraged to produce their own, self-styled account (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In doing so, parents warmed to the interview process. My impression was that most parents had trust in our relationship and my

interview plans. For example, Jasmine, Xixi's mother, contacted me after our two interviews because she had enjoyed talking with me and sharing more details about her stories with and in her family.

In summary, the free association techniques utilised in this research emphasised participants' own sequencing and phrasing of their narratives, thus respecting their own meaning-frames. It is worth noting that individuals' narrative ability varies. Inevitably, it was not always a simple matter for me to elicit stories from parents, especially from Olivia and Mathew. In terms of Olivia's interviews, my field notes offer an important insight into how Olivia seemed to lack sufficient interest in telling stories about her life. I wrote, *Olivia is not good at talking too much. So, I feel that this interview is a researcher-led interview as audio-taped [...] In the process of listening to Olivia's interviews, I observe that I may forget the exact words she said but can still remember the feelings I had for her at those memorable moments.* The notes suggest that Olivia's interviews required more artful skill to assist her to talk more about her life. Specifically, as emphasised by Hollway and Jefferson (2013), the researcher should not offer judgments and interpretations when assisting narrators to say more. Otherwise, the researcher's own relevancies are imposed and thus the participant's *Gestalt* would be destroyed. A person's emotional concerns contribute to the manifestation of their own *Gestalt*. What does *Gestalt* mean? According to Ginger (2018, p.15), "the whole is different from the sum of its parts". *Gestalt* is regarded as a complete figure or shape, which has meaning and structure. To put it another way, a

*Gestalt* means that “the whole will signify more than the sum of the parts” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.40). Thus, it is crucial for a researcher to ensure that each part of an interviewee’s story is told without interruption. In doing so, my own feelings towards parents, myself and our relationships were explored and discussed in my field notes as the evidence to understand the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship. For example, after my first interview with Jessica, Yaya’s mother, I wrote in my field notes, *not everyone is good at storytelling. Giving parents a chance to share their life stories comfortably in the interaction with the researcher is essential. I have to admit that I was quite nervous before and in interviews because the free association narrative interview method was a brand-new area for me. My fear of getting nothing or losing control of the situation was filling my mind in my very first interview with Jessica.* Most importantly though, I was aware of my feelings, which were significant to how data was produced in the dynamics between the researcher and six participants.

### **3.5.2 Research questions**

My research title is as follows:

Constructing play and relational self: Chinese parents’ narratives of parent-child relationships in early years

My focused research questions are identified as follows:

How do parents experience play in their daily interactions?



How is the relational self constructed in play-based interactions?

### **3.5.3 Narrative interview questions**

Narration can be an action as well as a product in the form of a text, film, dance, and the like. Central to narrating is the act of ordering for a number of different purpose. With narrative, people, strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create theme, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history.

Bamberg and McCabe (1998, p.iii)

A very simple interview question is recommended by some narrative researchers in order to encourage participants to explore the question in their self-directed ways (Riessman, 2003). Meanwhile, a narrative researcher is required to follow participants' interests and not control the interview process (Riessman, 2008). To capture parents' experiences in relation to play and their views on what play is, simple and open-ended questions were interwoven into my interviews. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013), researchers are encouraged to ask open-ended questions rather than closed questions in the interviewing phase; the more open the better. The data collection process included two rounds of narrative interviews with six parents in three families whose children were aged between three and five years old and attended a local kindergarten in Zibo, China. The gap between the two interviews for

each participant was approximately two months. As I mentioned in the previous section, I had formed relationships with these six participants before the first interviews at the very beginning of data collection.

According to Riessman (2000), stories in research interviews are rarely clearly bounded. However, negotiation between the researcher and a participant occurs, putting boundaries around relevance and deciding where the beginnings and endings of narratives are placed by the researcher's theoretical interests. In my practice of narrative research, on the one hand, I was aware of the importance of following the participants' interests and practiced staying in this position. On the other hand, as I mentioned in the previous section, I was nervous when I did free association narrative interviews with participants. Just as Walkerdine (1997, p.73) argues, "I am no more, no different from the subjects of my research" as a researcher. It was strange to maintain natural conversations in interviews to ensure that participants' stories were invited to be told as they wish and were finished uninterrupted. So, my feelings and practical choices were reflected in my field notes, which were important to how the data was produced. As Gergen (2009, p.204) suggests, "let us view what we take to be knowledge as an outcome of relational process. Through co-action people generate a world of the real". Challenges and opportunities must be acknowledged in the co-construction of narratives for a researcher in interview practice. However, in doing so, the researcher should be conscious of their own interpretation of a participant's

account, imposing their own meanings on the participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

There is one example from the second interview with Olivia, in which my interventions could be viewed as imposing my own meanings:

*Olivia: I can't remember [...] Maybe I have a lot of pressure from work. I go out with my son just to relax. I don't think too much.*

*Meng: Can I understand it as being immersed in your own world? just relax yourself?*

*Olivia: Right.*

*Meng: What do you think of your playing with him?*

*Olivia: It means to eat something new, or to play something new, to let him experience it [...] I just accompany him. Sometimes, he is excited to go out.*

*Meng: I think it is very interesting. I feel that although you don't talk much, it feels good to do something together?*

*Olivia: Yeah. I usually take him out on Sundays whenever I have a break. I like to take him out whenever I go to the vegetable market. We don't say much, just feel it [...] feel it. Maybe my personality is that I don't have much to say. I feel tired all day and don't like talking.*

In this example, I need to mention that my intention in my interventions was to positively produce understanding and to enhance trust to help Olivia feel more relaxed about sharing her stories. However, I was aware that my interventions in Olivia's interview imposed my meanings on her. As Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.24) suggest, the researcher and the interviewee in this situation may not be "mutually exclusive". She didn't express her feelings into words in this example. When I suggested *it feels good to do something together* and she agreed with me, I reflected my interpretation of her feelings to her, which I had obtained from how she expressed herself. But she still explained by using *feel it* instead of conveying specific emotions when she talked about her experience with her son. I asked myself a question in my field notes on this interview. I wrote: *to what extent can I use the exact words to represent her feelings?* Not everyone is adept at expressing their feelings. In Olivia's case, she seldom expressed her feelings in words.

I asked questions based on the following ones and participants' responses in the interviews:

### **First interviews**

What do you think is play, and what do you do for play?

Would you like to begin by telling me about your experiences of play before you had your child?

Can you tell me about your experiences of play since you had your child?

Can you tell me about your experiences of play with your child?

### **Second interview**

Can you tell me how you feel about the changes in your experiences of play since you had your child?

Can you tell me about experiences of play between you and your child that were enjoyable, and if there was anything that was not enjoyable?

Can you tell me if anything has changed in your life since you have been playing with your child?

### **3.6 Participants in research**

The main research was conducted with six participants in three families in China. This was considered a suitable number for answering the research question based on the practical demands of exploring and analysing each family. As shown in Table 3.1, pseudonyms were adopted in the research to ensure confidentiality. I will show in the next section the pen portraits I painted of my participants so that readers will have a more vivid insight into them.

**Table 3.1 Pseudonyms and details of the Participants**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Family</b>
<b>1</b>	Jessica	32	Female	Yaya's family
<b>2</b>	Rob	32	Male	Yaya's family

3	Jasmine	31	Female	Xixi's family
4	Mathew	33	Male	Xixi's family
5	Olivia	31	Female	Jiahao's family
6	Jason	32	Male	Jiahao's family

**Notes:** Name=Pseudonym

### 3.6.1 Pen Portraits of three families in research

#### Jessica and Rob in Yaya's family: pen portraits

Jessica

When I interviewed Jessica, she was 32 years old and living with her 32-year-old husband Rob and her five-year-old daughter Yaya. She was born and grew up in Hubei province, China. She married her husband after graduating university. Jessica is now living in Shandong province which is far away from her hometown. Living in a small town in Shandong province, her main focus is on rearing her daughter Yaya. As a housewife, she has no experience working in society. In the first meeting before interviews, she told me that she was keen to work when Yaya was out of her teens. Most of time, Jessica lives with her daughter in Zhoucun. Her husband Rob works in another town, Wangcun, which is half an hour's drive from Zhoucun. They are together as a family for three or four days a week. In our meetings, Jessica was very willing to share her moments with Yaya. Through her words, I observed conflicts within her as a mother, as a wife, and as herself. Her reflective words about her

experiences with Yaya, as well as her descriptions of the events, brought me to her inner world to witness her revolutionary self-exploration.

Reflection:

In the artist of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends: the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found.

Winnicott (1965, p.185)

I am an observer in the research; I do not wish to pry into others' lives without permission. Apparently, my participants were open to share their life experiences with me, which I have enjoyed. They might not be as willing to share their stories if they knew I would be looking for hidden meanings I'm not sure. For me, I am comfortable to openly share my inner discovery process from both light and shadow sides through my observations of myself. In this, I am only representing myself. Based on this consideration, I choose their words benefiting the higher purpose of this research, which offers the possibility for parents to rediscover their inner child, playfully and creatively, in their second phase of life with their children. I believe that our children are masters in leading us. Focusing on this purpose, our interview environment was made safe by offering a non-judgmental, freely chosen space for their free-associated narratives about their children and other important people in their lives. I see this as

something I have been able to offer for those who could join me on my research journey.

Rob

Rob is Jessica's husband. He manages a lottery betting station with his parents, which is legal and permitted in China. Rob is at the lottery betting station almost all day from 8am to 11pm. He can only have the seven days of the Spring Festival as holiday. He spends most of his time concentrating on the staff at work and does not think about much else. He is with his wife Jessica and his daughter Yaya for three nights a week. They do not talk much because he manages his business by using his phone at night. But he is planning to change his business in the coming years so he can have more time with his family.

Reflection:

Hence we must admit that the sounds combined with one another and acted, not by their quantity as quantity, but by the quality which their quantity exhibited, i.e. by the rhythmic organization of the whole.

Bergson, (1910, p.106)

During our interviews, Rob frequently mentioned time in his narratives, notably quantity of time. Beneath the surface of the duration for which he was with his daughter, I was always curious about how his inner world was constructed. I changed my way of questioning. The answers were not in depth as I expected. I worked with



Rob and his narratives to benefit the higher purpose of this research, which I mentioned previously. Rob's understanding of time may be enriched in his experiences with his family. It was only in the moments of our conversation that his understanding of time was as he described. I, as a researcher, captured his words in those moments for my own research purpose. But the possibilities in the depth of his answers depend on the life path he chooses.

### **Jasmine and Mathew in Xixi's family: pen portraits**

#### Jasmine

Jasmine was 31 years old when my interviews were conducted. She was living with her 33-year-old husband Mathew, her five-year-old daughter Xixi, her eight-year-old son Hanbo, and her mother in Zhoucun, Zibo, China. Both Jasmine and Mathew work in Mathew's parents' company in Wangcun. They come back to their home in Zhoucun together after work every day. Jasmine used to be a teacher in a kindergarten. In our interviews, she was extrovert and talkative. From her narratives, I observed her anxiety and worry about rearing her two children. In her loaded words about her relationships with her children, her mother and her husband, the conflicts and pressure within her are obviously observed. Her children's health and education are her focus. The time before she goes to sleep is the only time she feels she has any control over her life. She described it as "the whole world went quiet just for a second".

#### Mathew

He is Jasmine's husband and father to their two children. Mathew is the youngest child in his family. After graduating from a technical secondary school aged 20, Mathew worked in a local factory for a year and then followed his father into work. Mathew and Jasmine were married when he was 23. He told me that they had a very happy time together before marriage. After marriage, he underwent a transformation of identity and a great change within him. He admitted that such a huge life change was both exciting and scary to him, especially when they had their first child, Hanbo. Then he gradually tried to learn how to play with his children with the support of his wife. Mathew was friendly to me, but he was shy in the interview process. Given his shyness and at his request, I only conducted one interview with him.

### **Olivia and Jason in Jiahao's family: pen portraits**

Olivia

My first impression of Olivia was that she was quiet and cried easily. In our interviews, she sometimes wept thinking about her experiences in work. She could not recall many details of her interactions with her son, Jiahao. But she told me that she felt good just going out and be together with her son and husband. When I interviewed her, she was 31 years old and living with her 32-year-old husband Jason, her five-year-old son Jiahao, and her mother-in-law. Olivia's mother-in-law helped Olivia and Jason to take care of Jiahao when they were at work. Olivia did not talk much. But I felt her emotions through her words and her eyes.

Reflection:

There is more to emotion than talk about emotion and more to emotion than can be captured in conscious experience.

Greco & Stenner (2013, p.12)

Olivia's words are few and simple. I suppose readers cannot be enchanted immediately by texts. In my observable data where my emotional response to what I see takes place, there are a rich number of resources for readers to take into consideration in forming knowledge. Meanwhile, I draw upon my own subjectivity in the situated research practices as important references in reflecting on the research and studying parents.

Jason

Jason is Olivia's husband and runs his own business in the city. His time is flexible. Jason had a lot of interaction with Jiahao, his son. He was energetic and had a sense of humour in our interactions. He provided rich, vivid details about encounters between him and his son. Jason carefully observed his son. When he recalled those memories, I could observe his rich emotions, joy, frustration, sorrow, etc. Olivia told me that her husband was quiet, which was different from what I observed in interviews with Jason.

### **3.6.2 Writing the interview environment scenically**

According to Hollway (2011, p.94), “scenic understanding involves latent meaning and ties subjective experience to social practice and cultural meaning”. In doing so, more vivid, complex, and meaningful information can be clearly represented by writing scenically. Meanwhile, scenic understanding makes up for the lack of representing participants in socially determinist ways, because using social identity categories to describe participants loses contact with their emotional experiences (Hollway, 2011). As a narrative researcher, by writing scenically, I can pay attention to the emotional experiences of participants and their accounts as one important aspect of discovering meanings in further analysing data.

In the previous section, I discussed my pen portraits of the three families. In this section, I will further expand on the research environment. According to Hollway (2011), certain things might puzzle the audience or the reader about a scene description. In this research, the reader may ask, “why was a self-designed poster put on the wall at Jasmine’s home?”. By avoiding any premature closure with a dominant theoretical perspective, the researcher is required to “stay in her mind latent, arousing curiosity and a kind of readiness to hear more, but must not obscure anything else” (Balint, 1993, p.11). Likewise, as Hollway (2011) suggests, the researcher must not guess. I practically chose and adapted to this way of describing participants. Therefore, I invite this way of representing the interview environments into this section.

### **Jessica and Rob**

**Jessica:**

*First interview*

*It was a summer afternoon. Jessica sat opposite me on the sofa in a constricted pose. She waited for my questions. Her daughter, Yaya, was drawing a picture in her bedroom. I was greeted by the sweet aroma of a red bean soup cooking in the kitchen. Before our conversation, Jessica had given Yaya a cup of water by pretending to be a courier. I started our conversation by discussing this little game. She began to relax.*

*Second interview*

*I arrived at her home at dusk. Jessica and Yaya were at home. Jessica had just finished washing clothes. She sat in the same position as in our first interview. Yaya was in her arms. Yaya asked me when I would interview her. She said that she would be very happy to accept my interview. I answered that it was my pleasure to interview her. The second interview between Jessica and I was pleasant. After our interview, I had an interesting informal conversation with Yaya. Yaya was satisfied to be 'interviewed'.*

**Rob:**

*First interview*

*This was a Sunday afternoon. Rob rarely stayed at home on Sunday. He was too tense to sit on the sofa for our interview. I sat down in the chair opposite. Rob told me that*

*he could not think while he sat. He stood up and walked slowly up and down the living room. He gradually calmed down and relaxed. Then, our first interview flowed smoothly. Jessica and Yaya were in Rob and Jessica's bedroom, taking a nap.*

*Second interview*

*This was a Friday evening. Rob, Jessica and Yaya had just finished their dinner. I was invited into their study, Yaya's bedroom. Soft toys and children's books were on the bookcase. Yaya's paintings were lying around on the desk. It was exactly like the first time; and he just walked up and down, waiting for my questions. It helped him to think. We started our interview by discussing his work which was his major focus in his life.*

## **Jasmine and Mathew**

**Jasmine:**

*First interview*

*The first interview took place at Jasmine's home. It was a Saturday evening. I arrived there at the appointed time. Jasmine, Mathew, their two children, and Jasmine's mother were still having dinner together. Around the living room were several sets of furniture. In the corner was Xixi's (her daughter) study desk and on the wall Jasmine's self-designed poster of dad's educational rules and her children's awards. Hanbo (her son) asked me excitedly if I had learned about dinosaurs by myself. I told him I would prefer to listen to his interesting stories about dinosaurs after the*

*interviews. I called him 'Dr Dinosaur'. Meanwhile, Xixi gave me a big hug, jumped on me, and shared her favourite lollipop with me. This caught me a little off guard. Soon Jasmine and I had our first interview in her bedroom. Our interview was interrupted by Hanbo several times, because he wanted to get Jasmine's permission to play a digital game. But Jasmine did not allow it and asked him to play outside with his dad.*

#### *Second interview*

*Our second interview also took place in Jasmine's bedroom at her home. This time, she started our conversation by talking about her daily life. She was very talkative.*

#### **Mathew:**

##### *First interview*

*Our one and only interview took place after the first interview with Jasmine in her room, while Xixi practiced piano with her mother and Hanbo did his homework in his own bedroom. Jasmine's mother was in the kitchen. In the living room, Mathew sat tensely opposite me on the sofa. I noticed that he had been painting with Xixi when Jasmine and I had the interview. I started our conversation by talking about what they had painted together. Jasmine seemed to be following our conversation in her bedroom. She opened the door and whispered to Mathew, 'please answer the questions well'. Mathew seemed a little bit impatient with what Jasmine said. He*

*asked me if I could only conduct one interview with him. After confirming his wishes after our first interview, I respected his decision.*

## **Olivia and Jason**

### **Olivia:**

#### *First interview*

*This was a Saturday afternoon. Olivia rested at home on weekends. We did our interview in her bedroom. Jiahao, her son, played Lego in the living room with his friend from kindergarten. Olivia wore her pyjamas and sat by the bed with me. She didn't speak much but was quite relaxed. When she reminisced about her experiences, she wept several times. She seemed quite sentimental.*

#### *Second interview*

*Olivia and I did our second interview at her home. It was a brief one. She could not describe much about her emotions in words. I did not want to push her to say more.*

### **Jason:**

#### *First interview*

*We did our first interview in his study on a Friday afternoon. Jiahao and Jason's mother were watching TV in the living room when our interview took place. We sat opposite each other in chairs. He leaned his back against the table. Jason started our*



*conversation by using English to introduce himself. He laughed several times at the beginning. He said that the interview was strange to him, and he had never done it before. He was humorous and our interview went well.*

#### *Second interview*

*When I arrived at Jason's home, Jiahao gave me an enthusiastic welcome. He secretly told me, 'here you are, my dad is playing with me'. We started our interview in the living room. Jiahao quietly sat at his side, making orange juice. Jason shared vivid and detailed moments with Jiahao.*

### **3.7 Ethics**

Let us take pity as an example [...] True pity consists not so much in fearing suffering as in desiring it [...] yet we form it in spite of ourselves, as if nature were committing some great injustice and it were necessary to get rid of all suspicion of complicity with her. The essence of pity is thus a need for self-abasement, an aspiration downwards [...] The increasing intensity of pity thus consists in a qualitative progress, in a transition from repugnance to fear, from fear to sympathy, and from sympathy itself to humanity.

Bergson (1910, p.18-19)

In research studies, the term ‘ethics’ is viewed as moral principles held by professions, concerned with the way in which people behave and guide conduct (Wellington, 2015). In other words, as the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2018. p.5) suggests, all psychologists are encouraged to “be mindful of their strengths and weakness in order that they are able to behave in the most ethical way possible”. Ethical issues were highlighted throughout all the research stages in this research. My purpose in this section is to discuss the main ethical issues and considerations for my research practice.

In writing this section, I call on an important source of ideas from Wang Yangming (see Section 3.1.1) to support my continuous development of ethical considerations in the research. Particularly, he writes about where the will might be in our life. Wang Yangming (1916, p.80) emphasises that “maintaining a firm will includes nourishing the passionate nature, and doing no violence to the passionate nature also includes maintaining a firm will”. Furthermore, he (1916, p.138) writes that “sincerity of purpose is the best point of departure for investigation of things”. Wang Yangming’s (1916) work urged me to question what is taken for granted and what helps the practitioner to investigate things, work with others, and revise the ideas, whether in this research or in my life practice.

In the on-going process of making choices and decisions in this research, I kept questioning myself; ‘am I ethical?’, reflecting in field notes and research diaries to make authentic choices and decisions. The *means* of the research activity relates to an

ethical *how* in research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). Before proceeding to my formal research, a detailed ethical application form was given to my supervisor and the department to get clearance from the research ethics committees. It is worth mentioning that Chinese children aged between three and five years old were included into my initial research plan as observed subjects. As suggested by the ethics committees, I designed a visual consent letter and information sheet for the observed children and made several adjustments for my observing practice. However, I finally made a conscious ethical decision, combined with my supervisor's advice, to remove observation out of my current research by carefully considering the uncertainties about what observation would involve in family settings. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.80), there is no way "to inform participants in advance, in ways that would be meaningful, about the experience of our kind of interview". The complexity of the ethics of consent cannot be underestimated in the research. The narrative interviews with free association technique with parents were the only focus as my research method, which would provide valuable reference for ethical guidance for my further observational research. This ethical decision-making process urged me to remain open to ambivalence and conflict throughout my research process and make considered judgments about how best to treat the people involved and the research itself.

In my following discussions, I want to shift my emphasis to the relationships between the participants and me. First, I was aware of the exercise of power in relation to my

participants. Traditionally, as Hollway and Jefferson (2013) suggest, ethical guidelines are based on unequal power in research relationships, especially where participants could be abused by a researcher's power and would be unable to protect themselves. However, in my research, I needed their cooperation and hospitality (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Despite this, my status as a university researcher did not give me the right to view myself as more knowledgeable than participants. On the contrary, I as a researcher could positively encourage production from and with interviewees by utilising my own knowledge. In writing about this issue, it reminds me of a conversation between my supervisor and I:

*Tom: When I ask you what you choose to do, you usually say it is complicated.*

*Me: Yes. It's true. I'm worrying about the 'what ifs'.*

When I came back from our meeting, I kept thinking about what blocked my ability to think and why I could not efficiently act on a choice. It was not about knowing what I wanted and further reducing the uncertainty. It was about my own fear and insecurity. The fear that I don't know much and that I would get things wrong very often simmered in me. The insecurity of losing control and feeling that what I insist was lack of sufficient knowledge also simmered in me. Consequently, I may block my ability to think clearly or lose my sense of my actual abilities. In fact, in my second year of PhD study, my family was devastated by a serious issue. A sense that I should be responsible for supporting my family gradually frayed my emotions and affected my normal everyday life. This was self-inflicted and as such, those fears and

insecurities re-emerged. Realising this, I have consciously given myself therapeutic time and space to do meditation and nurture myself without external disruption. According to Greco and Stenner (as cited in Frosh & Young, 2017), they claim, “there is more to emotion than talk about emotion and more to emotion than can be captured in conscious experience”. Being aware of my own emotional experience, I am able to work with it. I worked with parents in this research while I was aware of going through a similar process of feeling and thinking and reflected on how I approached therapeutic self-care as part of the research process. Thus, before encouraging participants’ cooperation and co-production, I prepared myself as much as possible to be courageous enough to acknowledge that I cannot know everything about this subject before practicing. I embraced the courage to respect our differences and to embrace the uncertainty of choices and decisions.

Second, I was aware of the importance of respecting the participants by adopting the idea that “others are not the same as us, and there is no reason why they should be” (Parker, 2004, p.28). For example, considering the partnerships established in our first meetings and first interviews, there was a risk that parents may have felt embarrassed or reluctant to decline the second interviews out of sympathy towards me. I informed parents both formally and informally that they had the right to withdraw from the research anytime.

Third, I kept writing research diaries throughout the whole research process to reflect on my research experience with participants and my interpretations of parents’

narratives. The research diaries were viewed as “the vehicle for ordered creativity” (Schatzman & Strauss, 1977, p.105). Meanwhile, the research diaries were used to delve into my deep emotions when doing the work. I integrated a psychoanalytic lens into my reflective work, observing the researcher’s emotional response to what they see is the crucial part for developing the knowledge of the subject (Frosh & Young, 2017). However, according to Parker (2004, p.48), reflective work “should not be a self-indulgent and reductive exercise that psychologises phenomena and psychologises your own part in producing them”. In doing so, I kept asking questions about how much my reflective work helped me to learn about the six parents rather than me. Therefore, only the accounts that are closely related to certain aspects of the research are highlighted in this writing.

Fourth, in the data analysis phase, I did not bring parents’ narratives and my interpretations back to the parents for member checking. The reasons for this were considered as follows. Firstly, the data analysis worked on the basis of methodology and theories and was done some considerable time after the interviews with the parents. I considered that discussing my theoretical analysis with participants may have been difficult because participants might not have understood, and they might then have wanted to change what had said before. Secondly, the narratives were situated in a certain place and time. I would argue that participants might later change their views about what they had chosen to say in our interviews. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013), researchers should be aware that we are creating an

account which is theoretically, empirically and methodologically convincing, rather than ‘truths’ about a person. Given this, I intended to respect the original narratives produced by participants.

According to Clough and Nutbrown (2012), in revisiting my research practice, the other main ethical considerations are represented as follows. First, the failure to fully disclose the benefits and potential risks of research participation may cause negative outcomes for individuals who participate in research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Therefore, the consent letter was constructed to allow both the kindergarten and parents to understand the aims of the research, personal information about the researcher, the researcher’s role, the rights they have in the research and in what circumstances confidentiality is guaranteed (or not). All participated parents had a right to decide whether to participate in the research and were informed in the research statement that participation was voluntary. Second, personal experiences and individuals’ lives were deeply explored in narrative interviews with free association techniques, which risked causing distress. This type of interview had the potential to arouse distress or powerful emotions. Participants should therefore have considerable control in the process of qualitative research (Cassell, 1980). All participating parents were informed that they could freely withdraw from the research if they felt uncomfortable. Third, participants’ confidentiality should be protected by the researcher (Raffe, Bundell & Bibby, 1989). Pseudonyms were adopted in the research to ensure confidentiality. And it should be acknowledged that complete anonymity

can never completely be guaranteed. The audio recordings were carried out with the permission of participants and data were safely stored to protect participants' privacy.

### **3.8 The practicalities of analysing data**

#### **3.8.1 Analysis of narrative account**

The researcher is more like a sculptor, chipping away at a block of marble.

The sculpture is the product of an interaction between the sculptor, their skills and the raw materials.

Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun (2017, p.20)

Considering my interest in 'experience' and my focus on parents' constructions of self in parenthood and the possibilities of re-observing playfulness, I chose to adopt thematic analysis as the main access to participants' account (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I adopted narrative inquiry and a psychoanalytic approach to qualitative psychology and viewed the researcher's subjectivity as an integral part of the data analysis.

Thematic analysis, with its more qualitative approach to procedure which "advocates for a flexible approach to coding and theme development" (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke &

Braun, 2017, p.19), was an appropriate approach to data analysis. Thematic analysis

here was viewed as having an experiential orientation and being theoretically independent, focusing on what parents feel, think and do (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke &

Braun, 2017). This method advocates deep engagement with the interview data by following the phases of organisation and analysis presented below.



I drew on the six-phase analytic process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarising oneself with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Then I developed my analytic process. In order to support this process, I also utilised the psychoanalytic techniques created by Hollway and Jefferson (2011). My engagement with parents' narratives in this way and my application of experiences, research skills, and theoretical and personal standpoints helped me to explore and identify important and in-depth narratives which were significant to my research questions. I will discuss how my analytical process worked in detail below.

### **Phase 1) Familiarisation**

#### **Transcribing and translating**

Given that the interviews were audio recorded, the first step in my analysis was to generate a raw transcript. According to Hiles, Cermak and Chrz (2017), the raw transcript should not be 'tidied up' and must be produced as verbatim as possible. After producing the raw transcript in Chinese for 11 interviews, reading through the raw transcript several times and breaking it down into a sequence of episodes were my first moves in familiarising myself with parents' narratives.

Since the interviews between myself and the parents were conducted in Chinese, I also translated the raw transcript into English. In order to respect the original meaning in the raw transcript, this work was conducted after I had obtained an overview of the

text. From a social constructionist standpoint, I agree with Barrett's view (1992) on language, which is that meaning is constructed in, rather than expressed by language. Translation, as a purposeful activity in this research, is situated in cross-cultural interpretations and meanings. As a researcher and a translator, translation provided me with a significant opportunity to shift my attention to the problem of meaning equivalence through reflexive discussions in my research diaries. Meanwhile, translation was my third attempt at working with the parents' narratives after interviewing and transcribing within the research process, in which I could feel the data at a deeper level without the real-life scenarios and sounds, only with the words.

Mindful of the effect of transcripts on the validity of the research outcomes, I made a decision to openly discuss my translation and its process in the research diaries as a check on the validity of my interpretations. As Temple and Young (2004) suggest, a translator acts a role in the process of developing knowledge of the subject. However, by doing so, my translation cannot be viewed as 'the truths' of the participants and 'the correct meanings' of their accounts, because I am also situated in different positions, especially in relation to language (Temple & Young, 2004). My aim was to improve my empirical accuracy through enhanced self-reflection in the process of translation.

### **Reading and being observant**

I familiarised myself with the final textual data by breaking it down into 119 episodes and re-reading it at least three times, making observational notes. According to Terry,

Clarke and Braun (2017), this means being observant and asking questions of the data in order to generate very early and provisional analytic ideas.

To intimately and deeply engage with the data in this process, I asked four main questions as suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.51):

What do we notice?

Why do we notice what we notice?

How can we interpret what we notice?

How can we know that our interpretation is the 'right' one?

The first two questions were highlighted in the familiarisation process for the sake of capturing something important about the data in relation to the research questions, which could further help for coding and theme development. Here I take Jessica's (Yaya's mother) account as an example. When reading the transcripts, I noted that Jessica seemed to emphasise that her daughter was dependent on her. Indeed, in her words, she said that her daughter "is very dependent on her" and "cannot do a lot of things by herself". Noticing this, I took the importance of the whole into consideration in understanding the part (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). In doing so, I could also observe contradictions and inconsistencies in the whole textual data, which might help to discover whether her daughter is dependent on her or not, or something else. By familiarising myself with the relevant translated transcripts and my research diaries, I found that her daughter enjoyed doing her own little things alone. Moreover, I found

more evidence to the contrary. As I mentioned before, Yaya asked me to interview her in her own room. So, I had an interesting informal conversation with Yaya in her bedroom, with her mother's permission. She was satisfied to be 'interviewed'. I recorded our conversation in my research diary. She said, "I don't like that my mom is angry at me, and I want she is happy and loves me". She also shared a story with me (Yaya: "my aunt came to play with me [...] I wanted to sleep in the same bed as my aunt so she could tell me a story. But my mom said she would sleep alone. I didn't want her to feel sad. I just played with my aunt for a while and went to my mom's bedroom"). I asked myself in the analytic process. What does Jessica mean when she says Yaya is dependent on her? And how can I interpret what I notice in a more satisfactory way? To support and broaden my observation of the data, I also asked myself the following questions suggested by Riessman (2012, p.3): "Why was the story told that way? How did the local context and research relationship shape this account? What broader social discourses are taken for granted by the participants".

## **Phase 2) Coding**

Moving on from familiarisation with observational notes, coding is a more systematic process in which meaningful labels relevant to the research questions are created (Terry, Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this phase, I mainly focused on two main questions as follows in order to openly and inclusively produce codes and prepare well for theme development.

First, it is crucial to decide whether to build a rich description of the data or a more detailed account of one specific aspect (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For philosophical and theoretical reasons, I chose the latter. Instead of identifying the themes within the surface meanings of the data, I intended to explore detailed ideas beyond what a participant said (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and provide the participants' accounts by theorising the socio-cultural contexts. This position can be understood as follows. According to Burr (2006), a thematic analysis at the latent level tends to derive from a constructionist paradigm. In this framework, individuals' words are focused upon in the research, "and the researcher interprets how these words produce particular realities within the speaker's and hearer's culture" (Terry, Clarke & Braun, 2017, p.21). It is important to note, as Riessman (2012) claims, the experiences of tellers and interactions between tellers and listeners are deeply situated in contexts, in particular cultural milieux. Meanwhile, from a psychoanalytic perspective, I argue that data analysis is driven by rationalising the self-descriptions of participants, who are allowed by the researcher to say how it is for them (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). As I mentioned before, I took the importance of the whole in understanding a part into consideration (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). By doing so, I could also observe contradictions and inconsistencies in the whole textual data. A thematic analysis at the latent level can also work in psychoanalytic interpretations (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). I hope to produce interpretations by working with participants' accounts in a more flexible way. Two questions therefore need to be carefully asked in the analytic process. The first one is 'whose voice?'. The second is 'what is the participant's

emotional experience?’ I will focus on these two questions in detail in the next section on the evaluation of analysis, where I consider them in relation to the validity of the data analysis.

Second, to code in a more flexible way, both theoretical and inductive modes of thematic analysis were applied to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data that is collected in an inductive thematic analysis is data driven. However, the researcher cannot only code the data in a theoretical and “an epistemological vacuum” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12). Thus, the analytic process was conducted dynamically from the ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’.

### **Phase 3) Identifying core narratives and developing potential narrative themes**

This phase naturally unfolded by developing a deep understanding of the interactive dance between myself and the data in Phases 1 and 2. As Terry, Clarke and Braun (2017) suggest, themes are constructed instead of emerging in this phase. I argue that the researcher acts as an ‘active’ creator by iteratively, reflectively and reflexively engaging with the data. It is worth noting that the researcher should consciously reflect back on the specific research questions, since “the qualitative data are often rich and enticing, it is easy to get lost in analysis” (Terry, Clarke & Braun, 2017, p.27). To focus on the quality of theme development, identifying the relationships between and the distinctive boundaries of each theme was emphasised in this phase of analysis. However, I argue that a narrative should not be simply divided into a series of themes (Hiles, Cermak & Chrz, 2017). As Riessman (2012) claims:

Selection of segments for closer analysis – the textual representation of a spoken narrative we create and the boundaries chosen – is strongly influenced by the researcher’s evolving theory, disciplinary leanings, and research questions. In these ways, the investigator variously ‘infiltrates’ a transcript (p.9).

In the research, clear boundaries were difficult to define in the stories told by the participants. For better organisation of the data into themes in narrative inquiry, I focused on answering five main questions as below:

1. What are the bounded motifs among core personal narratives?
2. What are the unbounded motifs in each core personal narrative?
3. What are the bounded motifs among themes?
4. What are the unbounded motifs in each theme?
5. How do I represent the data dynamically?

The fifth question could be asked, answered and modified delicately in the iterative and reflective process of engagement with the data through answering the first four. In order to support this phase of theme development, I utilised a technique in my analytical work inspired by Herman and Vervaeck (2019) and the screenplay structure developed by Hiles, Cermak and Chrz (2017). The textual data was broken down into two narratological concepts, *fabula* and *sjuzet* (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). According

to Hiles, Cermak and Chrz (2017, p.166), *fabula* can be viewed as “the sequence of events being related” and *sjuzet* is described as “how the story is being told”. By using this technique, I could identify important narratives and focus on both the quality of the selected narratives and the psychological processes therein. In this way, participants’ personal narratives were re-told by the researcher and then represented to the readers. Most importantly, it is possible to imagine that a gleam of satisfactions and inspirations that the re-telling which should involve can be found in every re-told story (Hiles, Cermak & Chrz, 2017). However, I adopted this technique slightly, to largely emphasise *sjuzet* and reduce my focus on *fabula*, following the six-part model proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1997). I felt that *fabula* was not the crucial focus in the interview conversations between the parents and me. As I mentioned before, I view stories as experience-centred instead of event-centred in narrative inquiry. When reframing the narratives by utilising this technique, the fluctuations and shifts in participants’ sense of self could be specifically observed and presented a negotiable opportunity for me to pay attention to “further authentic threads into that story” (Hiles, Cermak & Chrz, 2017, p.159).

It is notable, however, that narratives are not suggested to be simply divided into themes (Hiles, Cermak & Chrz, 2017). Similarly, as Reissman (2008, p.53) argues, we should “keep a story ‘intact’ by theorising from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases”. In this research, I reframed the core narratives of parents and interpreted a narrative as “intact” in each individual case



(Reissman, 2008, p.53). This process was influenced by the aims of this research, emergent and prior theoretical choices, the data, and cultural factors.

**Phase 4) Re-transcribing the core narratives and revisiting the themes – conducting a ‘poetic’ reading of the account**

We picture ourselves as having known something that we did not know or not known something that we did know.

Bergson (1910, p.174)

**Re-transcribing the core narratives**

In this section, I will focus on representing two aspects, the re-transcribing and revisiting of the data. The reframed narratives of participants were analysed and then interpreted as a unique creation by the researcher in view of the data, the purpose of research, emergent and prior theoretical choices, and cultural factors in the research. In my application of a social constructionist approach, analytic narratives are co-constructed at different and connected levels; firstly, at the interactional level (the interview context and the research process) and secondly, the broader social and cultural context (Bakhtin, 1981; Riessman, 2008). In other words, I argue that construction of narrative is viewed as a consistent and flowing process “between stories within any one text” (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014, p.5). By utilising this construct, the “constantly changing elements” should be emphasised in the analytic

process (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014), which is in line with Riessman's (1993) views that meaning is contextual, fluid and ambiguous rather than fixed and universal.

From this perspective, the analytical work and shifts of meanings have unfolded throughout the whole process of the current research. As Riessman (2002) suggests, the researcher should not only focus on transcripts in narrative analysis. In what follows, meanings are shifted from what the parents say about their experiences and how they tell their narratives within their positioned resources, to what and how I, as an audience, understood the parents' personal narratives within my own positioned resources in the research process of interviewing, transcribing, translating, analysing and writing, to what and how other positioned audiences understand the retold stories. In other words, meanings are encoded "in the form of the talk, and expand outward" (Riessman, 1993, as cited in Emerson & Frosh, 2004).

Being mindful of encoding meanings from the inside, I drew on Gee's (1991) poetic line breaks (Emerson & Frosh, 2004), when re-transcribing selected participant core narratives. In Gee's words (1991, p.2), "the discourse structure of a text (in the current discussion, a narrative text), at a variety of different levels, functions to set up a series of *cues* or, better put *interpretative questions*". I argue that 'cues' internal to the text, which emerge from how the text is actually worded, provide the researcher with possibilities to explore. Questions "must be answered by any acceptable interpretation" (Gee, 1991, p.2), while answers may be constrained by how 'cues' appear in the text. In Gee's approach to narrative, the text can be divided into the

following narrative units: *strophes*, *stanzas*, and *lines* “in terms of ideas units, focuses, and lines” (Gee, 1991, p.23). However, mindful of the original account being in Chinese and my own limits when using English, the analytical ideas for language-in-use are borrowed from Gee’s approach, supporting my choices of ideas, units and focuses in order to respect parents’ accounts in Chinese, which are translated and represented in English. Considering my research aims and utilising Gee’s linguistic approach to narrative, I privilege the participant’s voice by focusing on how the participant tells the story through the textual structure and coherence (Young & Jackson, 2011). This therefore provides a ‘bottom-up’ narrative analysis. Drawing on Gee’s linguistic approach to narrative, the re-transcribed narratives in this research are organised into lines, then thematically and successively organised into stanzas, strophes, and parts. The data outcomes, organised by following Gee’s approach, will be represented in the next chapter.

### **Revisiting the data**

Being aware that “subjects are performed into existence during and by their narrative telling” (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014, p.6), I feel that it is always important to iteratively revisit parents’ accounts and the researcher’s retold narratives and themes. As I discussed previously, I can thus observe my accounts and recognise the changes in my own journey into family and play. Consequent changes may occur in my research and the researcher could notice inconsistencies (Hollway, 1989). For example, I wrote, “doing narrative research really triggers some negative personal

emotions” in my research diaries. After some time went by, I recorded that “what is most beautiful for me in doing this research is to deal with parents’ voices with an aesthetic sense [...] [this] may become a great portal for some amazing insights”. The joy of doing this research changed what I observed from parents’ words and how I felt these words. However, I also hope that parents’ original narratives are not threatened by this creative process because conscious decisions made by the researcher might shape the texts they encounter (Riessman, 2008). In the process of creating frameworks for meaning and new possibilities, it is crucial for me to respect parents’ narratives, which are the basic building blocks in this research.

#### **Phase 5) Interpreting: thicken the reading of the data**

In contrast to standard thematic analysis, data were interpreted by also applying psychoanalytic techniques (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) which include “analysing participants’ personal biographies, applying psychoanalytic concepts to narrative material and analysing the research relationship drawing on the field notes” (Frosh & Young, 2017, p.134). Furthermore, in the process of re-transcribing and analysing the data, to some extent, I also slightly drew on discursive analysis as developed by Gee (2004).

‘Language-in-use’ serves as a crucial tool to construct things (Gee, 2004). According to Gee (2004), whenever we write and speak, we simultaneously build or construct seven areas of the human experience which include identities, activities, relationships, significance, connections, sign systems and knowledge, and politics (the distribution

of social goods). Situated meanings are highlighted in discursive analysis. From this perspective, participants' narratives can be analysed and interpreted in a two-way process: "a movement from context to language and from language to context" (Gee, 2004, p.14). Here, I agree with Gee's suggestion concerning the use of one particular method; that a method serves as a set of 'thinking devices' instead of a 'step-by-step' set of rules to investigate certain questions. In the analytical process, I sought to understand parents' accounts through these seven areas of the human experience (seven building tasks) to enrich my interpretation. However, I do not claim that all these areas of the human experience are apparent in all participants' accounts. Alternatively, I can remain open-minded and ask questions based on these seven building tasks. I list these seven building tasks below in Table 3.2 (Gee, 2004, p.11-13; p.98-101).

**Table 3.2 Seven building tasks**

Seven building tasks	Description
Significance	<p>how and what different things mean – the sorts of meaning and significance they are given – is a component of any situation.</p> <p>question: how is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?</p>
Activities	<p>some activity or set of activities is a component of any situation (the specific social activity or activities in</p>

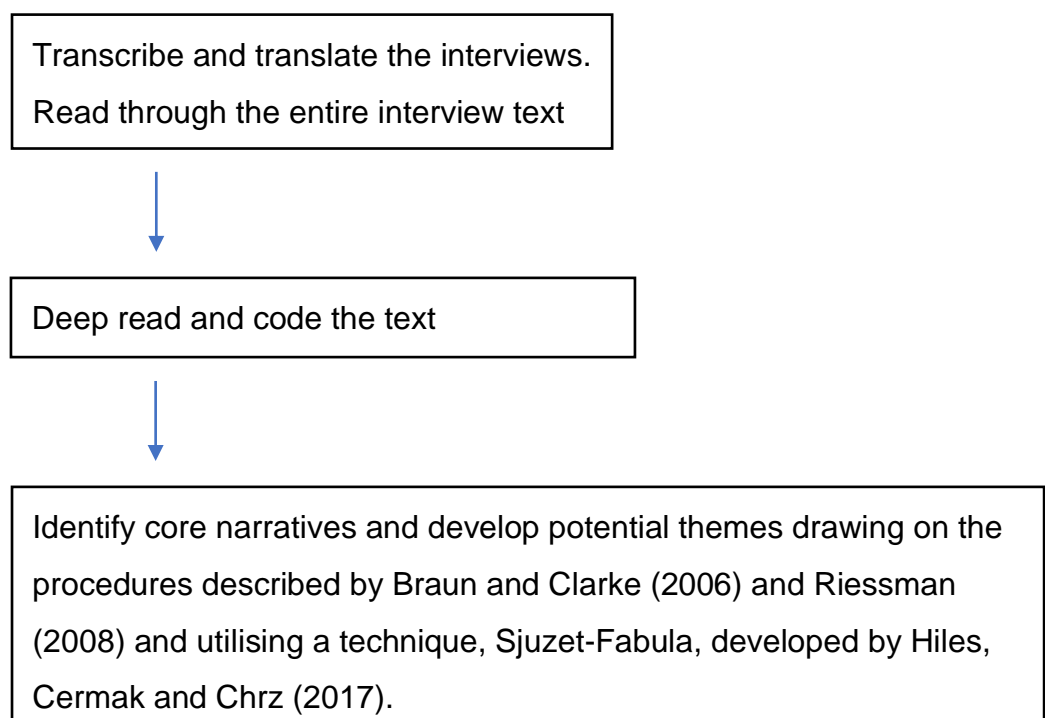
	<p>which the participants are engaging; activities are, in turn, made up of a sequence of actions).</p> <p>question: what activity or activities is this piece of language being used to enact?</p>
Identities	<p>any situation involves identities as a component, the identities that the people involved in the situation are enacting and recognizing as consequential.</p> <p>question: what identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact?</p>
Relationships	<p>any situation involves relationships as a component, the relationships that the people involved enact and contract with each other and recognise as operative and consequential.</p> <p>question: what sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others?</p>
Politics (the distribution of social goods)	<p>any situation involves social goods and views on their distribution as a component.</p> <p>question: what perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating?</p>
Connections	<p>in any situation things are connected or disconnected, relevant or irrelevant to each other, in certain ways.</p>

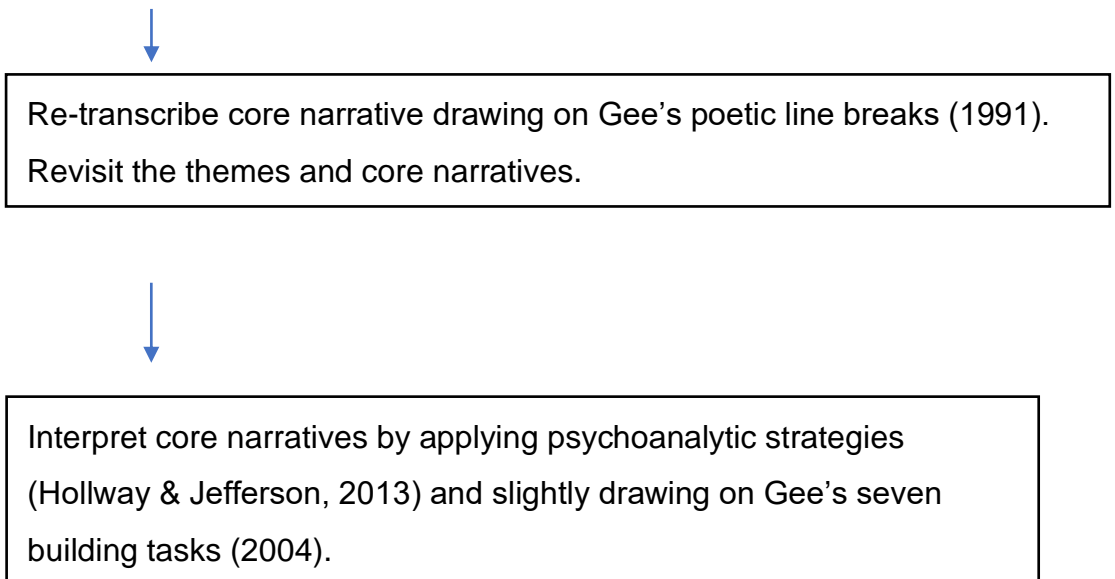
	question: how does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?
Sign systems and knowledge	in any situation, one or more sign systems and various ways of knowing are operative, oriented to, and valued or disvalued in certain ways.  question: how does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign system?

### Summary of the process of analysis

Summary descriptions of the process of analysis are outlined in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Brief outline of procedures of narrative analysis**





### **3.8.2 Validation**

In qualitative research, the question “what are the limits on interpretation?” is generally asked by researchers (Frosh & Young, 2017, p.130). How confident can a researcher be in the empirical accuracy of their interpretations? According to Polkinghorne (2007, p.474), “a degree of validity or confidence is given to a claim that is proportionate to the strength and power of the argument used by a researcher to solicit readers’ commitments to it”. From this perspective, the validation process is an argumentative practice for accepting validity of both “the collected evidence” and “the offered interpretation” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.478).

For narrative researchers, the ‘truths’ here in research refer to ‘narrative truths’ (Spence, 1982) or ‘provisional truths’ (Frosh & Young, 2017). The concerns of validity are that narrative accounts serve both as evidence for personal meaning and the interpretation of collected narratives. As mentioned in the previous section, I



consider two questions in relation to the validity of the data analysis. The first is ‘what is the participant’s emotional experience?’ The second is ‘whose voice?’ These two questions are the main highlights in considering validity.

### **Felt meaning**

It is not that we “feel emotions” so much as we do them.

Gergen (2009, p.102)

According to Polkinghorne (2007, p.480), the validity issue for the presented accounts expressed by participants is about “how well they are understood” to reflect participants’ experienced meanings. Given the complexity and depth of actual meaning experienced by parents, I, as the interviewer, encouraged parents to bring how they felt about a situation into awareness through their own reflections and analogical and metaphorical expressions (Polkinghorne, 2007). Thus, I encouraged parents’ self-explorations as a portal to the deeper meaning of their life experience. However, my practice only offered an opportunity to my participants to join this co-creation of interviews since their choices were totally accepted and respected by me and parents could be affected by me dynamically in many ways (Mishler, 1986), such as by my agenda and demeanour (Polkinghorne, 2007). In previous sections on eliciting data in narrative inquiry and reflexivity, I reviewed my interactions with parents in terms of building up a trustworthy research environment and assisting them to be more open in our interviews.

## **Parents' voices? Or multiple voices?**

From a constructionist perspective, “it is not individuals who come together to create relationships, but relationships that are responsible for the very conception of the individual” (Gergen & Gergen, 2007, p.465). On the one hand, participants were invited to describe and express on their own behalf (Lather & Smithies, 1997, as cited in Gergen, 2007). In my analytic process, instead of attempting to seek coherence among different perspectives, I sought diverse views in parents’ accounts in order to respect participants’ life experience. In the next section, participants’ narratives will also be selectively and originally represented. Readers will encounter and then construct participants’ narratives “which [...] emerged from the encounter” in their own ways (Salmon & Riessman, 2013, p.199). I agree that all narratives are fundamentally co-constructed because the audience are actively involved in the creating process (Salmon & Riessman, 2013). On the other hand, by adopting the social constructionist perspective, that “knowledge is negotiated and invented” (Frosh & Young, 2017, p.127), I frequently reflect on my investment in this research to avoid “a sense of holistic closure” (Frosh & Young, 2017, p.127) or “a single, integrative conclusion” (Gergen & Gergen, 2007, p.468). The multiple voices of participants and listeners, who possess multiple ways of narrating, potentially provide abundant perspectives and interpretations. However, in this research, I did not regard the participants as co-researchers in the current research. As I mentioned before, I did not invite participants to talk from their own perspectives about their involvement, their

narratives, and my interpretations after the interviews. The reasons for this are discussed in the ethics section.

### **As an aesthetic process of ‘playing’ with data**

To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition. Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic. To give the mind this free play is not to encourage toying with a subject, but is to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from its subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim. Mental play is open-mindedness, faith in the power of thought to preserve its own integrity without external supports and arbitrary restrictions. Hence free mental play involves seriousness, the earnest following of the development of subject-matter.

Dewey (1910, p.232-233)

I read and understand this as that when I do my narrative research, an ‘ideal mental condition’ is to be able to play with the subject both seriously and with intellectual curiosity and flexibility, rather than dogmatism and prejudice. In this perspective becoming a narrative inquirer is more than learning narrative techniques (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In addition, I agree that academic writing is a consideration of making intelligent choices, rather than following rigid rules (Sword, 2012). As a

narrative researcher, I give myself permission, as well as space and time, to play with data explicitly involving serious matters. The following quotation provides what I discussed in the previous chapter: the philosophical value of investigation in research

He [sic, throughout] overlooks none of its finest points and therefore carries it out to its breadth and greatness. He pursues the course of the meaning and therefore raises it to its greatest brilliancy, for the original nature of the mind is extremely broad and great (inclusive). If the individual is not able to reach the state in which he omits none of its most excellent and minute points, his mind has been obscured and obstructed by selfish desires, the least of which he has not been able to overcome.

Wang (1916, p.182)

As I type Wang's quote here, I take my statement to heart: touch the present moment and let my narrative writing breathe. My academic writing is the only place I can meet with my readers. I hope that readers will feel inspired by the aesthetic play in my narrative research as represented in my writing. Readers may thereby be enabled to re-interpret and re-create the 'lived experiences' of parents from their own points of view (Kim, 2016).

To this extent, being mindful of issues of validity in this narrative research, fidelity should be ensured in my academic narrative writing (Kim, 2016). Here, Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) takes the concept of fidelity from Madeleine Grumet's

statement: “Fidelity rather than truth is the measure of these tales” (as cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p.26). According to Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), a situation is treated as an object of truth, while fidelity is being true to the situation in relationships. For me, as a narrative researcher, this means it is crucial to be coherent and faithful in how I represent the interrelationships between epistemology, ontology, methodology and ethics while ‘dancing’ in the in-betweenness; the trust placed in the researcher by the teller for honouring and respecting the narratives of the teller. Admittedly, even participants reconstruct their stories based on their own purposes in telling their stories. From this perspective, narrative inquiry can be viewed as an artistic process in which an artificial endeavour exists within layers of intention and reconstruction (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

In my practice, maintaining fidelity is only served as a way of art “with its power of redescription of reality” (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 8) by honouring and respecting the narratives of parents, as mentioned previously. Iser (1974, p.274) suggests, “The artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic refers to the realization accomplished by the reader”. I hold the view that every word we say to ourselves and others has power and may transform how we experience life. Considering my own limitations in working with English as my second language, my endeavour in doing so will be commented upon and critiqued by my readers.

### **3.9 Data outcomes**

#### **3.9.1 Research questions**

My research title is as follows:

Constructing play and relational self: Chinese parents' narratives of parent-child relationships in early years

My focused research questions are identified as follows:

How do parents experience play in their daily interactions?

How is the relational self constructed in play-based interactions?

### **3.9.2 Narrative case study**

Simons (2009, p.21) suggests that a case study is defined as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’”. Within this definition, a case study serves as a choice of what to investigate instead of a methodological choice (Starman, 2013). I agree; moreover, I argue that a case could be studied from different perspectives by the methods chosen in the research. As I discussed in Chapter 2 on methodology, three families voluntarily participated in my research. During the analytic process of parents' accounts, each individual was basically investigated as a unit of a system. Each of the participants has their own unique life experience, which was deeply investigated in each case in the analytical process. In order to understand parents and their interventions with their children as a bounded system, selected stories across cases in one family will also be represented below in terms of my research questions. I hope to learn something by looking carefully at each individual

case with an open mind, rather than “in the hope of proving anything” (Eysenck, 1976, as cited in Simon, 2009, p.41-42).

Reflections: I was quite unsure about choosing appropriate methods of analysis when working with these individual cases. In my practice of developing themes, as I discussed in Chapter 2 on methodology, I reframed parents’ core narratives into stories which were presented as *Gestalts*. I interpreted a narrative as ‘intact’ in each individual case, influenced by the aims of this research, emergent and prior theoretical choices, the data, and cultural factors. In keeping stories whole, stories can be felt and interpreted more powerfully.

### 3.9.3 Map of themes and core narratives

For providing readers with a description of identified narrative themes, identified core narratives (Table 3.3) will be represented.

**Table 3.3 Identified narratives and themes**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Location in thesis</b>
<b>4.2 Jessica</b>	‘Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving’	Funnelling creativity into parent-child relations and turning into creative self in play	4.2.1
	‘Picking her shoes up’	Struggling with anger and setting out on the road of	4.2.2

		emotionally creative living in narrative	
<b>4.3 Rob</b>	‘I study lottery...it is a kind of relaxation’	Studying lottery projects in fields of football and basketball as a transitional space	4.3.1
	‘It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day’	Searching for potentials to defend against conflict which is caused by the way he works through inner dialogue	4.3.2
<b>4.4 Jasmine</b>	‘You’re (I’m) getting overwhelmed and bored’	Struggling with anxiety and the environmental provision	4.4.1
	‘I create a poster on the wall’	Single voice instead of multiple voices	4.4.2
	‘My husband, I, and my kids go to grandma’s house in the countryside every weekend’	Flow movement in the co-action	4.4.3
<b>4.5 Mathew</b>	‘Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around ‘	A developing self and practicing to be a father	4.5.1
	‘I like to play outdoor sports with him’	Playing together with the child as a transitional space for a	4.5.2



		parent	
<b>4.6 Jason</b>	‘Playing with children in the family should be divided into two parts...physical play and psychological play’	Exploring Jason’s unique understanding of play in the condition of relational life	4.6.1
	‘We will support him if he wants to be more independent’	Being perceptive and supporting the child to use transitional objects	4.6.2
<b>4.7 Olivia</b>	‘For the family, I don’t worry a lot about it’	A need for developing the emotional communication	4.7.1
	‘To let him experience it...I just accompany him’	Taking comments on emotional communication a step further	4.7.2

## **Chapter 4 Reading of core narratives**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Following emotional concerns, as discussed in Chapter 2, free association techniques are utilised in data collection practices. Narrative data is produced by simply encouraging participants to express themselves on and around the research topic (Frosh & Young, 2017). In light of the data, the purpose of research, emergent and prior theoretical choices, and cultural factors in the research, participants' narratives are reframed, analysed and then interpreted as a creation by the researcher. Therefore, six participants' core stories will be represented by utilising Gee's poetic line breaks (1991). In this chapter, narratives are selected and interpreted based on their thematic relevance to this research to understand these six people clearly. Then I will provide further discussions concerning research outcomes, methodology, literature review, and research questions.

### **4.2 Case study: Jessica**

In this section, I will represent two core stories about Jessica. In the first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.2.1, Jessica describes her experience of delivering a cup of water to her daughter. In the second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.2.2, Jessica describes a story about choosing shoes for her daughter before going to kindergarten in a morning.

#### 4.2.1 ‘Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving’: Funnelling creativity into parent-child relations and turning into creative self in play

Core narrative extract ‘Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jessica describes her experience of delivering a cup of water to her daughter.

##### **Part 1: I’m a courier**

**Strophe 1:** A cup of water was delivered to my daughter

**Stanza 1:** she locked her bedroom door

1. I ASKED her to drink some water

2. BUT she LOCKED her bedroom door

3. just now

**Stanza 2:** I used delivery as a way

4. I used DELIVERY as a way

5. to ATTRACT her attention

**Stanza 3:** She felt happy to open the door

and drink water

6. and THEN she FELT VERY HAPPY to

open her door

7. and DRINK water

**Stanza 4:** It will be difficult to directly ask

her to open the door

8. IF you JUST ASK her to OPEN her door

DIRECTLY

9. it will be DIFFICULT

**Stanza 5:** She will have hard feelings to do

as you wish

10. BECAUSE she won’t open her door

11. or sometimes will have HARD

FEELINGS to do AS YOU WISH

**Strophe 2:** It’s a different way of doing

something

**Stanza 6:** Your delivery is arriving

12. PLEASE open your door

13. YOUR delivery IS ARRIVING

**Stanza 7:** She found it funny

14. and she found it FUNNY

15. and she WOULD LIKE TO open her  
door

16. then she GOT THIS cup of water

**Stanza 8:** She felt like receiving something

17. she FELT LIKE RECEIVING  
something

18. that was DELIVERED to her

**Stanza 9:** We can try different ways of  
doing something

19. I think sometimes we CAN TRY  
DIFFERENT ways of doing something

20. and these ways will AROUSE her  
INTEREST and MOTIVATION

**Stanza 10:** it is better than just asking her to  
drink water

21. maybe the effect will be BETTER  
THAN

22. JUST ASKING her to drink water

23. or FORCING her to drink water

24. well I think it's HARD to RAISE a child

**Part 2: Behind these ideas**

**Strophe 3:** Communication

**Stanza 12:** I will give you a treat if you  
drink your water

25. she DOESN'T HABITUALLY drink  
MUCH water

26. in daily life I would say

27. Yaya PLEASE HURRY UP

28. DRINK your water

29. if you DRINK your water

30. I will GIVE you a treat

**Stanza 13:** But sometimes I force her to  
drink water

31. but sometimes I would also FORCE  
HER to drink water

32. and tell her IF she DOES NOT drink  
MUCH water

33. she will GET SICK

**Stanza 14:** Maybe this way was the best for  
her

34. anyway I HAVE TRIED DIFFERENT  
ways

35. maybe THE WAY I used just now

36. was the BEST FOR HER

37. it also depends on her MOOD

38. and WHAT WAYS she is COMFORTABLE with

**Stanza 15:** She has a lack of initiative

39. she DOES NOT actually TAKE INITIATIVE to drink water

40. she has a LACK OF INITIATIVE in MANY things

41. she DOES NOT know what she OUGHT TO DO

**Stanza 16:** She has changed in this half a year

42. she HAS CHANGED in this HALF A YEAR

43. she has MORE AND MORE IDEAS

44. and her EXPRESSION ABILITY is getting BETTER AND BETTER

**Stanza 17:** I feel headache when getting alone with her

45. so sometimes I HAVE QUITE A HEADACHE

46. in the process of GETTING ALONG WITH HER

The above extract was reformed by removing the interviewer's parts for the reason as follows. Readers can see, feel, and analyse Jessica's narrative without the researcher's words in the interviews. However, the researcher's questions and subjectivity throughout the interviews can serve as clues for the interpretation. Thus, I will provide the researcher's questions and subjectivity in the following discussion.

The above narrative begins with the researcher prompting Jessica's play with her daughter. In the above extract, Jessica's narrative begins with a description of a little

game with her daughter which she creates by herself. This game had just happened before our first interview was taken. I noticed that both Jessica and Yaya, her daughter, enjoyed this little game. Jessica states that it is difficult to ask her daughter directly or force her to do something. In contrast, Jessica tries different ways, which may arouse her daughter's interest and motivation. Striving for effective communication within Jessica and her daughter's relationships is prioritised in her narrative above.

I argue that Jessica and her daughter typically could not reach a consensus on what happened. For example, Jessica states that '*I force her to drink water*' and '*she has a lack of initiative*'. There was a standstill within Jessica and Yaya's communication as Jessica suggested that if she forced her daughter to drink water, Yaya would not open her door. From the perspective of the relational self, creative acts are viewed as relational actions (Gergen, 2009). Jessica constructs herself as a courier in their playing, and her daughter constructs it as funny and feels comfortable within the core narrative. I feel that her creative innovation breaks out of a standstill within their communication. I argue that Jessica's core narrative is thus an account of funnelling creativity into parent-child relations.

Her daughter, Yaya, provided an informal narrative to me after my second interview with Jessica, which offers an interesting sidelight in relation to this topic. As stated in 'Writing interview environment scenically', Yaya asked me when I would interview her. She said that she would be delighted to accept my interview. I answered that it

was my pleasure to interview her. The second interview between Jessica and me unfolded with pleasure. After our interview, I had an interesting informal conversation with Yaya. Yaya was satisfied to be ‘interviewed’. I organised our conversation into my field notes. In this conversation, I asked, *‘Is there something you want to tell your mom?’* Yaya said, *‘I want to tell her [...] I’m very happy that you play with me. I really want to make a gift to you. Let’s play together [...] My mom doesn’t like gifts. But she really likes a gift I make for her.’*

According to Yaya’s account here, I argue that Yaya enjoys the pleasure of playing together, which implies that in the process of co-action Jessica’s creative attempts are meaningful to Yaya. Consider Jessica’s core narrative above. Jessica said, *‘Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving.’* Yaya becomes a customer. At that moment, they are not a mother and a daughter. Instead, they become a courier and a customer. Drawing on Gergen’s ideas (2009), Jessica’s creative attempts may be regarded as a generative process, enriching the potentials for both Jessica and Yaya to be open to each other via their flow of co-action.

Throughout this core narrative, Jessica’s parental identity provide her with possibilities for creative play with her child. Just as importantly, Jessica claims that her daughter finds it funny and feels comfortable when she tries this way of playing. However, she acknowledges that she has quite a headache in the process of getting along with her daughter. Thus, I argue that her identity may be reconstructed and

reinforced by her creative play with her child. In Jessica's relationship with her daughter, I wonder that how Jessica's identity is constructed in her narrative.

Applying Gee's (2014, p.32-35) seven building tasks, I first pay attention to "what identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact" in Jessica's narrative. Jessica plays as a courier with her daughter, suggesting that she creatively constructs herself as a 'playmate' compared to her traditional identity as a mother. I was intrigued by how she came up with the idea of playing as a courier because I notice that she mainly speaks and acts like a mother in her responses. Jessica lives in a small town in Shandong province. Most of the time, Jessica lives with her daughter in Zhoucun. Her husband Rob works in another town Wangcun which is merely half an hour's drive from Zhoucun. They gather together for three or four days each week. Jessica's primary focus is on rearing her daughter Yaya. As a housewife, she has no experience working in society. In the first meeting before the interviews, she told me that she keenly wanted to work when Yaya grew out of her teen years. It seems that 'mother' is a significant identity for Jessica.

Instead of temporal sequencing of narratives, the emotion is represented as a route into unconscious logic (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). At this point, I feel that emotion governs the germination of ideas. One of my field notes provides an important perspective on how Jessica's emotional changes influence my interview questions. I wrote, *'I was so excited to see the process of their play. I was planning to ask Jessica deeper questions about how she created this play. But it actually didn't work because*



*she, as a mother, was mostly focus on her daughter instead of herself.*' My field notes suggest that perhaps what and how she narrates in her narrative, our interview, and the research relationship can reveal her unique truths (Riessman, 2000). As illustrated in the core narrative, Jessica mentions that she has a headache in getting along with her daughter, and she thinks that it is hard to raise a child. For Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.51), "what [...] we notice" is associated with working with qualitative data. I noticed and felt that Jessica was stressed and anxious when narrating her stories in the position of a mother. From a social construction perspective, emotion is a possession of relations, but not of personal minds (Gergen, 2009). In Jessica's case, I feel that perhaps I need to focus on how she constructs the identity of a mother in her relationships and how the identity of a mother influences her construction in relation to play.

Accordingly, observing her evident emotion for a moment, I asked, '*What makes you feel headache?*' She answered, '*for example, she talks back.*' while smiling reluctantly. To explore more about this, I asked, '*Do you have any special memories?*' She then answered:

*I find that she has a strong sense of self-esteem now. For example, if she wore clothes she thought were pretty, she would be very confident and excited that day. I didn't agree with her choices sometimes. But she thought she was beautiful. I think it is necessary to advise her to consider other choices, and meanwhile, I don't want to impose something upon her. I respect her choices. Sometimes I just want her to have an eye on the things she doesn't try before.*

*You can force yourself to do something or try to accept something new for yourself. I want her to know that. Don't be too wilful. She always does things she thinks she wants to do so. She could sometimes listen to others' voice. I think this is very important to her. She could consider others' voices which may be beneficial for her. Maybe at her age, she cannot overthink as we do. She may be simply thinking that she wants to do something she likes to, and she will not do it if she doesn't like it. So sometimes, I choose to respect her. I will slowly let her know something I understand until she is old enough to understand the complex notions.*

At least until now, I argue that two significant points are shown herein. First, it seems that Jessica's identity in parenthood shifts. Second, inconsistencies may arise in Jessica's account between tuning into one's agency as one 'does things she thinks she wants to do so' and utilising external validation. Initially, Jessica acknowledges that she sometimes forces her daughter to do things, but she describes that it is difficult to ask her daughter to do things directly because her daughter wants to do as she wishes. It seems that her old ways of being a mother frustrate her.

Further on in the narrative, Jessica mentions that she has tried different ways of doing things to raise Yaya's interest and motivation such as playing as a courier. And then, Jessica describes her daughter as having strong sense of self-esteem, drawing on an example of her choosing her own clothes. Jessica describes how Yaya would be very confident and excited when she chose her own clothes. Jessica acknowledges that

sometimes she does not agree with her daughter's choices of clothing, and she wants her daughter to look at things she has not tried before. Jessica respects her daughter's choices and educates her daughter to listen to others' voices.

Therefore, on the one hand, as 'a mother', Jessica aligns herself with creative potential and shifts the way of being with her daughter. On the other hand, Jessica's comment within the above narrative that '[Yaya] could consider others' voices' seems ambiguous. Jessica does not acknowledge her possible vulnerability here. I wonder whether Jessica feels anxious and has a sense of losing control when her daughter gradually develops her autonomy. Her ambiguous motivation emerges more vividly in the core narrative of 'picking her shoes up', analysed and discussed in the next section. It appears to me that Jessica perhaps has ambivalent feelings towards her daughter.

Feeling that her possible vulnerability and potential defences are likely to be initiated, one of my field notes offers an important point regarding how my interview attention shifts from Jessica's problems into Jessica's potentialities. I wrote in my field notes, '*I told myself in the interview: please try not to break down her walls. Instead, try to understand her and she will come down through the interviewer's compassion.*' The note suggests that showing compassion and understanding, instead of figuring out Jessica's inner world, may help Jessica open up communication emotionally. In the first interview, I felt that Jessica second-guessed what this research wanted, and she perhaps intended to answer my questions according to what a 'good' mother 'should' do. I felt that what I wrote in my field notes helped hold space for Jessica to express herself in the

research interaction. After Jessica talked about how Yaya could consider others' voices, I asked, *'Is there anything in particular that you have gone through that has impressed you?'* Jessica freely associated the narrative of *'picking her shoes up'*, in which she ran out of her patience and was cross with Yaya. This narrative will be interpreted explicitly in 4.2.2.

Back to my concerns about Jessica's depressive position, I argue that Jessica might be potentially creative but still overcome her depressive position. It is not merely because Jessica's play as a courier in her case could be something that she could trust, without falling into anxiety and anger states with herself and her objects (in 4.2.2) but also because she might interact destructively with her environment (in 4.2.2).

In summary, throughout Jessica's narrative, I argue that Jessica constructs different positions, a mother and a playmate, in relations with her daughter. As a 'mother', Jessica strives for effective communication within the mother-daughter relationship. Then her attempts to play as a courier can be viewed as a generative process. Therefore, I propose that Jessica's identity in parenthood could shift through this generative process. Meanwhile, I suggest that Jessica may need to continue exploring creative interaction with her environment for the creative self to move forward, which will be investigated explicitly in 4.2.2.

#### **4.2.2 'Picking her shoes up': Struggling with anger and setting out on the road of emotionally creative living in narrative**

Core narrative extract **'Picking her shoes up'**

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jessica describes a story about choosing shoes for her daughter before going to kindergarten in a morning.

**Part 1: Unexpected problems crop up**

7. and THEN other problems will CROP UP

**Strophe 1:** Negotiation

in the MORNING

**Stanza 1:** Taking too much time in the

8. such as PICKING HER SHOES UP

morning

9. which must give us an UNEXPECTED

1. she picks her clothes up in the morning

'SURPRISE'

2. sometimes we take TOO MUCH TIME in

**Stanza 4:** Yaya is insistent

NEGOTIATION in the morning

10. SHE can be like that sometimes

**Stanza 2:** Let Yaya choose her clothes to

11. TOO INSISTENT

wear the night before

12. NO MATTER how TOUGH my

3. it's getting BETTER now

STANCE is

4. when I REALISE that she would like to

**PART 2: Different choices, triggering**

CHOOSE her clothes BY HERSELF

**conflicts**

5. I will LET her CHOOSE what she would

**Strophe 3:** Dirty sneakers versus clean

like to wear THE NIGHT BEFORE

shoes

6. in case she takes TOO MUCH TIME to

**Stanza 5:** I told her calmly

do so the next morning

13. she WANTED to WEAR a pair of

**Strophe 2:** Other problems may crop up

DIRTY shoes one day

**Stanza 3:** picking her shoes up

14. I CALMLY told her to wear a pair of

CLEAN shoes

15. I would WASH DIRTY ONES for her

THAT DAY

16. and she could WEAR this pair of

sneakers THE NEXT DAY

**Stanza 6:** She didn't hear a word I said

17. I DIDN'T KNOW

18. it SEEMS LIKE she DIDN'T

UNDERSTAND what I had said TOTALLY

19. she INSISTED

**Stanza 7:** She cleaned her shoes by herself

20. THEN she went to the BATHROOM

21. and CLEANED her DIRTY sneakers

with wet paper

22. BUT they were STILL DIRTY

**Stanza 8:** I tried to keep cool

23. I KEPT COOL

24. and didn't LOSE MY TEMPER

**Stanza 9:** I tried to reason with Yaya

25. I told her that OTHER children LIKED

the style of her CLEAN shoes

26. and she could STILL wear her DIRTY

shoes the NEXT DAY

27. AFTER I CLEANED them

**Stanza 10:** She reluctantly wore the clean

ones

28. she RELUCTANTLY PULLED ON

CLEAN shoes

29 with actions of TRYING TO TAKE

THEM OFF

**Stanza 11:** I started throwing tantrums

30. I REALLY DIDN'T WANT her TO

WEAR the DIRTY sneakers

31. THEN I started THROWING

TANTRUMS

**Stanza 12:** She still insisted on her choice

32. BUT guess WHAT

33. she STILL INSISTED ON HER

CHOICE

34. EVEN WHEN we were LATE for

school

35. she was NOT FLEXIBLE on this matter

**Stanza 13:** I yelled at her

36. I was very HELPLESS  
37. and RAN OUT of my PATIENCE  
38. then I YELLED AT HER

**Strophe 4:** Yaya's dad stepped into this case

Stanza 14: I counted myself lucky because

her dad was at home

39. LUCKILY her dad was at home

40. I CANNOT imagine HOW to CALM

myself down in that circumstance

41. WITHOUT her DAD

42. and when NO ONE SENDS her TO

KINDERGARTEN

**Stanza 15:** Her dad helped me to persuade

Yaya

43. her dad also HELPED me to

PERSUADE YAYA

44. to WEAR the CLEAN shoes

**Stanza 16:** She went to kindergarten in her

dirty sneakers

45. WHY did she INSIST ON her CHOICE

46. HOW could she have her OWN ideas

47. she FINALLY walked away IN her

DIRTY sneakers

**Stanza 17:** as if nothing bothered her in the

morning

48. when she arrived at kindergarten

49. her dad found that she ACTED as if

NOTHING BOTHERED HER

50 it was AS IF NOTHING HAPPENED in

the morning

51. she JUST went in her classroom

52. took off her clothes

53. and THEN putted down her bag

54. it was NATURAL

55. her dad COULD NOT SEE by her face

56. that WHAT happened in the morning

MADE her FEEL UNHAPPY

**Part 3: Evaluation**

**Strophe 5:** Dynamics of our conflicts

**Stanza 18:** she didn't say what I expected

57. is it very EASY for children to FORGET

SUCH thing

58. sometimes I CANNOT STAY CALM

59. BUT she DIDN'T SAY that she MUST  
LISTEN TO ME and DOESN'T WANT to  
make me ANGRY

60. after I was LOSING my TEMPER

**Stanza 19:** I suppose that maybe she needs  
time to realise her own problems

61. MAYBE she needs time to REALISE  
her OWN PROBLEMS

62. and to CHANGE HERSELF

63. MAYBE when she STANDS OUTSIDE  
IN her DIRTY shoes

64. and SOMEONE says to her HOW  
DIRTY your shoes are

65. MAYBE she would NOT WANT TO  
WEAR her DIRTY shoes AGAIN

**Stanza 20:** But she would not listen to my  
advice

67. BUT if I TELL her

68. that her shoes ARE DIRTY

69. she WOULD NOT LISTEN TO MY  
ADVICE

70. SHE thinks

71. I LIKE TO WEAR THE shoes

72. and I CAN CLEAN them IF they GET  
DIRTY

73. I GUESS

**Stanza 21:** She will change as she wishes  
but not under pressure from parents

74. so LET her FEEL the NEED to  
CHANGE by HERSELF

75. THEN a CHANGE in her ATTITUDE  
happens

76. she will CHANGE AS SHE WISH

77. BUT NOT UNDER OTHER'S  
PRESSURE

78. NO MATTER HOW MANY good or  
bad WORDS ADULTS SAY

79. and EVEN we LOSE our TAMPER

80. she DOESN'T CARE



The above narrative starts with the researcher's question about whether anything has impressed her after Jessica suggests her daughter should consider others' voices. One of my field notes offers a piece of important information on Jessica's reaction after my question. I wrote, '*I felt that Jessica was emotional and prepared well to share something significant to her*'. According to Winnicott (2005), an individual's searching for the self emerges in his or her own time and non-purposive state. In this way, I tried to provide a supportive interview environment that Jessica could freely associate with her experience. I felt that it might be a significant experience for her to recall at that moment.

In the above extract, Jessica associates a story about choosing shoes for her daughter before going to kindergarten in a morning and how it leads to conflicts. The narrative is quite a long story in Jessica's interview. I seemed to see the scene she described at that moment because she told me this story quite emotionally. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013), the researcher should not offer judgments and interpretations when assisting narrators to say more. Otherwise, the researcher's relevancies are imposed, and thus the participant's *Gestalt* would be destroyed. With this in mind, I approached the interview with empathy and active listening.

It was an ordinary morning. Yaya had chosen what she would like to wear the night before. Jessica never imagined that '*an unexpected surprise*' was waiting for her. Yaya

was *'insistent'* on wearing a pair of dirty sneakers that morning. Jessica tried to *'calmly'* persuade her daughter to wear a pair of clean shoes and promised her daughter that she could wear that pair of sneakers the next day after washing them. However, her daughter did not accept her advice and still insisted on wearing dirty sneakers. Then her daughter went to the bathroom and cleaned her dirty sneakers with wet paper. At that point in her story, Jessica took a deep breath. She continued, *'I tried to keep cool and didn't lose my temper.'* Her deep breath was the first significant moment to me when she described her narrative. What interests me is that this is the second time she emphasises that she controlled herself. However, I felt a noticeable change in her mood this time when she described this story. In other words, she seemed to feel a stirring of anger at that moment in her narrative. There may be an interesting discursive position here: Jessica suppresses her anger.

Continuing with her narrative, Jessica's association is that *'I told her that other children liked the style of her clean shoes, and she could still wear her dirty shoes the next day after I cleaned them'*. As a result, her daughter *'reluctantly'* wore her clean shoes. It is this act by her daughter that triggers her anger. Jessica *'started throwing tantrums'*. She explains that she did not want her daughter to wear dirty sneakers. On seeing this, her daughter still insisted on her choice. In Jessica's words, her daughter was *'not flexible'*. Then Jessica yelled at her daughter. She represents herself as *'helpless'* and *'[I] ran out of my patience'*. Jessica admits that she could not imagine

how to calm herself down in that circumstance without her husband, which suggests that Jessica might interact destructively with her environment.

In this example, Winnicott's theme of transitional objects and transitional phenomena provides crucial interpretive stances for Jessica's account here. Applying Winnicott's theory (2005), Yaya's insistence on wearing her dirty shoes as an external object may trigger Jessica's inner frustration in relation to her loss of power. Towards the frustrating object: Yaya's insistence without accepting Jessica's advice, Jessica may use aggression to control her daughter's behaviour. For example, Jessica '*started throwing tantrums*' and '*yelled at her*' (Stanza 11 and 13). Towards the good object: Yaya's autonomy, Jessica may feel guilty about influencing her daughter's behaviour. For example, in the above narrative, she describes herself as knowing that her daughter might change as she wishes but not under pressure from her parents (Stanza 21). Throughout the core narrative, multiple aspects of Jessica's experience of loss, a sense of helplessness, anger, frustration, guilt and reflections, are embedded within the context.

By utilising Winnicott's theory, I assume that Jessica discovers herself concerning her experience of loss and disillusionment in her narrative. In this sense, Jessica's narrative might be viewed as a transitional space where her experience with her daughter might be reworked and reflected by her present self. For example, her experience of loss goes through some changes in her narrative. At first, Jessica might try to deny her sense of loss. She describes herself as trying to keep calm and reason

with Yaya. Gradually, Jessica feels helpless and yells at Yaya, suggesting that Jessica feels her anger and does not suppress it, leading to destructive interactions with her environment. Then, it seems that she remains in the past, trying to negotiate her way out of hurt. For example, Jessica states that her husband helps her persuade Yaya to wear clean shoes (Stanza 15). After negotiating, I argue that she might move into a depressive state because I can feel her sadness when she recalls that her daughter was sent to the kindergarten by her husband, and nothing seemed to bother Yaya. Winnicott's term 'depression' is one aspect of weaning in disillusionment (2005). According to Winnicott, the capacity of depression or sadness, as a healthy and valuable depression, can lead an individual to work through the sense of loss (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Further on in the narrative, it seems that Jessica gradually accepts her daughter's behaviour. She reflects upon the dynamics of their conflicts (Strophe 5) and feels concerned about her daughter. Winnicott suggests that "[c]oncern implies further integration, and further growth, and relates in a positive way to the individual's sense of responsibility" (1963, p.73). In the narrative, some positive changes take place in her interpretation of her daughter's behaviour; for example, '*is it very easy for children to forget such thing*' (Stanza 18), '*Maybe she needs time to realise her own problems and to change herself*' (Stanza 19), '*She thinks [...] I like to wear the shoes and I can clean them if they get dirty [...] I guess*' (Stanza 20), and '*so let her feel the need to change by herself, then a change in her attitude happens*' (Stanza 21).

It is also important to recall the informal conversation with Yaya, Jessica's daughter, which I organised in my field notes and mentioned in 4.2.1. We talked about what had happened that morning. In our conversation, I asked, '*How did you feel when your mom lost her temper?*' Yaya said, '*I felt unhappy.*' Then I asked, '*Is there anything else you want to tell your mom?*' She answered, '*I really want to tell mom [...] emm [...] please don't get angry again. Why do you always get angry at me? I'm annoyed. But mom is still angry at me. I couldn't help it. I could only cry.*' Then I asked, '*Do you still think about it when you went to kindergarten that morning?*' She said, '*Yes.*' And then, I asked, '*What will you do when it happens to you again?*' She answered, '*I will always listen to mom. I won't do that again. I will tell mom like this.*' Surprised by what she said, I asked, '*What would you do, for instance, if there is something you really want to do but your mom doesn't let you do it?*' She did not answer my question directly but gave me an example. She said, '*for example, I want to climb high to take [...] but my mom doesn't want me to do that.*' I asked, '*do you still want to climb high?*' She replied immediately, '*Yes.*' I said, '*But your mom won't let you do that, right?*' Then she said, '*I will listen to my mom. She is right. If I fall off and get injured, it is not safe.*'

From the conversation, it seems that Yaya intends to put her mother's needs ahead of her own. According to Winnicott (1960), the false self has defensive functions, hiding and protecting the true self that can creatively use objects. The sense of false self tends to be characterised by feeling futile and unreal (Winnicott, 1960). Drawing on Winnicott's concept of the false self (1960), Yaya's account of '*I will always listen to*

*mom. I won't do that again. I will tell mom like this.*' suggests that she might create a false self or mask to manage parental demands and maintain the connection. However, Yaya's account is not positioned here as something associated with assessing Jessica's mothering. Instead, Yaya, as a real person, reflects on Jessica's escalating anger. From a relational perspective, I suggest that Yaya's account might be an essential resource for Jessica to reconstruct her anger and step out of destructive interaction with her daughter that may lead to emotionally creative living (Gergen, 2009).

In summary, Jessica's narrative, which is provided about the past and exists in between Jessica and her experience, portrays a morning conflict when her daughter '*wanted to wear a pair of dirty shoes*' before going to kindergarten. For Winnicott (2005), transitional phenomena provide an individual with a space to play with 'possessions' (transitional objects), allowing the individual to recognise the inner self and external world and relationally understand differences between the Not-me and Me. I assume that Jessica searches for self in the stories of her experience of loss and disillusionment in relation to her power. In this example, it seems that Jessica's reworking and reflections in the transitional space led to her self-healing and potentially creative ways of interacting with her environment.

### **4.3 Case study: Rob**

In this section, I will explore two stories about Rob, Jessica's husband. The first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.3.1 was selected in which Rob describes his

experience in relation to his job. The second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.3.2 was selected in which Rob describes his daily routine.

### **4.3.1 ‘I study lottery...it is a kind of relaxation’: Studying lottery projects in fields of football and basketball as a transitional space**

Core narrative extract ‘I study lottery...it is a kind of relaxation’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Rob describes his experience in relation to his work.

#### **Part 1: My work as a way to relax**

8. I DON’T HAVE TIME to EXERCISE

**Strophe 1:** The connection between my

9. IF I HAVE TIME to exercise

work and I

10. this is ALSO a GOOD way to RELIEVE

**Stanza 1:** I study lottery

PRESSURE for myself

1. I’m MANAGING a LOTTERY

**Strophe 2:** How I work at the lottery betting

BETTING STATION

station

2. so I STUDY LOTTERY

**Stanza 4:** I have almost no weekends and no

3. it is a way of RELAXATION

holidays

**Stanza 2:** why I study lottery

11. I’m at the lottery betting station

4. because I LOVE this WORK

ALMOST ALL DAY from eight in the

5. I am INTERESTED IN LOTTO

MORNING to eleven at NIGHT

6. I am STUDYING LOTTO

12. I have ALMOST NO WEEKENDS and

7. this is also a kind of FUN

NO HOLIDAYS

**Stanza 3:** I don’t have time to exercise

13. I ONLY HAVE SEVEN DAYS of  
spring festival to HAVE A REST

14. the station is ALWAYS OPEN

**Stanza 5:** I study methods to help lottery  
buyers

15. EVERYONE wants to WIN in MY  
STATION

16. if you want to MAKE the BUSINESS  
BETTER

17. you need to STUDY the rules and the  
winning methods to HELP PEOPLE who  
want to GET CERTAIN BENEFITS

## **Part 2: My hobbies**

**Strophe 3:** The relationship between my  
work and hobbies

**Stanza 6:** I study lottery projects related to  
football and basketball

18. PERSONALLY I LIKE FOOTBALL  
and BASKETBALL

19. I STUDY related projects DEEPLY

20. THEN I give BUYERS  
RECOMMENDATIONS

21. what kind of games are GOOD

22. what kind of games YOU CAN WIN

23. help them MAKE SOME MONEY

24. I have TIME to STUDY this

**Stanza 7:** it is a great fun

25. I PREFER these TWO SPORT  
ACTIVITIES

26. there are JUST SUCH TWO kinds of  
LOTTERIES

27. I'm doing A LOT OF research

28. GUESS the RESULT of the game or  
something

30. anyway it is A GREAT FUN

**Strophe 4:** How I feel when I study the  
lottery

**Stanza 8:** I'm proud of myself if I can guess  
the results correctly

31. if I get it RIGHT

32. I'm EXCITED

33. and PROUD of MYSELF

34. if I can GUESS the results  
CORRECTLY



35. it is a VERY GOOD THING FOR the  
BUYERS

**Stanza 9:** I don't think about other things  
when studying the lottery

36. therefore during the period of studying  
the lottery

37. I would NOT THINK about OTHER  
THINGS

38. NO EXTERNAL FACTORS would  
AFFECT ME

39. NOR would they AFFECT my MOOD

40. EVEN IF there is something

NEGATIVE

41. I DON'T THINK about anything ELSE

42. when I GET INTO the state of  
STUDYING the LOTTERY

As illustrated in pen portraits, Rob is Jessica's husband, managing a lottery betting station (national supervision) with his parents. Rob is at the lottery betting station from eight in the morning to eleven at night. He can only have the seven days of the Spring Festival to have a rest. Rob spends most of his time concentrating on his work and does not think about anything else. He spends time with his wife Jessica and his daughter Yaya three nights a week. They do not talk much because Rob manages his business by using his phone at night. However, he plans to change his business, and then he could have more time with his family. Based on this situation, Rob's free associations are mainly focused on his work. In our interviews, Rob's narrative describing his work seems to contain many examples about searching for meaning in life.

The above extract provides me with four crucial messages. First, Rob thinks that he loves his work. Second, Rob spends most of his time working. Third, Rob combines his hobbies into his job. Forth, is his work a way of escaping from building relationships with others? Rob states that he loves his work (Stanza 1 and 2). In studying the lotto, he constructs that *'it is a way of relaxation'* and *'this is also a kind of fun'*. Here I argue that Rob constructs himself as a person who enjoys his work. In other words, it seems that he might trust his work environment.

Rob represents himself as committing his time (most of his time) to his work. In the narrative, he states that *'I'm at the lottery betting station almost all day [...] I only have seven days of Spring Festival to have a rest'*. Furthermore, he mentions that *'I usually come back home three nights a week'*, and he does not talk much with his family because he manages his business by using his phone. I wonder why Rob chooses to spend most of his time working. In his free association, he states that *'The stressful thing is worrying about money. The less money I make, the more stressed I am. Making money is my pressure'*. He seems to construct himself as striving for a better life. However, it is implied that he might not interact with her daughter and wife much in this way. For example, he associates that *'we don't communicate much at ordinary times'*.

In his narrative, Rob represents himself as combining his hobbies into his job. Applying Winnicott's theory (2005), I argue that a transitional space might be created by Rob, a resting space for Rob in which his experience will not be challenged. In the

above narrative, studying the lottery is constructed as a good way to relieve pressure by Rob. According to Winnicott (2005), the function of the transitional object and transitional phenomena is supporting an individual to create the 'breast' while providing space for an individual to figure out the difference between Not-me and Me. In this sense, studying the lottery, I argue, might be Rob's way of being with the environment-mother, a 'good-enough' space for Rob to feel enjoyment, as well as to experience a journey of progress. Correspondingly, Rob mentions that he studies lottery projects related to football and basketball '*deeply*' because he likes those two sports. In addition, Rob states that he studies the rules and winning methods to give buyers advice and make the business better. In this process, he feels '*excited*' and '*proud of me*' if he can guess the results correctly.

Furthermore, most importantly, I argue that his capacity for concern might also develop. For example, he constructs studying the lottery to be a good thing for the buyers. As for disillusionment, Rob represents himself as having a bad mood if his customers do not win the lottery in his narrative. I assume that through studying the lottery, which seems to be the transitional phenomenon for Rob, he might gradually work out that his advice for customers (Me) does not equal to his customers' choices and lottery winning results (Not-me). Thus, it seems that studying the lottery serves as a trusty transitional space for Rob.

In our interview, I noticed and felt that Rob was anxious because he walked back and forth all the time and never had eye contact with me. At the beginning of our first

interview, he told me, *'Please allow me to walk [...] only by doing so can I think.'*

However, I found that he walked slowly and felt pretty relaxed when he recalled these experiences.

His anxious state reminds me of his narrative as follows. Rob represents himself as a person who *'would not think about other things'* when he is immersed in the state of studying the lottery. My suggestion here is that Rob might construct a particular place (studying the lottery) for himself as a cave in which he seems to isolate himself and escape from frustrations in relation to his experience. There might be a paradox that a transitional space is also an isolation space. He mentions that no external factors affect him when he studies the lottery. Specifically, he suggests that he does not think about anything else when he is studying the lottery and even if there is something *'negative'*, his mood is not affected. Therefore, on the one hand, Rob feels relaxed and a sense of achievement in studying the lottery. On the other hand, studying the lottery might also be a space for Rob to avoid something *'negative'*. Here is an example from our second interview to support this point. Rob describes himself as someone who deals with his negative emotions, which are associated with his work and quarrels with family members. I asked, *'You said before that if you would concentrate on sports lottery, you would not think about the outside things. How do you deal with your negative emotions?'* He answered:

*I have nothing to do with those emotions. I just stay by myself, or I just watch some sports games or watch some movies. Anyway, I usually watch*

*some movies and watch some games when I am in a bad mood. I'm stuck there?*

I asked, 'Stuck there?' Then he answered:

*Just fight in my heart, think about that thing and ponder over this thing repeatedly. I will be well a few days later.*

I said, 'Will it be ok in a few days?' He replied:

*As time went on, I forgot those things when I got busy with my work. I felt very uncomfortable that day, took the night to sleep, thought about the thing repeatedly, and then fell asleep. In the next, I would feel much better, not as strong as the day before.*

Then, I asked, 'What kind of things will make you struggle? Is there any example you want to share now? It's okay not to share.' He answered:

*For example, if my customers don't win the lottery, I will be in a bad mood. This is usually the case. Then [...] there is the quarrel with my family which is the reason I'm in a bad mood. These are the cases. I don't have a lot of trouble. I'm in the lottery store all day.*

Then, in his narrative, Rob expresses his lack of communication when he is in conflict with Jessica. I asked, 'Can you tell me in detail [...] [about the] quarrel with the family?' He answered:

*My wife and I have an argument. Two people just don't talk. After a while, one of them surrenders. We are in cold war for two or three days. Then I take the initiative to find her and say something nice. It's not a big deal to admit a mistake [...] There is no big problem [...] just the small things in life. Some small things lead to disputes and different opinions. Maybe sometimes she thinks I nag [...] I complain [...] and then she is impatient [...] she shouts [...] I want to shout. When two people don't know what to do, it's over...*

I asked, *'Have you ever faced each other's conflicts in other ways?'* He answered:

*No, I haven't. Generally speaking, it is not a big deal to admit one's mistake and make peace. Apologise to her [...] apologise to her.*

Overall, in this example, Rob represents himself as someone who deals with his negative emotions by himself and lacks communication when he fights with Jessica. In addition, by noticing his anxiety in our interviews, I tried to support him to construct his narrative and, specifically, was very conscious of supporting his flow of thought. It was a difficult reflective and reflexive process for me in the research. Based on his narratives above and my observation in his interviews, I suggest that Rob seems not to be used to expressing his thoughts and feelings to others. Moreover, most importantly, through his interactions with his wife, I suggest that Rob might not have good-enough inner communication. According to Winnicott's theory of communication, the experience of mutual communication depends on the mother who

recognises the infant and the infant who identifies his or her inner potential to grow (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In this sense, Rob's construction of himself as always apologising to his wife after their arguments might be interpreted as a means of protecting himself from struggles (which lead to potential growth) and maintaining false peace in Rob's family. Expressly, for himself, I assume that his inner-mother and his inner-infant seem not to have mutual and good-enough inner communication for facilitating his capacity to discover and create different ways of interacting with others. Due to the lack of data about Jessica's perspectives on this issue, I cannot interpret their communication dynamics from both sides. Therefore, Rob might tend to use studying the lottery to avoid frustrations and his potential growth in interpersonal communication.

In summary, throughout the core narrative above, Rob thinks that he loves his work. In addition, Rob spends most of his time working. Moreover, Rob combines his hobbies with his job. Specifically, applying Winnicott's theory (2005), it seems that studying the lottery serves as a trusty transitional space for Rob, a good-enough space for Rob to feel enjoyment and experience a journey of progress. However, Rob might potentially construct studying lottery as a space where he seems to isolate himself and avoid something '*negative*'. Rob's account of his quarrels with Jessica, his wife, support this point. Applying Winnicott's theory of communication (2018), Rob's inner-mother and inner-infant seem not to have mutual and good-enough inner

communication for facilitating his capacity to discover and create different ways of interacting with others.

#### **4.3.2 'It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day' :**

**Searching for potentials to defend against conflict which is caused by the way he works through inner dialogue**

Core narrative extract 'It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day'

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Rob describes his daily routine

**Strophe 1:** My trouble when I work

**Stanza 1:** It takes a lot of energy to sit there

1. the TROUBLE is that you DON'T

MAKE ENOUGH MONEY

2. COMPARED WITH you GIVE IN this

WORK

3. it TAKES A LOT OF ENERGY to SIT

there

4. and TYPE 14/5 HOURS a day

**Stanza 2:** I want to quit this job

5. I want to have a PROPER

OPPORTUNITY

6. TO QUIT this JOB

**Strophe 2:** The reasons why I want to

change jobs

**Stanza 3:** I can spend my day with my

family

7. first I can SPEND my DAY with my KID

and WIFE

8. on the other hand I could GO OUT with

THEM on WEEKENDS

9. and HAVE DINNER WITH THEM in the

EVENNING

**Stanza 4:** Actually, I have no time for

anything else



- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 10. BUT I SHOULD BE IN the STORE for<br>WHOLE day            | 14. DON'T STICK to this POSITION<br>EVERY DAY        |
| 11. there's NO TIME for anything ELSE                        | 15. well there's NO WAY to HANG OUT                  |
| <b>Stanza 5:</b> I want to do something for myself           | 16. NO TIME to EAT and DRINK                         |
| 12. I CAN do something FOR MYSELF                            | 17. just STAY IN the SHOP                            |
| 13. at least I can do something with<br>RELATIVELY FREE TIME | <b>Stanza 7:</b> how I feel my life in this way      |
| <b>Stanza 6:</b> Don't stick to this position every<br>day   | 18. this kind of life is also WITHOUT ANY<br>PURSUIT |
|  | 19. and this kind of life is TOO BORING              |

In the above narrative, Rob's account starts with the trouble at work. Rob recounts how his work takes a lot of his energy, and he cannot make enough money compared with the time he devotes to his work. Rob states that he is considering quitting his job because he wants to spend more time with his family. Rob feels that he has no time for anything else and wants to do something for himself. Rob constructs the way he works as '*too boring*' and '*without any pursuit*'. It seems that his wish to interact more with his family encourages him to consider changing jobs. However, in the previous section, he states that he loves his work. I wonder why Rob is ambivalent about his position in his job.

From a relational perspective, I suggest that Rob's three identities can be found in the above narrative, a person who works, a father, and a husband. According to Gergen's

theory of multi-being (2009), we become a particular sort of person in each relationship, and how we act may become potential useful in the future. Specifically, in each relationship, “a self we become through a relationship”, “another’s way of being”, and “a choreography of co-action” are three potential sources for being (Gergen, 2009, p.137). In this sense, authenticity is viewed as a relational achievement in Gergen’s theory. It is worth noting that this relational perspective encourages openness and truthfulness in our relationships instead of focusing on a true self and a false self, as described in Winnicott’s theory. Based on Gergen’s theory, it might be misleading for us to emphasise masks in relationships when encouraging relational being. At least for now, based on my understanding, I argue that both theories, which illuminate self differently, seem to nourish our understanding of an authentic self in constructing ideas as a relational being and living as a relational being.

Importantly, we cannot ignore the differences between the relational and the early psychoanalytic vision of personal multiplicity. To distinguish one from the other, a crucial notion of “doing” is described in Gergen’s theory of relational being (2009, p.139). According to Gergen (2009), ‘doing’ means our multiple and conflicting potentials as both good and evil, which may or may not reach consciousness, can exist as intelligible action within our relationships. It reminds me that “playing is doing” in Winnicott’s theory of play (2005, p.55). In this sense, I feel that ‘doing’ from a

relational perspective seems to be playing. As Gergen (2009) suggests, “in a context where there is no dialogic tension - no voice of denial - anything is possible” (p.143).

Back to Rob’s account, from a perspective of multi-being, Rob’s multi beings, as a person who operates a lottery centre, as a father, and as a husband, seem to be represented in his inner dialogue in the above narrative. It seems that his position as a father and husband conflicts with his position as a person who operates a lottery centre. In this sense, the desire for more interactions with his family in this role as a father and a husband might lead us to question the meaning of being a person who operates a lottery centre. Specifically, in the above extract, I interpret what Rob is ‘doing’ here as seeking coherence in his life which means that he is searching for potentials to defend against conflict, which is caused by the way he works through his inner dialogue.

As mentioned before, I wonder why Rob is ambivalent about his position in his job. However, if I invite ‘inner dialogue’ into my interpretations, Rob’s narratives would not be viewed as ambivalent. Instead, his construction of the way he works as ‘*too boring*’ and ‘*without any pursuit*’ represents the inner voices of his ‘doing’ inner dialogue where voices are juxtaposed with one another, and anything remains possible (Gergen, 2009). According to Gergen (2009), each voice comes from past relationships, and certain voices are more convincing than others as they argue with one another internally. Based on the above extract, I suggest that Rob’s inner voices of ‘*I can spend my day with my kid and wife*’, ‘*I could go out with them on weekends*’, ‘*have dinner*

*with them in the evening*, *'I can do something for myself'*, and *'I can do something with relatively free time'* might be dominated and prove convincing in his inner dialogue.

Applying Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow (2002, p.40), I assume that Rob's inner battle (inner voices) seems to be a form of self-discipline, that is against the entropy which makes disorder enter into consciousness, which potentially leads to a state of flow or a state of harmony. I feel that the openness and truthfulness, which are encouraged in our relationships from a relational perspective, are situated in an environment where a person's attention can be freely focused on his or her goals as "no threats" for the self means to "defend against" and "no disorder" means to "straighten out" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.40). Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory is focused on flow experience, a state of harmony (2002). Thus, I argue that Rob's inner dialogue, presented in his narrative, maybe a battle for the self instead of against the self and potentially leads to his experiencing flow as often as possible and, I think, experiencing coherence.

In summary, Rob's multi beings, as a person who operates a lottery centre, as a father, and as a husband, seem to be represented in his inner dialogue in the above narrative. Rob's desire for more interactions with his family in his positions as a father and a husband might lead us to question the meaning of his being a person who operates a lottery centre. I suggest that Rob's 'doing' inner dialogue might be constructed as playing in which he seeks coherence in his life. In other words, through his inner dialogue, Rob is searching for potentials to defend against conflict caused by the way

he works. Meanwhile, Rob's inner dialogue seems to be a battle for the self in which disorder is brought into consciousness.

#### **4.4 Case study: Jasmine**

In this section, I will investigate three stories about Jasmine. In the first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.4.1, Jasmine describes her anxiety about being two kids' mother. In the second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.4.2, Jasmine describes her creation of a poster on the wall. In the third re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.4.3, Jasmine describes her weekend with her kids and husband.

##### **4.4.1 'You're (I'm) getting overwhelmed and bored': Struggling with anxiety and the environmental provision**

Core narrative extract 'You're (I'm) getting overwhelmed and bored'

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jasmine describes her anxiety about being two kids' mother.

###### **Part 1. Anxiety in educating two kids**

**Strophe 1:** My parenting matters

**Stanza 1:** I think education from parents is critical

1. it does NOT say that CHILDREN are BORN to be BAD children

2. it's just a MATTER of your

PARENTING and your EDUCATION

3. I think EDUCATION from PARENTS is CRUCIAL

**Stanza 2:** I think a lot every night

4. I THINK TOO MUCH

5. EVERY NIGHT

**Strophe 2:** Communication with one of my friends

**Stanza 3:** Sometimes I would persuade my friend

1. sometimes I would PERSUADE my friend

2. DON'T LISTEN to your mother-in-law and father-in-law

3. DON'T DO THAT

**Stanza 4:** How to take care of two kids

4. two children are BROUGHT UP TOGETHER

5. you at least TAKE GOOD CARE OF the ELDEST brother

6. so he can be MORE INDEPENDENT

7. THEN you go to TAKE CARE OF the YOUNGER one

8. you have EXPERIENCE and PATIENCE

**Strophe 3:** I'm getting overwhelmed and bored

**Stanza 5:** Multi-tasks to do

1. if you HAVE TWO CHILDREN

2. you HAVE TO WORK

3. and you HAVE SO MANY CHORES to do

4. you are getting OVERWHELMED and BORED

**Stanza 6:** I question myself

5. why CAN'T I DO it

6. why THEY DO IT SO WELL

7. why MY CHILDREN ARE NOT GOOD

8. that was WHAT I DID

**Stanza 7:** I feel anxious

9. ANXIETY

10. THIS IS THE REASON

11. I'm MUCH BETTER THAN BEFORE

**Stanza 8:** I can't control my temper

12. it may be a little ANNOYING during or near your period

13. I CAN'T CONTROL MYSELF

14. I'm just BORED

15. THEN I WANT TO LOSE my

TEMPER in front of MY CHILDREN

16. and I begin to BLAME MYSELF

**Stanza 9:** Xixi (my younger daughter) told

me that losing temper was not good

17. Xixi ASKED me WHY I DID THAT

18. and told me that WAS NOT GOOD

**Part 2: When I was in a bad mood, it was**

**because of my husband**

**Strophe 4:** The relationship between me and

my husband

**Stanza 10:** When I was in a bad mood, it

was because of you

19. I said to my husband to buy a quote

hanging on the wall

20. I told him that WHEN I WAS IN a BAD

MOOD

21. it was BECAUSE OF HIM

22. he's CHANGING NOW

**Stanza 11:** I need to be understood

23. I said to HIM

24. that as A WOMAN

25. I NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD

26. and a man COME UP BEHIND ME

27. and say it's OKAY

28. I NEED A MAN LIKE THAT

**Stanza 12:** When I'm in trouble, you push

me out

29. NOT EVERY time I'm IN TROUBLE

30. you PUSH me OUT

31. you PUSH me INTO the WIND

32. you let me STAND IN YOUR WAY

33. I said that you need to CHANGE

**Stanza 13:** When my husband cares more

about me, my attitude towards children are

changing

34. when HE CARES MORE about ME

35. my ATTITUDE towards CHILDREN

HAS CHANGED A LOT

**Stanza 14:** I feel very aggrieved when he

quarrels with me

36. if he QUARRELS with ME

37. I will be VERY AGGRIEVED

38. it is VERY ANNOYING

**Stanza 15:** I'm just like a small hedgehog

after the annoyance

39. after the ANNOYANCE

43. he QUARRELED with me

40. I'm just like a small HEDGEHOG

44. I TEXTED him

41. STAB ANYONE I see

45. he NEVER REPLIED to me

42. just like that

46. WHY did HE DO THAT TO ME

**Stanza 16:** My husband didn't reply to my

47. what he did DIDN'T MAKE SENSE

message after quarrelling with me

The above extract begins with Jasmine's construction of her anxiety about her parenting. Here she mainly positions herself as a mother and a wife. As mentioned in the pen portraits, Jasmine is extroverted and talkative. I observe her anxiety and worry in rearing her two children in her stories and her interviews. The conflicts and pressure are observed in her many words about her relationships with her children, mom, and husband. Her children's health and education are her focus. It is difficult for me to clarify the logic concerning my research through Jasmine's massive amounts of free association. In this section, I will explore the core extract above combined with related narratives in relation to her struggling with anxiety.

Before diving into the core narrative above, it is important to discuss her relationships with her mother and husband. Jasmine constructs her values about parenting and her relationships with her mother and her husband. As Winnicott suggests (2005), environmental provision is an important, influential factor in creative living. As mentioned in the literature review, I wonder whether a 'good enough' parent has a



corresponding good enough environment for themselves to adapt to a parent's role and other situations.

### **Jasmine's mother**

When she recalled her experience of tutoring her son in our first interview, Jasmine freely associated:

*If her brother tries his best in his study and his study is still not good, it doesn't matter. He must have a shining point somewhere else. So, if you can't do it well, we can go to work and do business. But he comes to the age of study. He just should study hard [...] no [...] there is no reason. He told me he had much homework to do. I told him that if others could finish them, you could also finish them. I don't want his dad to give him some excuses. I talked with his grandma and dad. I 'll take care of the children. You don't need to do this job. Don't butt in when I'm talking with children. Don't be like a repeater. I will manage the children by myself.*

In this extract, Jasmine seems to use three 'don't's to blame her mother and her husband and express her dissatisfied feelings towards them. However, I interpret this as a means of communication that Jasmine uses. From my observation, I assume she intends to express what frustrates her when her husband and mother co-parent the children. She states that '*I will manage the children by myself*' in this narrative. I interpret her relationships with her husband and mother as unsatisfactory.

When she freely associates her experience of practicing singing in her childhood in the second interview, she said:

*I could sing at home. I closed the door and practiced singing by myself. My mom was very supportive. What she supported was something you didn't need to pay for by using money. You had to teach yourself. She was a big fan of mine. Otherwise, I would have learned something professional at school [...] I'm the kind of person who likes talking. When I go out to meet people, I talk to them. I have no independent opinion because of my personality. I couldn't say [...] mom, I like this, you let me learn this, ok? She told me that our family was poor. I think about my children when I revisit my past time. Although life conditions are good now, it is necessary to imitate my mom's way. I don't think children should be coddled too much. When they are gradually growing up, they will gradually get to know how to spend money.*

In the above narrative, Jasmine seems to construct her mother as frugal because her family was poor when she was young. Based on this point, she represents herself as imitating her mother's parenting. However, Jasmine constructs herself as having no independent opinion. When Jasmine reflected on her parenting in the second interview, she said:

*...I used to be very angry and spank her. I slowly found that I needed to be patient with her. A mother's character is crucial to the development of her children. I heard that the father is there to cultivate children's courage. From*

*my experience, I am not independent. I am just like my mother. So, I have to change my children. I try to tell them about my experience and show my weakness. I think this is good for my children. For example, I told them I broke something and then they gave me some advice. I think I will learn to try to control my emotions this year. I think it is a big change for me in interacting with them.*

Here Jasmine mentions her independence for the second time. Jasmine constructs her independence as ‘*just like my mother*’. However, her association here is not related to her lack of having an independent opinion. Instead, Jasmine’s account is focused on her changed parenting. Specifically, she mentions that she used to resort to punishment to make her children obey. For example, ‘*I used to be very angry and spank her*’. Then she describes herself as becoming patient and trying to control her emotions within a year. Jasmine states that she has to change her children, which I interpret as her wish to not be like her mother.

The following narrative might be supportive of her wish to not be like her mother. In the second interview, I asked Jasmine what her job as a teacher means for her. She associated:

*When having my children, I centre around them every day. I take it very seriously. I don’t trust that their grandma can take care of my children well. I also don’t trust that my mom can take care of them well. I take care of them by myself. My mom says the kids only listen to me. Yeah [...] they have lived*

*with me since they were born. My mom didn't get along with my children until we moved to Zhoucun. Besides, my mom is impatient. She worried less for us when we were young because we saved her much worry.*

In this narrative, on the one hand, Jasmine states that she centres around her children every day. At the beginning of the second interview, she mentioned, '*with my children [...] this is my only habit*'. On the other hand, she describes she distrusts her mother-in-law and her mother to take good care of her children. From a relational perspective, distrust, an essential aspect of bounded being, is motivated by self-gratification (Gergen, 2009). However, I strongly feel that Jasmine's expression of distrust cannot be interpreted as being motivated to gratify herself. One of my field notes offers an important perspective concerning this point. I wrote:

*Jasmine invited me to have dinner with her family before having our second interview. After our interviews, she messaged me asking if we could talk in private, she expressed that she wanted to learn more about herself and her relationships to live a happy life. I feel that Jasmine is warm, and I am pretty accepted in her family. I do not feel that I am a tool for her because I can feel her trust and openness. Her openness is crucial for my personal growth because I used to attract people who like to manipulate others. I am very cautious of this bounded character and learn myself in order to grow out of others' manipulation (patterns in my close relationships).*

Therefore, from a relational perspective, I assume that her distrust can be interpreted as a sense of “insecurity” of co-creation (Gergen, 2009, p.174), for I feel that Jasmine intends to build a nourishing life together with her family. The following narrative might be supportive of this point. Jasmine constructs herself as a ‘mediator’ in her family. She associated:

*After the quarrel between my mom and dad, my mom kept complaining about my dad. I said, ‘mom, you are immature. Look at you at your age. You’re immature.’ She said I was on my dad’s side. I said I had reasons for it. Why does she always blame others when it is clearly her fault? When we change others, we should change ourselves. I educate her. See [...] if I educate her, and meanwhile, I have to educate my husband. I think when I talk with them, I change myself. They will slowly mature and slowly become better.*

I asked, ‘you mean [...] how you communicate?’ She answered:

*Right. We can learn together. I’m changing either. On the one hand, we can become gentle and better. On the other hand, he cannot be angry with you, unless he doesn’t love you and doesn’t care about you. He has a change that proves I’m doing the right thing. Well [...] she quarrelled with my dad last week. I asked my dad if my mom was different in that quarrel. He said it was different. And I said, yeah, you had to thank me because I taught her a whole week. Since my mom has changed, my dad has also changed. He said he*

*understood it. I saw that my dad took photographs of my mom, and I knew they made peace together. That was great.*

In this narrative, on the one hand, we can observe that Jasmine wants to ‘*change*’ with her family members in healthy ways. I interpret that Jasmine consciously recognises the patterns of interaction among her family members. From a relational perspective, Jasmine’s attempts to ‘*change*’ her family system might, to some extent, invite the enchantment (Gergen, 2009). According to Gergen (2009), enchantment is regarded as injecting value into the bonding unit. Values and significance in a family unit are created through her own language, such as ‘*we can become gentle and better*’, ‘*we can learn together*’, and ‘*That was great*’. According to Gergen (2009), such phrases possibly involve affection and care towards her family members. Jasmine’s emotional involvement indicates that her intention is not the result of reason. Jasmine’s attempts might be an example of the dialogic play where change, growth and new understanding can be fostered (Gergen, 2009).

On the other hand, it seems that Jasmine perhaps constructs her family as lacking mutual value. Jasmine positions herself as a caregiver in her family. In particular, Jasmine constructs her mother as ‘*immature*’ and herself as educating her family members. I wonder whether this might be a contributing environmental factor for Jasmine’s anxiety. After discussing Mathew, Jasmine’s husband, a significant environmental provision in Jasmine’s case, the psychoanalytic understanding of Jasmine’s anxiety will be formulated.

Back to my concern for the environmental provision in relation to Jasmine's mother, in summary, it seems that Jasmine feels dissatisfied in her relationships with her mother. She represents herself as imitating her mother's way in her parenting. However, she seems to express her wish to not be like her mother. Her unsatisfactory relationships with her mother might represent a sense regarding insecurity of co-parenting. Importantly, it seems that Jasmine wants to 'change' with her family members in healthy ways. Jasmine's attempts to 'change' her family system might, to some extent, invite the enchantment (Gergen, 2009). However, it is worth noting that Jasmine perhaps constructs her family as lacking mutual value.

### **Jasmine's husband**

In this section, Jasmine's narratives about her relationships with Mathew, her husband, will be discussed. As mentioned above, Jasmine uses three 'don't's to blame her husband and express her dissatisfied feelings towards him in our first interview. When I asked Jasmine how to deal with her emotions in our first interview, she associated:

*Sometimes the temper has to come out. Yeah, especially to his dad [...] I have to say it. If I can't say it, I feel uncomfortable. He said, 'if you say that again, I'm going to be depressed,' I said, 'well, you are better off depressed than I am depressed. I can't keep myself from saying it. Well, I'd rather you are depressed than I am. I have to talk with you.' Sometimes he has a wrong mentality. Sometimes he said [...] he suddenly said, 'why do I feel that life is so meaningless.' I said, 'how can you feel meaningless when you're with*

*someone as positive as me?’ He said, ‘I just feel so meaningless, I want to die.’ I feel that it’s ok for him to say those words, but he couldn’t say those things in front of our children. He is responsible for his family. I told him, ‘We all have unpleasant moments in our life. Instead of thinking about such unhappy things, we should use some good methods to adjust ourselves and let ourselves get out of them, right?’ I think it’s important. Sometimes, I don’t know if he’s joking or serious. Sometimes he’s just like that. Actually, I think the reason why I’m tired is that I have an immature husband. Someone told me, ‘You want to find a mature husband which means you don’t want the process and you want the results directly because mature people have come over, he can only give you the results.’ I told my husband that I got it [...] I need to know how to speak with you.*

When I asked her how to deal with her emotions, Jasmine freely associated the account of Mathew, her husband. I feel that Mathew might be the most significant person Jasmine has complained to and about. Jasmine represents her husband as sometimes having ‘*a wrong mentality*’, a depressive tendency. Specifically, based on Jasmine’s description, Mathew constructs life as ‘*so meaningless*’. It seems that Jasmine treats this situation with humour. She constructs herself as a ‘*positive*’ person. Although Jasmine cannot distinguish whether Mathew is joking or serious, she enlightens her husband. However, Jasmine emphasises Mathew’s role as a father and his responsibility for their family by suggesting that her husband should not express his



negative emotions in front of their children. Jasmine also represents herself as being tired because of her immature husband. Even so, Jasmine describes her hope that her relationships with Mathew will become mutual and mature through working together.

Applying Gergen's theory of relational being (2009), I interpret Jasmine's account here as negotiating the real and the good, which is one of the essential aspects (negotiation, narration, and enchantment) of creating bounded relationships. It seems that Jasmine respects her husband for expressing his negative emotions. Mathew seems to be treated as a real person by Jasmine instead of just in his role as a husband and a father in that moment. She constructs her husband as immature, which can be interpreted as Jasmine knowing what she does not value in relationships. However, Jasmine's attempts to work together with her husband suggests she hopes to co-create a valued family with her husband.

From a relational perspective, Jasmine's account is also narrated in the way of bonding. In the above narrative, Jasmine uses 'we' when she enlightens her husband. For example, *'we all have unpleasant moments in our life. Instead of thinking about such unhappy things, we should use some good methods to adjust ourselves and let ourselves get out of them, right?'* In addition, Jasmine reflects her ways of interaction with Mathew, which also indicates her narratives are focused on 'we'. For example, *'I told my husband that I got it [...] I need to know how to speak with you.'*

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the father's value can be seen in three main aspects in Winnicott's theory: enjoying and loving the relationships between the

mother and the father, supporting the mother, and being himself (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). These three aspects can provide a good-enough environment, a secure environment, in which the mother is supported to offer a nurturing environment for the child (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). Then this enables the child to feel secure and develop from object-relating to object-usage (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In this sense, the father is valued in terms of environmental provision. Based on the narrative above, I suggest that Mathew may not provide good-enough support to Jasmine because of his depressed state of mind and his immaturity from Jasmine's perspective.

In summary, on the one hand, I feel that Jasmine hopes and attempts to co-create a valued and real family with her husband. Applying Winnicott's standpoint (2005), these attempts to co-create with her family might be viewed as playing, creating a bonding family with shared realities. On the other hand, as a wife, as a mother and as one part of their family, Jasmine might feel tired when she cannot receive the support of her husband, who might have a depression tendency. Mathew, as the environment for Jasmine, might be not good enough for Jasmine's play.

### **Jasmine's anxiety**

Back to the core narrative above, this extract has two parts: Jasmine's anxiety about educating two kids and the relationship between Jasmine and Mathew. Jasmine believes that children are not born to be bad, and education by the parents is crucial for children. Based on what she values, Jasmine overthinks her parenting every night and shares her parenting experiences with her friend. As mentioned before, she states

that her only *'habit'* is being with her children. I feel that her over-concentration on two children and her emphasis on the importance of parenting may cause her to be stressed. We can observe the account in relation to this aspect from her narrative above. She represents herself as being overwhelmed and bored by doing multi-tasks which include *'have two children'*, *'have to work'*, and *'have so many chores to do'*. Faced with these situations, Jasmine questions herself, suggesting that she might have high standards for herself. Jasmine's high standards may be parallel to how she constructs her mother and her husband as immature.

On the one hand, what Jasmine values might nurture their bonding in her family, specifically discussed in 4.4.2. On the other hand, these high standards for herself and her family members may cause Jasmine to view herself and her family members as not good enough, which may cause more stress in her family and go against Jasmine's hope for a valued and honest family. The following example in this core narrative might be supportive of this point. Jasmine constructs herself as being anxious. As a result, she describes that *'I want to lose my temper in front of my children'* and *'I began to blame myself'*.

Applying Winnicott's insights of environmental provision (2005), two aspects that are as follows may indicate that Jasmine might be unable to rest and feel supported because of a failure of environmental provision (her husband and her mother). Firstly, Jasmine represents her mother and her husband as immature. Secondly, Jasmine's unsatisfactory relationships with her mother and husband might concern a sense of

insecure co-parenting. I interpret that a possible failure of environmental provision might be a cause of Jasmine's anxiety. I will explore this point further below.

In the core narrative, Jasmine associates her relationships with Mathew, her husband. Jasmine describes that she blames Mathew for not supporting her. Notably, Jasmine represents an ideal man who Jasmine needs as he understands her and supports her. Instead, she feels that her husband pushes her out when she is in trouble. She also represents herself as aggrieved when her husband quarrels with her. Her husband tends to avoid her after quarrelling with Jasmine. She becomes aggressive after their quarrels.

Based on Winnicott's views on the environment, the father's value can be represented in three main aspects: supporting the mother, enjoying and loving the relationships with the mother, and being himself (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). These three aspects can provide a good-enough environment, a secure environment, in which the mother is supported to offer a nurturing environment for the child (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). As she describes, her husband is changing with her request. Receiving support from her husband energises her, and her attitude towards the children has changed.

In summary, Jasmine's attempts to co-create with her family might be viewed as playing, creating bonding and nurturing a family. Jasmine's anxiety is mainly from four aspects: her over-concentration on two children, doing multi-tasks, the high standards for herself and her family members, and a failure of environmental provision. According to Winnicott (2005, p.70), "playing is essentially satisfying". If

a degree of unbearable anxiety involves, playing can be destroyed (Winnicott, 2005).

In the core narrative, Jasmine describes losing her temper in front of her children because of her anxiety, suggesting that she destructively interacts with her environment (her children). Her anxiety may indicate that she cannot enjoy her play or feel satisfied because of the anxiety. However, receiving support from her husband energises her, and her attitude towards the children has changed. Receiving support from Mathew indicates that being supported by her husband is very important to Jasmine.

#### **4.4.2 ‘I create a poster on the wall’: Single voice instead of multiple voices**

Core narrative extract ‘**I create a poster on the wall**’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jasmine describes her creation of a poster on the wall.

<b>Strophe 1:</b> Me being concerned about	3. sometimes I FEEL IRRITATED
cooperation with my husband	4. and I also have something which IS NOT
<b>Stanza 1:</b> I ask their dad to cooperate with	GOOD
me	5. we should
1. I ASKED their DAD	6. we should have a LITTLE PROGRESS in
2. to COOPERATE WITH ME	EVERY YEAR
<b>Stanza 2:</b> We should make progress in each	7. RECOGNISE our SHORTCOMINGS
year	8. and CHANGE THEM

**Stanza 3:** It's not okay to make those

mistakes over and over again

9. BUT IF we don't change them

10. we will MAKE those MISTAKES

OVER and OVER AGAIN

**Strophe 2:** I create a poster on the wall

**Stanza 4:** My husband likes to play with his

phone

11. my husband

12. when my MOM is HERE

13. he is LAZY

14. and PLAY with his PHONE

15. he is BETTER

16. when my MOM ISN'T HERE

**Stanza 5:** I composed a poster myself

17. I WROTE a poster by MYSELF

18. TAPED UP on the WALL

19. we can SEE it EVERY DAY

**Strophe 3:** The contents of this poster

**Stanza 6:** A real father

20. let two kids have a REAL FATHER

21. two kids can GROW UP WITH THIER

DAD

**Stanza 7:** Dad cannot play phone games at

home

22. dad CANNOT PLAY phone GAMES

AT HOME

23. CANNOT WATCH IPAD when taking a

shower

24. CANNOT WATCH the PHONE when

getting up in the morning

**Stanza 8:** Parents should be more attentive

to two kids' needs

25. we should be more ATTENTIVE to

TWO KIDS' NEEDS in daily life

26. study

27. and personality

**Stanza 9:** Things should be highlighted

28. we CANNOT SPEAK IN A LOUD

VOICE

29. if we have time

30. READ MORE

31. COMMUNICATE with EACH OTHER

32. we can CHOOSE to GO OUT for A

WALK

**Stanza 10:** We are being strict with

ourselves

33. we should be STRICT with

OURSELVES

34. go to BED EARLY

**Stanza 11:** Everything is given priority to

two kids

35. as PARENTS

36. EVERYTHING is given PRIORITY to

two KIDS

In the above narrative, Jasmine values cooperation in relationships. She describes that she asked her husband to cooperate with her in parenting. However, Jasmine also constructs her husband and herself as ‘*not good*’ and ‘*should make progress*’. She believes that they ‘*should*’ recognise their shortcomings and ‘*change*’ them. Jasmine worries that they will make mistakes if they do not change themselves. As discussed above, Jasmine’s high standards for herself and her family members can cause anxiety.

Further on in the narrative, Jasmine states that she creates a poster on the wall. In this poster, she provides a detailed description of what Mathew and she should do as parents. The aim of doing so is to give priority to their two children. As discussed before, Jasmine values that education from parents is crucial to their children. Specifically, in this poster, she suggests that her husband should be more attentive to the children instead of playing with his phone. In addition, Jasmine emphasises that both she and her husband should be strict with themselves, such as ‘*cannot speak in a*

*loud voice*, *read more*, *communicate with each other* and *go to bed early*. Thus, her detailed description of what she and Mathew should do indicates that Jasmine positions herself and her husband as taking second place while putting their children first.

From a relational perspective, Jasmine's voice dominates in her relationship with her husband. It seems that Jasmine knows what she wants. Paradoxically, she describes herself as having no independent opinion in 4.4.1. Based on her relationship with her mother, I argue that Jasmine's dominant voice in her interactions with her husband might be a way of defining the boundaries of her being in order to form her coherent existence (Gergen, 2009). In addition, Jasmine is embedded within multiple relationships from a relational perspective. She constructs herself as having no independent opinion, and she also represents her mother and her husband as immature. These aspects might indicate her insecurities regarding losing herself through cooperating with others.

On the one hand, based on Chinese cultural values, I argue that we can understand Jasmine's account here through cultural meanings. Harmony is an important value of Chinese culture and an important aspect of Chinese Neo-Confucian philosophy (Angel, 2009). The pursuit of harmony can be viewed as one character of Chinese culture (Wang, 1916). Wang (1916) argues that an individual's mind, being without desire, is tranquil. Whether this individual is in motion or at rest, fixing the determination is the same. In other words, an individual must master the original



nature of the mind and use the state of harmony because the mind is naturally never at rest. According to Wang Yangming's doctrine (1916), harmony means everything matters.

Each person, animal, plant, and tile has coherence as the thing that it is, and in turn exists in a web of interrelationship that structures the universe.

In certain circumstances it is relatively easy to notice that in some particular way, coherence is disrupted and our world has tipped out of balance.

Angel (2009, p.71)

In this sense, collectivism is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, which is different from an individualistic orientation. From a social construction perspective, problems emerging from the bonding process in Chinese culture, I think, tend to be related to relational suppression. I feel that this is a potential cost of harmony. Based on this point, the insecurities of losing oneself and of cooperating with others stand out.

As Wang Yangming's doctrine (1916) mentioned, qi (material or physical force within oneself) differentiates us from others and determines one's uniqueness. It is worth noting that it is "a coherent way of making space for a sense of individuality that is unlike the problematic self-associated with si yu" (Cocks, 2015, p.348). Si yu can be defined as selfish desire in Wang Yangming's doctrine (1916). Here we can understand that Jasmine's insecurities and her dominant voice might be related to

discovering inner coherence. In this sense, this indicates that Jasmine is playing in terms of searching for the true self.

On the other hand, from a relational perspective, I suggest that if Jasmine's monologue dominates the relationships with her husband, Mathew may be denied full participation, and rich possibilities may be suppressed or unused (Gergen, 2009). As discussed in the literature review, dialogues serve as the key for deepening an understanding of our own and others' perceptions. Relationships with each other are also cultivated in dialogues (Gergen, 2009). According to Gadamer (2013), we are open to others' strange and new meanings in dialogue-play. In this process, we experience transformative possibilities and cultivate our natural talents and capacities. In this sense, I argue that Jasmine may not reach dialogue-play in her interpersonal engagements.

In summary, Jasmine's voice dominates with her husband. She constructs herself as having no independent opinion, and she also represents her mother and her husband as immature. These aspects might indicate her insecurities regarding losing herself and cooperating with others. On the one hand, based on Chinese cultural values, Jasmine's insecurities and her dominant voice might be related to an in-depth discovery of inner coherence. In this sense, this indicates that Jasmine is playing in terms of searching for the true self. On the other hand, I suggest that Jasmine may not reach dialogue-play in her interpersonal engagements because Jasmine's monologue dominates her relationships with her husband.

#### 4.4.3 ‘My husband, I, and my kids go to grandma’s house in the countryside every weekend’: Flow movement in the co-action

Core narrative extract ‘My husband, I, and my kids go to grandma’s house in the countryside every weekend’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jasmine describes her weekend with her kids and husband.

**Strophe 1:** We go to grandma’s house every weekend

6. or PLAYING WITH RAIN

7. when it rains

**Stanza 1:** A visit every weekend

**Stanza 3:** We go there after kids finish their

1. my husband, I and my kids GO TO

homework and when we are free

GRANDMA’S HOUSE

8. when we ARE FREE every weekend

2. in the COUNTRYSIDE

9. and AFTER they FINISH their

3. EVERY WEEKEND

HOMEWORK

**Stanza 2:** Connecting with nature while

10. we PLAY OUTSIDE

playing

11. EVERY WEEKEND

4. PLAYING WITH SNOW

12. with TWO KIDS

5. when it snows

13. I think it’s GREAT

In the above narrative, Jasmine describes that she and her family (Mathew and two kids) go to the countryside every weekend. She describes their play in the countryside as ‘*playing with snow, when it snows or playing with rain when it rains*’. Upon

hearing Jasmine's description of playing, I saw her eyes gleamed, and the trouble vanished out of her face. As suggested by Gergen (2009, p.304), we do not ask the question, "do I believe it" when we are open to multiple 'lenses'. I appreciated that a way of being emerged in our interview, which I had not met before the moment. As written in my field notes, '*I feel happy for her. Or I can say I celebrate this moment and a different her. A fluid way of being in relationships with her family?*' The notes suggest that our interviews might be a place for both Jasmine and me to embrace uncertainty, in which a way of being from multiple 'lenses' might emerge. Isn't this worth celebrating? In this sense, I think that I am celebrating differences and rich possibilities.

In our interviews, I argue that Jasmine may create a unique space of play for herself, in which her past experiences and her relationships with her family members are freely explored. As a researcher, I encourage Jasmine's self-exploration only as a portal to how she feels about a situation and the deeper meaning of her life experience. As discussed in the literature review, players try to discover difficulty or resistance (Henrick, 2015), and they learn about their 'qualities', and 'character' so that new understandings and possibilities may be produced in the spirit of play. It reminds me of Winnicott's insights of the value of waiting, not curing for the analyst (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). From this therapeutic perspective, a participant's discovery should serve as a process in which their mental elements are to be met but not cured. In this sense, I argue that the researcher's capacity to listen and wait might encourage the

participant's self-discovery. This kind of discovery is a way of "beings-at-play-in-the-world" (Vilhauer, 2013, p.83).

From a relational perspective, Jasmine's pleasure is not hers alone in this research. I stand in gratitude to Jasmine for the pleasure of playing in the countryside, for freely associating her experiences, for her self-discovery, and for embracing uncertainty in the interviews. As Gergen suggests (2009, p.125): "[i]n principle, there is no self-gratification. Even in privacy, self-pleasure feeds on a history of relationship." In this sense, Jasmine creates pleasure and inspiration in this research journey (Gergen, 2009). In other words, the current research is a relational creation instead of the private language of the researcher.

Back to her narrative above, Jasmine represents playing outside every weekend with her family as '*great*'. It is worth noting that she also recalled this experience when I asked the question in the first interview, '*what about you? Besides educating them, do you have a life of your own?*' She said:

*No, I just stay with him and stay with her [...] On Saturday, I take a break from my work, taking my children on an outing. It's warm outside [...] We can learn some new stuff at home or go to the park on Sunday. On Saturday, we go back to the countryside. I ride around the village on an electric bike with them. I said [...] we could go to grandma's place to help grandma to water her field [...] enjoy nature. That was great [...] Sometimes, I play the*

*piano by myself. Although I'm not good at accompaniment, I play the piano by myself. They just cannot be influenced by me.*

Jasmine, describing this ‘*great*’ experience twice in the first interview, might regard playing in the countryside as a way of connecting back to a sense of self. In these two pieces of narratives, especially in the second one, I feel that Jasmine might, to some extent, liberate herself from her identity as a mother. It reminds me of Winnicott’s insights on the capacity to be alone (1958). According to Winnicott (1958), the capacity to be alone refers to a person being alone in the presence of another, feeling real, and living creatively. The reliable presence of an important mother is crucial to developing the capacity to be alone (Abram and Hjulmand, 2018).

In the example of playing in the countryside, I argue that Jasmine’s capacity to be alone might be reached. The signs are presented as follows. Firstly, she represents playing outside every weekend with her family as ‘*great*’. This indicates that this experience might help her release stress and bring her enjoyment. Secondly, she describes their play in the countryside as ‘*playing with snow, when it snows or playing with rain, when it rains*’. This indicates that Jasmine may experience bodily pleasure and a state of flow. In this example, I argue that nature in the countryside might be served as an important ‘other’ in the presence of which Jasmine can connect back to herself or be alone.

In summary, Jasmine’s narratives about playing in the countryside can be interpreted from two perspectives. On the one hand, in terms of interview interaction, I argue that

Jasmine may create a unique space of play for herself, in which her past experiences and her relationships with her family members are freely explored, and a way of being from a different ‘lens’ emerges. As a researcher, I celebrate Jasmine’s different way of being, a fluid way of being in relationship with her family, different from her dominant way of being, as discussed in the previous section. In this section, Jasmine’s narratives inspire me to rethink the research dynamics and the role of a researcher and a participant in their relationships. On the other hand, in terms of her narrative itself, I argue that Jasmine’s capacity to be alone might be reached in the example of playing in the countryside. In particular, Jasmine can connect back to herself in the presence of nature in the countryside.

#### **4.5 Case study: Mathew**

In this section, two stories about Mathew will be explored. In the first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.5.1, Mathew describes his play experience between Xixi (his younger daughter) and him. In the second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.5.2, Mathew describes his play with Hanbo (his elder son).

##### **4.5.1 ‘Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around’: A developing self and practicing being a father**

Core narrative extract ‘**Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around** ‘

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Mathew describes his play experience between Xixi and him

**Strophe 1:** Play with my younger daughter

5. her MOM said that Xixi had to

**Stanza 1:** We fight playfully

DEVELOP GOOD HABITS

1. Xixi and I like to FIGHT PLAYFULLY

6. for her AS A GIRL

2. and CHASE EACH OTHER around

**Strophe 2:** How we fight playfully

**Stanza 2:** We haven't fought playfully for

**Stanza 4:** It's the way she likes to play

some time

7. it's JUST THE WAY

3. we HAVEN'T DONE it

8. SHE LIKES TO PLAY

4. for a WHILE

9. the way in which I CATER TO HER

**Stanza 3:** Her mom wants Xixi to develop

**Stanza 5:** She likes to be hugged

good habits as a girl

10. she likes to ASK me

11. to pick her up and spin her around

In the above narrative, Mathew describes how he plays with his younger daughter.

However, Mathew gives only a short account. He represents his play with Xixi (his daughter) as fighting playfully and picking her up and then spinning her around.

Mathew also states that he and Xixi have not fought playfully for a while because his wife wants their daughter to develop good habits as a girl. Jasmine's request indicates her dominant role in the relationships with Mathew, which we have discussed in the previous section.

I argue that Mathew's valuable identity as a father, to some extent, might be suppressed because of Jasmine's dominant role (Gergen, 2009). In particular, Mathew



represents her daughter as enjoying fighting playfully and being hugged by him. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), play can be viewed as a way of family interdependence and bonding. Playing together might be a good way to promote Mathew's participation in parenting in order to support Jasmine as a mother and to nourish the bond with his younger daughter. However, Mathew's identity as a father is perhaps suppressed by not fully participating in co-actions with his children.

Here is an example to support this point. In the interview, Mathew associated:

*I'm very impatient. I don't like to discipline children. I'm pretty impatient when teaching them. I want to give them a stern lecture when they are not good. Then their mom would tell me that I didn't need to discipline them. She would say that I was getting impatient in such a short time. So, I usually don't discipline them. But if I don't do so, their mom is very fretful. Then she may say that she can't manage two children by herself.*

In this example, Mathew describes himself as impatient when he disciplines his children. He also states that his wife asked him not to discipline their children when he was impatient. These aspects indicate that Mathew isn't trusted and encouraged by Jasmine to practice being a father. In this sense, the value of Mathew's identity as a father is suppressed as well.

In fact, Mathew does not prevent interaction with his children or avoid parenting. He describes himself as providing suggestions on children's education. However, Mathew's voice is underestimated by Jasmine. He said:

*Hanbo has been learning piano for more than three years. He doesn't want to learn it at all. I told his mom that maybe we should respect his wish. She disagreed with me and insisted that he should finish his classes. I said [...] how nice it would be for him to learn something he likes, such as sports. She didn't accept my advice. She said it was good for a boy to learn piano.*

A transition might be embodied in his narratives. As illustrated in the pen portraits, Mathew underwent a transition and a significant change after marriage. He admitted that such a huge life change was exciting and scary to him, especially when they had their first child, Hanbo. Then he gradually tried to learn how to interact with his children. He associated:

*We were married when I was 23. We were young. Before marriage, we had been through a very happy time together. After marriage, there have been many conflicts between us. We quarrel with each other a lot [...] We often quarrel with each other after having Hanbo. I was just 24 years old. We were usually at war because I didn't care about my kid and thought about playing with computers.*

In this narrative piece, Mathew describes himself as avoiding interaction with his elder son and describes his wife as dissatisfied with him. Thus, combined with previous narratives, a transition emerges here: a transition from avoiding interaction with his son to providing suggestions regarding his children's education.

He represents himself as not fully committing to his family unit (Jasmine, Mathew, Hanbo & Xixi). He also describes himself as depending on his parents. He said:

*At that time, commitment to my own family was not [...] how to say [...] I thought it was good in a big family, and we didn't need to worry about our life. It was good. I didn't think of our son. I thought that the child had his mom to take care of him. I could live my own life. After Xixi was born, we still lived with my parents. My parents helped us to take care of our kids.*

It seems that Mathew's relationships with his parents might impact his transition. Mathew describes himself as headstrong because of his parents' love and indulgence. Moving out of his parents' home and having a new home with his wife, his son and daughter, was formative in making his new identity as a husband and father. He associated:

*I am the youngest child in my family. I have an elder sister. My father and mother love me more. I never feel tired and suffer from the pressure of life. So, I was headstrong. I quarrelled with my wife. After Xixi was born and we had our new home for four of us, our relationships between my wife and I*

*have improved. I'm getting better with my kids. I was often angry with Hanbo when he was young. He knew that. And I would spank him also.*

Applying Winnicott's theory of illusion-disillusionment (2005), a significant change may also occur in him along with a transition from illusion towards disillusion, a developing self.

Regarding illusion, as illustrated in the pen portraits, after graduating from a technical secondary school aged 20, Mathew worked in a local factory for a year and then followed his father into work. As described in the previous narrative, he represents himself as never feeling tired and suffering from the pressure of life. In addition, he describes himself as headstrong because of his parents' love and indulgence. The illusion, in Winnicott's theory (2005, p.16), is that "there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create" if the mother's adaption to the infant's needs is good enough. I cannot interpret whether Mathew's parents adapted to his needs well enough because of limited data. However, all of these experiences indicate that Mathew's parents might over-protect their son from "the insult" of the pressure of life (Davis & Wallbridge, 2018, p.55). This may somewhat restrain Mathew's adaptation to his role as a father.

Regarding disillusionment, moving out of his parents' home and having a new home with his wife, his son and his daughter might provide Mathew with the chance to connect with his family members and explore his own relationships with his wife and children without his parents' support and protection. As a result, Mathew needs to

face the painful transition directly. The conflicts between Mathew and Jasmine, Jasmine's dissatisfaction with Mathew, and Jasmine and Mathew's disagreement in terms of children's education, I assume, offer Mathew chances to cope with 'the insult' of Jasmine's account of reality and accept a 'Not-me' world. Based on his description of his identities as a husband and as a father being formative, I argue that Mathew's experience of disillusionment is oriented in a positive direction but is still not successfully worked through.

It is worth noting that Mathew is described as sometimes having 'a *bad mentality*', a depressive tendency, in Jasmine's account. Specifically, based on Jasmine's description, Mathew constructs life as '*so meaningless*'. As discussed in the literature review, Winnicott's term 'depression' is one aspect of weaning in disillusionment. According to Winnicott, the capacity of depression or sadness, as a healthy and valuable depression, can lead an individual to work through the sense of loss (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). The capacity of depression or sadness is the most important part of successfully working through the disillusionment process. Here is an example of Mathew's depression in his case.

In the example, Mathew talks about the divorce phenomenon and reflects on his relationship with Jasmine. When I asked, '*What about you? You also have your own emotions and thoughts. How do you adjust yourself?*' He said:

*Sometimes, I chat with Jiao. She also communicates with me about her worries. Divorce rates are high. Some of my friends and their partners are*

*divorced. My cousin and his wife are divorced. They have kids. We mediated between them. They were young and didn't overthink and communicate much with each other. The life trivia [...] accumulated slowly [...] then it made their marital conflicts impossible to resolve. In these years, Jasmine and I went through the worst period in our marriage [...] from the fights, quarrel [...] we need to make some changes and adjust ourselves properly, but those couples just can't get along with each other [...] no matter what.*

In the interview, when he narrated the account of the divorce phenomenon and his reflections on his marriage, I can feel the sadness and pity for divorced couples in his account. According to Winnicott (1958), sadness is caused by the capacity to sense an individual's own awfulness, which can lead to taking responsibility. In this sense, I assume that Mathew may deeply feel the divorces that happened around him; he might learn more about marriage and take more responsibility for his marriage with Jasmine. As he describes, *'we need make some changes and adjust ourselves properly'*. In this way, Mathew's sadness might have a valuable and healthy meaning for himself, his marriage, and his relationships with his children.

Back to the core narrative above, the narrative is an example of practicing to be a father because their play is mainly based on his daughter's needs. As I mentioned in section 4.4.2, from the relational production of pleasure perspective, Xixi's (Mathew's daughter) joy and pleasure is not hers alone in their play. Mathew enjoyed

their play, and he chuckled with delight when he recalled it. In this sense, Xixi creates pleasure and shares her pleasure with Mathew. Playing with his daughter, I assume, might be a joyful way for Mathew to explore rich potentials as a father.

In summary, a transition is embodied in Mathew's narratives from avoidance of interaction with his elder son to the provision of suggestions on his children's education and more interaction with children. Applying Winnicott's theory of illusion-disillusionment (2005), a significant change occurred in him along with a transition: a transition from illusion towards disillusion, a developing self. It is worth noting that Mathew's depression might have a valuable and healthy meaning because his sadness evoked by the divorces that happened around him leads to him taking responsibility for his marriage with Jasmine. Playing with his daughter can be interpreted as a process in which pleasure is relationally produced. Playing together might also be a good way to promote Mathew's participation in parenting to support Jasmine as a mother and to nourish the bond with his younger daughter. However, Mathew's identity as a father is perhaps suppressed by not fully participating in co-actions with his children because of Jasmine's dominant role in their relationship.

#### **4.5.2 'I like to play outdoor sports with him': Playing together with the child as a transitional space for a parent**

Core narrative extract **'I like to play outdoor sports with him'**

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Mathew describes his play experience with Hanbo.

**Strophe 1:** The relationship between me and Hanbo

**Stanza 1:** I usually accompany him to do his homework and play together

1. I USUALLY ACCOMPANY him

2. to DO his HOMEWORK

3. PLAY with him

**Stanza 2:** He plays a lot by himself and with other children

4. he plays A LOT BY HIMSELF

5. he usually plays TOYS WITH other

CHILDREN

**Stanza 3:** We play badminton in my

company

6. sometimes we play BADMINTON in my

company

7. it is WARM to play badminton

8. I LIKE TO PLAY OUTDOOR SPORTS

WITH HIM

**Stanza 4:** Play the phone

9. he likes to PLAY his PHONE sometimes

10. we adults also know that

11. we LIKE TO PLAY the PHONE

EITHER

**Stanza 5:** I don't spend too much time with two kids

12. I DON'T spend TOO MUCH TIME

13. WITH two kids

**Strophe 2:** My experience playing with my son

**Stanza 6:** Me playing rubber bands with

him

14. some time ago

15. I brought RUBBER BANDS for him

16. and TAUGHT him rubber bands

17. WE JUMPED when WE WERE

LITTLE

**Stanza 7:** We throw the sandbags



18. OH

22. sometimes it's WARM

19. and THROWING the SANDBAGS

23. we ride BIKES

**Stanza 8:** Me playing badminton with him

**Stanza 10:** We play in a big court

20. I bought a badminton racket

24. there is a BIG court NEAR our company

21. and PLAYED BADMINTON with HIM

25. It's really NICE

**Stanza 9:** We ride bikes

26. so we GO and PLAY THERE

In the core narrative above, Mathew describes his interaction with his son as tutoring and playing with his son. Mathew also states that he does not spend too much time with his children. He represents himself as enjoying playing outdoor games with his children, such as badminton, jump rope, throwing sandbags, and riding bikes. Specifically, Mathew describes that they enjoy playing together in a big court near his company.

Mathew also mentions how he engages with his children every day. In particular, they spend less time with each other because he feels tired after work and likes to play on his phone; meanwhile, the two kids do their homework. Jasmine represents Mathew as not engaging with their two kids. When I asked, '*how do you spend most of your time?*' He recalled:

*I mainly work during the day, and I'm tired at night. Perhaps my wife would say, 'you come back home, and then just say you are tired.' She told me that I didn't have an awareness of spending time with kids. I just watch*

*my phone all the time [...] I am indeed a little tired when I come back. I spend little time with them because they also have homework, and their grandparents accompany them on weekends. We often interact and play together when we go to friends' houses and have dinner with friends.*

Mathew gives a detailed example of playing blindfold games. In this example, unlike the description of playing in section 4.5.1, Mathew clearly expresses mutual enjoyment in blindfold games which he plays with his children. Unlike the ways Mathew engages with his children in daily life, which are constricted and impatient, the ways he engages with his children in play are mutually enjoyable and beneficial.

Mathew said:

*A while ago, I was playing blindfold games with them. I like to play this game with them. If I don't choose to play hide-and-seek, I will choose to play this game together.*

Then I asked, 'Are there any memorable moments?' Mathew said:

*The blindfold game was very interesting. I really enjoyed it. I felt refreshed when playing with them. Throw sandbags, jump rope, blindfold games [...] These are the games that I come up with. I taught my kids, as well as their little friends. They felt very happy when they saw sandbags. As for jump rope [...] they hadn't played before. They felt very happy when they played this game. And blindfold games [...] I played with them. Sometimes, they*

*would say they wanted to play these games with me and enjoy playing with them.*

I asked, 'How do you feel when playing with them?' He answered:

*I'm really into it. I take it very seriously. They basically can't find me. Like playing blindfold games, I hide very well. As a parent, I feel very happy when I see my children are very happy. I'm happy when they are healthy. I'm very happy to see their smile. But I'm also very angry when they are naughty. Especially when my daughter loses her temper [...] I don't like it. Too headstrong [...] Sometimes maybe I have a bad temper, so we can't teach them properly.*

In his description, Mathew positions himself as choosing games and teaching kids how to play. He represents himself as refreshing when he engages with his children in play.

Applying Winnicott's concept of transitional space (2005), playing can create a transitional space for self-expression and rich potentials which may not be experienced in daily life. Play is situated between the inner self and external world, as a resting-place, in which an individual cannot be challenged. In other words, an individual may experience the self in specific ways which they may not do in daily life. Then what is experienced in play may potentially integrate into the ways Mathew

engages with his children in daily life. In the example of playing blindfold games, a transitional space might be created in the play for Mathew.

In real life, Mathew seems not to be able to seize the initiative because Jasmine plays a dominant role in their relationship. This is mainly reflected through parenting in the narratives. Particularly, Jasmine asked Mathew not to discipline their children when he was impatient. Although Jasmine needs Mathew to support her, Jasmine does not trust and encourage Mathew to practice being a father. In addition, he describes himself as providing suggestions on children's education. However, Mathew's voice is underestimated by Jasmine. Concerning the relationships between Mathew and his parents, he said:

*I hope my children can be in good health. I don't ask them to study well, as long as they can earn their own money and be independent. Don't be like me. I grew up living with my sister in my parents' house [...] Our education ideas are different. They give us life plans. My sister and I don't have any ideas of our own. I wanted to do something and told my parents excitedly. Then they just put you down. It was hard for me to do something when I was young. I needed to ask my parents for their permission [...] My parents pay us, and we do what we are told. My parents are growing old. We can't let them get angry. So, we obey them.*

Drawing upon the Chinese culture in which he lives, Mathew describes his parents as dominant or more powerful than him. He represents himself as dependent and having

no choice but to obey his parents. However, he emphasises that his idea about education are different from theirs.

When Mathew played with his children, he chose the game and taught the children how to play. I assume that this might be Mathew's wish to seize the initiative and be in control of his life. Applying Winnicott's concept of transitional space (2005), when playing, Mathew had an experience of himself (experiencing initiative) in relationships with his children, which was impossible in his 'real' life. I noticed that Mathew smiled when he gave this description, implying that he enjoyed this version of himself in play with children. In addition, I argue that Mathew might also express his wish to maintain his childlike innocence in his play with children. He describes himself as being really into play and taking play very seriously in the blindfold game. In this unchallenged resting place, the anxiety and depression he experienced in his everyday life vanish.

Mathew's description of play evokes his reflections on relationships with his children in his daily life. For example, he said, *'As a parent, I feel very happy when I see my children are very happy. I'm happy when they are healthy. I'm very happy to see their smile.'* And he also mentioned, *'I'm also very angry when they are naughty. Especially when my daughter loses her temper [...] I don't like it. Too headstrong [...] Sometimes maybe I have a bad temper, so we can't teach them properly.'* I argue that the more Mathew can understand his own behaviour in play (or at least where he is able to be inspired by what he experiences in play), the less impatient and constricted

he may become in relationships with his children and the more initiative he may take in relationships with his family members. In other words, Mathew may develop his capacity to interact playfully with his environment.

In summary, applying Winnicott's theory of transitional space (2005), a transitional space might be created for Mathew in the blindfold game. Different from the ways Mathew engages with his children in daily life, which are constricted and impatient, the ways he engages with his children in play are mutually enjoyable and beneficial. Different from the depression he experiences in daily life, he feels happy in play. Unlike his lack of initiative in daily life, he can seize the initiative in play. His description of play evokes Mathew's reflections on relationships with children. This indicates that Mathew's play with children and his narratives about playing may provide space for Mathew to develop his capacity to interact playfully with his environment.

#### **4.6 Case study: Jason**

In this section, I will explore two stories about Jason. In the first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.6.1, Jason describes his opinion of playing with children in the family and his own play. In the second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.6.2, Jason describes how he educates his son in play.

**4.6.1 ‘Playing with children in the family should be divided into two parts...physical play and psychological play’: Exploring Jason’s unique understanding of play in the condition of relational life**

Core narrative extract ‘Playing with children in the family should be divided into two parts...physical play and psychological play’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Jason describes his opinion of playing with children in the family

<b>Part 1: Being concerned about playing with children</b>	6. FOOTBALL
	7. HIDE-AND-SEEK games
<b>Strophe 1:</b> Playing in my views	8. which we USED TO PLAY
<b>Stanza 1:</b> Playing with children should be divided into two parts	9. when WE WERE KIDS
1. PLAYING with CHILDREN in the FAMILY	<b>Stanza 3:</b> Psychological play is about expanding my son’s experience
2. should be DIVIDED into TWO parts	10. psychological play
3. PHYSICAL play	11. we spend MORE TIME with my SON to watch MOVIES
4. and PSYCHOLOGICAL play	12. to TRAVEL
<b>Stanza 2:</b> Physical play is more about playing physical games	13. to EXTEND his EXPERIENCE of SENSING
5. physical play may be more about PLAYING PHYSICAL GAMES	14. from DIFFERENT aspects of SOCIETY and NATURE

**Stanza 4:** I feel that both physical and mental play are very important

15. I FEEL that we should PLAY

16. from aspects of EDUCATION and

MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL

DEVELOPMENT at the SAME time

17. I FEEL that both PHYSICAL play and

MENTAL play are very IMPORTANT

**Part 2: My experiences of playing with**

**my son**

**Strophe 2:** our experiences of physical play

**Stanza 5:** We play football and basketball

and run in physical play

18. FOOTBALL

19. BASKETBALL

20. RUNNING

21. if I have TIME

22. I would like to TAKE him to

FOOTBALL field and BASKETBALL

court

23. for some sports activates

**Strophe 3:** our experiences of psychological play

**Stanza 6:** I spend less time with my son

because of my work

24. because my time with my son is

LIMITED

25. I spend LESS time with my son

26. because of my WORK

**Stanza 7:** I try to find opportunities to create

conditions

27. I try to find opportunities to CREATE

conditions

28. we may TRAVEL

29. or participate in some PARENT-CHILD

activities in his kindergarten

**Stanza 8:** I take him to meet other children

30. I take him to KNOW more children

31. knowing good FRIENDS will have a

GREAT HELP

32. for his GROWTH and LEARNING

**Part 3: I love sports from the bottom of**

**my heart**



**Strophe 4:** Sports I love

**Stanza 9:** I love sports from the bottom of  
my heart

33. doing some sports

34. because I also LOVE sports

35. from the bottom of my HEART

**Stanza 10:** I would like to play football and  
basketball

36. if I have TIME

37. I would like to play FOOTBALL and

BASKETBALL

**Stanza 11:** Gatherings with friends

38. sometimes I attend to parties

39. with my friends

**Part 4: My opinions on play**

**Strophe 5:** My opinions on play

**Stanza 12:** I don't feel play is timed

40. play

41. the time is not FIXED

42. BEFORE going to bed

43. or BEFORE getting up

44. AS LONG AS you have time

45. anytime

46. and anywhere

47. I don't feel that play is timed

**Stanza 13:** I feel that I can play anywhere

48. I feel that I can do it

49. anywhere

The above narrative begins with the researcher prompting questions, '*What do you think of play [...] How do you play on your own? How do you play with your children? Anything about play?*'. He starts his narrative by raising a question, '*Is play related to children?*' It seems that Jason views play as something to do with children. In the narrative above, he describes playing with children in the family as physical and psychological play. In Jason's account of his understanding of playing with his son,

physical play is more about playing physical games, such as playing football and playing hide-and-seek. It is worth noting that Jason suggests that physical games are what he used to play when he was a child. In this way, I argue that play is to entertain and educate children and carries the meaning of being ‘mutual’ or ‘shared’ for Jason. In Jason’s account of his understanding of playing with his son, psychological play expands his son’s experience of different aspects of society and nature, such as watching movies and travelling. I think Jason suggests here that playing is experiencing. Jason represents both physical play and psychological play as important.

Further on in the narrative, Jason describes his physical play experiences with his son. The sports they play include football, basketball, and running. Then Jason describes his experiences of play with his son in terms of psychological play. He represents their psychological play experiences as travelling, participating in parent-child activities in his kindergarten, and meeting new friends.

Afterwards, Jason describes his own play as playing sports and gathering with his friends. Jason expresses his enthusiasm for playing sports, especially football and basketball, stating, *‘I love sports from the bottom of my heart’*. Jason mentions that he plays football and basketball if he has time. Further, Jason also describes his own play as gathering with his friends. It is worth noting that Jason represents play as something without the limitations of time and place. From this, we can also observe that playing with his son carries the meaning of being ‘mutual’ or ‘shared’ for Jason.

Throughout the core narrative above, Jason's narrative is descriptive, with no in-depth experiences involved. However, we can observe that parent-child play, according to Jason, is mutually valued. In other words, from a relational perspective, play exists in a confluence of relationships. According to Gergen (2009), confluence is regarded as a form of life where an array of mutually defining relationships is involved. In a confluence orientation, Jason's experience and understanding of parent-child play can be explored in the condition of relational life where Jason participates (Gergen, 2009). For example, playing football with his son occurs within a confluence. Here I will interpret it as below. First, playing football is Jason's enthusiasm as he describes that he loves playing football from the bottom of his heart. In other words, his enthusiasm or love, as a psychological state, is related to playing football. Simultaneously, I assume he also tries to play football with his son. His enthusiasm for playing football, I think, is in tow. Second, what he tries (intends, attempts and endeavours) to do in parent-child play might be regarded as daily activities to which Jason devotes his enthusiasm for playing football. I assume that he values and shares his love or enthusiasm with his son. In this sense, for Jason, playing football functions as entertaining and educating his son and sharing his loves and values. His values of playing football will be explored explicitly in section 4.6.2.

From a relational perspective, I suggest that Jason's three identities in the relationships with his son can be found in the above narrative; he is a father, a person who loves playing sports, and a playmate. According to Gergen (2009, p.137), in each

relationship, “a self we become through a relationship”, “another’s way of being”, and “a choreography of co-action” are three sources for potentials of being. As a father, his primary concern of play is its educational function. For example, Jason suggests that play should include aspects of education and moral and intellectual development. Furthermore, he also suggests that making new friends benefits his son’s growth and learning. As a person who loves playing sports, Jason represents play as related to doing what he loves. As a playmate, he describes play as without the limitations of time and place. In particular, he suggests that he tries to create opportunities for him and his son to play together, such as before going to bed and getting up. I feel that Jason is being proactive enough to engage with his son. As illustrated in the pen portraits, Jason runs his own business in the city. Jason had a lot of interaction with Jiahao, his son because his time is flexible. Jason carefully observed his son.

As Jason suggests, play is without the limitations of time and place. Based on this point, he gives me two examples. The first example is about their play before they were going to bed taken from the second interview. In this example, Jason positions himself as a friend. He associated:

*In summer, I think half-past nine at night is very late for him to play. But he feels he can go out to play and run around a while. From our point of view, I want him to sleep and let him get up early. Sometimes we intentionally let him take a bath and go to sleep. Yet, the result is often the opposite. Instead, he lies in bed and was unhappy. Sometimes I put myself in his shoes.*

*Sometimes when you want to do something, no one can stop you. We are all the same. I feel empathy for my son. I can still allow him to do what he wants to do if he doesn't cross the line. I feel that I talk with him more now, and we have less conflict between us.*

I asked, 'What is your conversation like?' He answered:

*As friends, in fact, I used to be very hot-tempered. Two people often quarrelled with each other. I would slowly hug him and let him cry. We were made closer. I feel this is a kind of progress that belongs to me. I'm a little more advanced than his mother at this point. Sometimes he can consider your feelings. For example, sometimes I have a night out. His first feeling is that you are not allowed to drink. Because you have to consider his mother's feelings, and no one plays with him if I come back late. He may be asking for more.*

In this example, Jason doesn't provide the in-depth details of their play. However, he describes that their communication is improving as friends. This kind of communication occurs when his son wants to play instead of going to bed. In this way, although Jason, as a father, wants his son to sleep and get up early, he represents himself as stepping into his son's shoes as a friend. From a relational perspective, Jason's multi beings, as a father and as a person, are represented in his inner dialogue. It seems that his position as a father conflicts with his position as a friend. Specifically, in the above example, I interpret what Jason is 'doing' here as seeking

coherence in his life which means that he is searching for potentials to defend against conflict caused by the way he positions himself as a father through his inner dialogue. In Jason's traditional ways of engaging with his son, he describes himself as being very hot-tempered and often quarrelling with his son. In entering a friend-like relationship with his son, he can be someone who listens to his son's voice, becomes more open to vulnerability, and fills with greater sympathy for his son. For example, tenderness is expressed emotionally by Jason. As stated so beautifully by him, '*I would slowly hug him and let him cry. We were made closer. I feel this is a kind of progress which belongs to me*'.

Jason's efforts tender the gulf between parents and children. Instead of blaming Jiahao (his son), to some extent, Jason respects Jiahao's own willingness. In this way, a sense of trust is built between Jason and his son. I suggest that Jason's efforts may bring harmony and trust into his relationships with Jiahao, potentially nourishing their bond. For instance, by suggesting that Jiahao becomes more considerate of Jason's feelings, the bond between Jason and his son remains stronger. Thus, even though Jason doesn't provide the in-depth details of their play before going to bed, I can still feel playfulness in their interactions. As defined in Chapter One, play is philosophically defined as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. In this sense, Jason's creative attempts to be his son's friend, instead of in the more

traditional ways of relating, can be viewed as playful movements in their relationship.

The second example, taken from the first interview, regards their interactions before getting up. This example arose from my question, ‘*do you have any thoughts or feelings you would like to share with me regarding playing with him?*’ In this example, Jason describes communication with Jiahao as important and more closely related to emotional experience. He said:

*I want to talk more with him [...] Communicate more with him. All emotions come from communication [...] My wife slept in our room, and Jiahao and I slept in the study room [...] because my wife felt annoyed by him. I was just joking. Jiahao slept in one bed with his mother one night. She said no because she could not sleep, and the bed was not big enough. She had to work. I have more freedom than his mom during the day. The night before yesterday, he had a dream. He woke me up after three o'clock. He said he had a dream and couldn't sleep. I asked him what kind of dream he had made. He said that a dog chased him all night in his dream. I just heard that he had said something in his dream, and I didn't know what he exactly dreamed. We both stayed awake until after five o'clock. It was almost six o'clock in the morning. If he didn't sleep, I couldn't sleep either. I was very sleepy. The two of us talked for a while, then finally fell asleep, and he got up to pee [...] oh [...] no.*

Then I asked, ‘*What did you talk about?*’ He answered:

*I made him recite some ancient poems. He talked to me about some games.*

*He told me they also had electronic games to play like adults. Plants vs*

*Zombies, snakes or something...*

I continued to ask, ‘*did you have any feelings in engaging with him?*’ He said:

*The next generation of children [...] like my son [...] is really happy. We are*

*all old (laughing). Although the resting time is less than that when we were*

*children, they are still happy. Having less resting time is for a better future*

*and a better life. They know so much now.*

In the second example, communication is emphasised by Jason in playing with his son. In particular, emotional experience, according to Jason, is the most important functional aspect of communication. In this sense, Jason values the functional aspect of communication as an empowering way to nurture and strengthen their bond. When I work with this example, I am always tempted to enjoy this lovely and vivid story. It seems that Jason constructs that night as both funny and annoying. Even though Jason did not express his feelings directly, I can capture them through his description of that night. As mentioned before, I value the felt meaning in my research. As the interviewer, I encouraged parents to bring how they feel about a situation into their awareness through their rich forms of expressions (Polkinghorne, 2007). Furthermore,



Jason prefers to describe how they communicate in detail with the emotions underneath than to express his feelings directly. As he said in the second interview:

*Speaking from the heart, we must be very happy as parents to see the child's growth. It is also very satisfying to see the progress of the child. But sometimes, it cannot be too obvious. I'm afraid of him being too proud. I'm afraid of him being impetuous. In this aspect, we may control our emotions as much as possible. Maybe sometimes our emotions are not obvious on the surface. I can feel an upsurge of emotion but not express it.*

Jason represents himself as not wearing his heart on his sleeve. He identifies himself as controlling his emotions: '*it cannot be too obvious.*' '*I'm afraid of him being too proud.*' '*I'm afraid of him being impetuous.*' Olivia's description of Jason also supports this point. As mentioned in pen portraits, Olivia told me that her husband was quiet at home. I argue that Jason's character as a father contains deep cultural meanings.

Children's education is an emphasis in Confucianism (Jung & Wang, 2018). An ancient Chinese story about Mencius's mother reveals this emphasis. In order to provide good enough surroundings for Mencius's education, Mencius's mother moved three times (Huang & Gove, 2015). Specifically, in the values of Confucianism, the father and mother play different roles in educating their children based on two principles: Yin/yang (negative, dark and feminine/positive, bright and masculine distinction) and Nei/wai (inner/outer distinction) (Jung & Wang, 2018). As

two distinctive modes, Yin/yang or Nei/wai can harmonise or conflict with each other (Cheng, 2006). In the family system, the polar structure of Yin/yang is identified as the potentially different positions of fathers and mothers when educating children. Yin, representing femininity, is related to weakness, hiddenness, and softness (Cheng, 2006). Yang, representing masculinity, is related to strength, brilliance, nobility and goodness (Cheng, 2006). From a traditional Yin-yang perspective, a father's role tends to be strong. Emotionally, he tends not to express his feelings. In the family system, the polar structure of Nei/wai is identified as the separated spheres of fathers and mothers. From a traditional Nei/wai perspective, a father tends to play a role in the outer domain, while a mother tends to play a role in the inner domain (Jung & Wang, 2018).

Jason's role as a father seems to be more connected to Yang energy in his narratives. However, Jason also recognises that his traditional ways of communication are not sufficient to strengthen and nurture a bond with his son. I think his attempts to encourage emotional experience and playfully interact with his son (as a friend) can be viewed as breaking with tradition and seeking rich potentials of being. In this sense, Jason's attempt to communicate with his son can be valued for his creative vitality.

In summary, firstly, from Jason's short stories, playing with his son carries the meaning of being 'mutual' or 'shared' for Jason. He represents playing with children in the family, including physical play (sports) and psychological play (experience). Jason describes his own play as playing sports and gathering with his friends.

Furthermore, Jason's narratives about play in this section are explored through a relational orientation. Jason's experience and understanding of parent-child play can be explored in the condition of relational life where Jason participates (Gergen, 2009). Multi beings are found in the above stories: a father, a person who loves playing sports, a playmate, and a friend. As a father, his primary concern with play is its educational function. As a person who loves playing sports, he represents play as related to doing what he loves. As a playmate, he describes play as without the limitations of time and place. In particular, he gives me two examples in relation to his suggestion of playing without the limitations of time and space. The first example regards their play before they were going to bed. In this example, Jason's creative attempts to be a friend in engaging with his son, instead of in the traditional ways of being, can be viewed as playful movements. The second example is about their play before getting up. In this example, Jason seems to be more connected to Yang energy. However, Jason also values emotional experience in engaging with his son. His attempt to break tradition and seek rich potentials of being can be valued for its creative vitality.

#### **4.6.2 'We will support him if he wants to be more independent': Being perceptive and supporting the child to use transitional objects**

Core narrative extract '**We will support him if he wants to be more independent**'

**Part 1: How psychological play works**

**Strophe 1:** Psychological play acts a role in my son's growth

**Stanza 1:** He learns and completes things on

his own

1. after he meets different FRIENDS,

PEOPLE, and THINGS

2. he DELIBERATELY LEARNS things

3. and he can also COMPLETE new things

on his OWN

**Stanza 2:** He will go by himself without our

company

4. for example

5. he may think that why can Shiya go to

dinner with my dad and mom

6. and her mom and dad don't have to

FOLLOW

7. next time

8. he will go by HIMSELF without our

COMPANY

9. why did Shiya do it

10. I also can do the SAME

**Strophe 2:** The relationship between our

son and us

**Stanza 3:** We will support him if he wants

to be more independent

11. if he MENTALLY wants to be

INDEPENDENT

12. THEN he ASKS for it

13. and SLOWLY our parents

14. that means we parents TOTALLY

SUPPORT him

15. if he ASKS for it

**Stanza 4:** We take some exercise on

purpose

16. so we take some EXERCISE

17. ON PURPOSE

**Stanza 5:** He needs to complete things by

himself in educational system

18. after all

19. in the future

20. in primary school

21. middle school

22. high school

23. and university

24. he needs to COMPLETE things

INDEPENDENTLY

**Stanza 6:** We can only assist him beside

him

25. we parents can ONLY ASSIST him

BESIDE him

26. as far as possible NOT to let him MAKE

DETOURS

27. he still needs to FIND his OWN way out

**Stanza 7:** overindulgence is not good for my

son

28. OVERINDULGENCE is NOT very

GOOD for my son

29. AROUND US

30. we DON'T OVERINDULGE our son

**Part 2: How physical play works**

**Strophe 3:** Playing football and basketball

**Stanza 8:** I play a lot of sports with my son

31. I play A LOT OF SPORTS

32. WITH him

**Stanza 9:** I hope he can learn to play

football and basketball in the summer

33. I HOPE

34. that he can LEARN to play football and

basketball in the summer

**Stanza 10:** I hope he can feel the process of

playing football and basketball

35. I ESPECIALLY hope

36. that he can play football and basketball

37. SWEATING

38. and BURNED and TANNED by the

SUN

39. I hope he does

40. because only if he FEELS and TASTES

this process

41. and KNOW how HARD it is

42. he will CHERISH EVERY point and

EVERY achievement

43. he earns

44. success are HARD-EARNED

**Stanza 11:** Sportsmanship is really special

45. I have GROWN up with SPORTS

46. and SPORTSMANSHIP is really

SPECIAL

47. learning sports has its ADVANTAGES

49. and HARD-WORKING spirit

48. such as TEAM spirit

Jason describes his thoughts on psychological play and physical play with Jiahao in the above extract. Jason constructs psychological play and physical play as serving crucial roles in his son's growth and independence. In particular, Jason emphasises the importance of independence in his accounts and constructs parents' role as supporting and assisting the child to be independent. Jason constructs himself and his wife as not overindulging Jiahao, suggesting that Jason and his wife not only meet their son's dependent needs but also provide chances for their son to support him to move from dependence to autonomy.

According to Winnicott (2005, p.14), the good-enough "mother" functions as one who makes an active adaption to an infant's needs, a gradually lessening adaption in accordance with an infant's "growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration" (2005, p.14). In Jason's case, his support for Jiahao's independence takes two forms. Firstly, his support will be provided if his son '*wants to*' be independent. This suggests that Jason encourages Jiahao to develop a sense of autonomy in psychological play. Secondly, Jason describes some psychological play as being created on purpose because he believes that his son needs to complete tasks and goals by himself in the educational system. This indicates that

Jason might perceptively assist his son to develop the capacity to observe and use objects.

In this narrative, there are two examples of Jason perceptively assisting Jiahao to observe and use objects. The first example can be constructed as follows. Opportunities to experience different things (psychological play), such as meeting friends and people and exploring different things, can be considered transitional phenomena. For example, as Jason describes how Jiahao previously could not go to dinner without his parents' company. To Jiahao, playing with Shiya (his friend) might be seen as Jiahao's transitional phenomena. Through interacting with Shiya, Jiahao is free to create illusion. As Jason describes, '*Shiya can go to dinner*' without his parents' company, and Jiahao may think '*I also can do the same*'. In this potential space, I think that Jiahao enhances his confidence in his own abilities. As a result, Jason represents his son as being more independent than before because of psychological play. He said:

*He went from being particularly dependent on one parent to being able to do something on his own [...] Independence is better than ever [...] It's good to be able to complete some extracurricular activities independently [...] For example, the English tutorial centre organised a summer camp. He really wanted to go alone. He was a little disappointed that their class failed to go camping because of the time. He can also attend art class alone. Independence has improved a lot. In the past, he was so dependent on us.*

*We had to accompany him to class and then wait for him outside. Now his independence has been gradually improved.*

We now move on to the second example. Playing football and basketball (physical play) might also be seen as Jiahao's transitional phenomena. I say 'might' here because I can only hear Jason's thoughts on physical play in the above extract. In other words, Jason creates opportunities for his son to use football as a transitional object. His 'hope' can hint at how this transitional space works for Jiahao from Jason's perspective.

On the one hand, Jason describes that '*I especially hope that he can play football and basketball, sweating, and burned and tanned by the sun*'. For Jason, he hopes his son can enjoy playing football. His son likes football as well, which is embedded in his descriptions of football play. Jason emphasises the value of experiencing positive emotions in playing football. On the other hand, Jason describes that '*only if he feels and tastes this process and know how hard it is, he will cherish every point and every achievement he earns*'. For Jason, he identifies success as hard-earned. According to Jason, I argue that playing football can be regarded as an intermediate area for Jiahao to potentially experience this process.

I argue that Jason's feelings of love towards sports and his expectations for his child are both embedded in the above narrative. In other words, his accounts as a father in the above narrative are integrated with his own values and sense of self. In the example of playing football, Jason values sportsmanship in team spirit and



hard-working spirit. I argue that his values have mostly to do with his own sense of self. I asked, ‘*What do you think regarding fostering his independence?*’ Then he said:

*...in the future, he will go out into the world [...] if he is not independent, it is not a matter of gain or loss [...] it is a matter of survival. Personally, I spend more time away from home. I haven’t really been at home since junior high. It is better to let the child have contact with society. I lived on campus in junior high school. After graduation from the university and then after marriage [...] my mother has been living here after having Jiahao in recent years. I’ve always been independent [...] for example, there is one more person in the bed. I’m not used to it because I was used to living alone. From studying at school to start a business, I was all alone. At that time, the competition was not as stiff as it is in nowadays [...] but now, if you do not let them have contact with society early enough, I feel it is not easy to keep up with the rhythm of life in nowadays.*

Then I asked, ‘*What do you think of the rhythm of life nowadays?*’ He answered:

*Generally speaking, business is slower than a few years ago, but the rhythm of life is faster than before. Cooperation, the good faith of cooperation, is required in our society. Firstly, you need to learn to endure hardship. Team spirit is also very important. For example, you earn money with the other. You should give the other half bowl of soup if you have a bowl of soup. It would help if you learned to cooperate with others. I hope Jiahao can find*

*this through sports like football and basketball. He may learn hard-working and team spirit by playing football and basketball because every team requires teamwork. The children in the next generation cannot endure hardship. I feel that my son should learn to endure hardship now than in the future.*

In this narrative, Jason represents himself as independent. Firstly, Jason identifies one's independence as being crucial to survival in society. Secondly, Jason describes himself as always being independent when studying at school and starting a business. Based on the narratives given in this section, I think that Jason developed a strong sense of self in moving towards independence. In raising and educating Jiahao, his goals, values and ideas are clearly represented in his narratives.

On the one hand, playing football and basketball can be seen as opportunities that Jason perceptively creates for Jiahao to use transitional objects. On the other hand, however, I wonder if Jason's expectations are projected onto his son in playing sports. According to Winnicott (1960), the central self can be viewed as experiencing a continuity of being and acquiring at its own speed and in its own way. Further on, I wonder how Jason's expectations which may be projected onto his son, might influence Jiahao's self-exploration or his search for self. Due to the limited data available, these questions remain inconclusive in the current research.

With the present data, I will explore Jason's expectations from a perspective of uncertainty. I feel that Jason's personal experience with work and sense of current

society may trigger his deep concern for his son's future. Considering play in the theme of uncertainty, Huizinga (1998) describes it as belonging to the dimension of aesthetics in which the effects of beauty are excavated as "tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc" (Huizinga, 1998, p.21). As mentioned in the literature review, his words instructively enlighten our understanding of players' attempts in play. Here I agree with Henrick's suggestion; a 'reflective' self is a creation of play. However, it might be better to view this reflectivity as a process instead of a purpose in play because play is a softer, more emotional sphere of life (Henrick, 2015). Based on this point, I think Jason's expectations for his son can be seen as a purpose in playing football and basketball. In Jason's narratives, his wife's description of Jason gives me relative information about Jason's expectations. His wife represents Jason as controlling in Jason's narratives. Moreover, his wife suggests that Jason need to give Jiahao space to explore by himself in play. In the first interview, Jason associated, 'His *mother says I'm too much of a boss.*' I asked, 'What did your wife mean by that?' He answered:

*Let me leave him alone. When I'm considering it, yes [...] it's right. Children just play together. Adults play games and drink wine together. Just leave them alone. What his mother meant was to give him space to experience. Yes, actually [...] But it was not ok for my son to say that.*

I argue that Jason mainly positions himself as authoritative and commanding in his relationships with Jiahao. If he is authoritative and commanding, his son may be

positioned as a listener in their relationships. In this sense, I wonder whether Jiahao plays football and basketball because of his own love towards these sports or because of his father's expectations. Due to the limited data available, this question still remains inconclusive in the current research.

However, I suggest that Jason creates certainty and counteracts uncertainty in the play world. On the one hand, Jason's dispassionate, logic-driven ways of understanding the purpose of play in line with his own values might allow him to be perceptively practiced at playing sports with his son (*'I hope...'*). On the other hand, his attempts may counteract a process of experience and reflectivity in play (*'Let me leave him alone [...] What his mother meant was to give him space to experience.'*).

Throughout the above narratives in this section, Jason constructs himself and his wife as not overindulging Jiahao, suggesting that Jason and his wife not only meet their son's dependent needs but also provide chances for their son to move from dependence to independence. A sense of autonomy is encouraged by Jason in psychological play. According to Winnicott's theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena (2005), Jason might perceptively assist his son to develop the capacity to observe and use objects. In this narrative, there are two examples of Jason perceptively assisting Jiahao (his son) to observe and use objects. Firstly, opportunities to experience different things (psychological play), such as meeting different friends and people and exploring different things, can be considered as transitional phenomena. Secondly, playing football and basketball (physical play)

might also be seen as Jiahao's transitional phenomena. In the narratives in this section, Jason's accounts as a father are integrated with his own values and sense of self. In particular, Jason represents himself as independent. Accordingly, Jason's consideration of his personal experience with work and current society may trigger his deep concern for his son's future. Furthermore, Jason mainly positions himself as authoritative and commanding in his relationships with Jiahao. Thus, I suggest that Jason creates certainty and counteracts uncertainty in play.

#### **4.7 Case study: Olivia**

In this section, I will explore two stories about Olivia, Jason's wife. In the first re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.7.1, Olivia describes her life after having her son. In the second re-transcribed narrative segment in 4.7.2, Olivia describes her experience playing with her son.

##### **4.7.1 'For the family, I don't worry a lot about it': A need for developing the emotional communication**

Core narrative extract '**For the family, I don't worry a lot about it**'

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Olivia describes her life after having her son.

**Part 1: My daily life after having my son**

**Stanza 1:** It's not as good as being single

**Strophe 1:** Evaluation

1. I'm getting angrier than before

2. it's NOT as GOOD as being single

**Stanza 2:** I have a lot of work to do every day

3. sometimes I look back

4. I don't know what it feels like

5. but there is a lot of work to DO every day

**Stanza 3:** I don't need to worry a lot about the family

6. for the FAMILY

7. I don't worry A LOT about it

8. BUT the family can't live without me

**Stanza 4:** I'm not very devoted to my family

9. I'm NOT VERY devoted to my family

10. I leave EARLY in the morning

11. about seven o'clock

12. and come back from work at six in the evening

13. I've been OUT ALL day

**Part 2: What I do in family life**

**Strophe 2:** What I do in my family

**Stanza 5:** It doesn't feel good to stay at home and ask for money

14. I CAN'T stay at home ALL day

15. and ask for money

16. it DOESN'T FEEL GOOD

**Stanza 6:** I earn money to buy things for my family

17. I earn some money

18. to buy things for me

19. to buy things for the children

20. and to buy things for the family

**Stanza 7:** I never ask my partner for money

21. I NEVER ask my partner FOR money

22. I pay for things by MYSELF

**Stanza 8:** I feel better about the material things I do for my family

23. I think I've DONE A LOT for the family

24. although I am NOT at home WITH my child EVERY day

25. I FEEL BETTER about the material things I do

26. for him and my mother-in-law

**Stanza 9:** I care about them in different ways

27. I TRY to give them

28. think about them

29. buy them some

30. in DIFFERENT ways

**Stanza 10:** I don't share a bed with my child to sleep

31. actually other - ah NOTHING has changed

32. because EVERY day

33. I DON'T SHARE a bed with my son

34 in my ARMS to sleep

35. it's EASY for me

36. My son and his grandma sleep in the SAME bed

**Stanza 11:** I don't have to take care of the kid in the morning

37. when I get up in the morning

38. I sometimes get up early

39. and go for a WALK or something

40. I DON'T have to take care of the kid

41. I come back

42. to brush my teeth

43. to wash my face

44. to put on my clothes

45. and LEAVE

In the above narrative given in the first interview, Olivia provides an account of her daily life after having her son. She represents her daily life after having her son as being not as good as being single and that she is becoming angrier than before. Olivia describes how she has much work to do every day. She feels that she does not need to worry about the family, but her family cannot live without her. She represents herself as not very devoted to her family because she works the whole day.

Olivia represents what she does in family life as making money and buying things for the family. She values making her own money. Olivia describes how she would not feel good about staying at home and asking for money. In particular, she states that she never asks her partner for money, and she pays for things by herself. She describes herself as doing a lot for the family with her money, although she is not at home with her child every day. She represents doing a lot for the family with her money as feeling better and that she has a different way of caring about her family.

She describes herself as not sharing a bed with her son. She feels that sleeping without sharing a bed with her son is easy. She describes how, in the morning, she does not have to take care of her son and does whatever she wants.

Olivia's accounts of her daily life after having her son are very descriptive. As mentioned in the pen portraits, Olivia's words are few and simple. I suppose the readers cannot be enchanted immediately by texts. As I mentioned in the methodology, Olivia's interviews required more skills and practice to encourage her to talk more about her life because she is not good at talking too much and expressing her own feelings. In order to do so, I asked similar questions (i.e., *how do you spend your time after work?*) at different times in the interviews. According to Bowlby's perspective of attachment theory (2005), I tried to provide Olivia with a secure base, such as sympathy (i.e., *I can understand that you don't want to talk when you get home*) and encouragement (i.e., *well, go on*). Even though I felt it was challenging to support and encourage her to talk, to be honest, there are many resources for readers



to consider in my observable data, where my emotional response to what I see occurs. Meanwhile, I draw upon my own subjectivity in the situated research practices as essential references in reflecting on studying Olivia. I will interpret Olivia's narratives with my observable data in this section to help readers understand better.

Throughout the above narrative, I argue that Olivia constructs a sense of herself as not taking responsibility for family care by suggesting that she works all day and her mother-in-law takes responsibility for family care for her, including taking care of Jiahao and doing household tasks. What interests me is how she engages with her family because she constructs herself as not taking responsibility for family care. Her relationships with Jiahao will be specifically explored in the next section. Here we will focus on her relationships with Jason, her husband.

She represents her husband and herself as not able to play together. In the first interview, I asked, '*How do you spend your time after work?*' She said:

*I usually have Sundays off with my kid. Sometimes I wanted to take a break and go outside with my husband and the kid. He would not go outside with us. I think he has a lot of work to do., and he is busy all day. I feel like we just cannot play together. Maybe it's because of the nature of the job. Sometimes I just want to go out and play together on Saturdays and Sundays. He doesn't want to go out because he has much work to do. Sometimes we quarrelled because he didn't want to go out with the family on weekends. We need to understand each other. If he doesn't go outside*

*with us, I can't help that. He runs his own business, so it is hard for him to rest on weekends as I do.*

I argue that spending time and playing with her husband and son on weekends emerge as Olivia maintains her family's engagement. I think she feels overwhelmed by not playing together with her husband and son (i.e., *Sometimes we quarrelled with each other*). Based on my observation in the first interview, Olivia looked sad when she explored possible reasons why Jason does not want to go outside with her and their son. Then I felt an urge to ask her how she and her husband communicate with each other. Olivia represents her husband and herself as lacking communication. She said:

*We seldom communicate with each other. Because he didn't understand what I told him. He wouldn't want to listen to me talking about my work. I couldn't understand what he said. We don't have too much communication.*

She also describes her family as lacking verbal expressions of emotion. I asked, '*how do you communicate your feelings?*' She answered:

*We never say so. We lack communication. I just sleep through the night and leave. It's true. We don't feel excited [...] just nothing exciting when we go outside to play.*

Olivia constructs herself as enjoying doing things independently, such as walking on her own with her headphones on. When I asked about what brings her joy and excitement in her life, she said:

*I can hang out on my own. I'm willing to do it in this way. I mean [...] walking on my own in the morning and evening [...] putting on my headphones. It feels good.*

Olivia describes herself as not wanting to say too much and as someone who will just do things. She said:

*I don't think there's anything to say. I will just do it. Communication takes a lot of effort. Sometimes I don't care about what they think. I do things this way. As time goes by, people will understand you.*

She also states that she and her husband prefer to send messages to communicate when they quarrel with each other. She said:

*My husband and I sometimes quarrel with each other and misunderstand each other. We send text messages to communicate. We don't have face-to-face communication as it is now. It's not a big deal [...] not fundamental matters. He is also a man who does not like to talk. You'll know when you talk to him.*

In the second interview, Olivia explored with me more about her work life. She became quite emotional and choked up when recalling her experiences of work pressure as a manager in the postal service. In her narratives in relation to her work, she describes herself as processing negative emotions on her own by suggesting that she doesn't bring the pressure of the work to her family. She associated:

*Indeed, I don't talk about work when I come back. I just go out for a walk [...] just feel relaxed [...] just feel good and relaxed [...] I think I can handle it. Now I am getting used to my job. I don't say things about my work. He cannot help me if I say those things. I feel I can handle my work now [...] When I come back home, I don't think about my work. Sometimes I go out to play, listen to songs, and watch a movie [...] Sometimes I come back and put on my headphones and go out. It feels good. I'm willing to be alone sometimes. Now I balance my work, family and self well.*

For Bowlby (2005), there are five tasks in applying attachment theory in individual therapy. First, the therapist provides a secure base for the patient. Second, the therapist supports the patient to explore how he or she interacts with significant figures in his or her current life. Third, the therapist encourages the patient to examine a particular relationship. Fourth, the therapist assists the patient to connect his or her current feelings, perceptions, actions, and expectations with his or her past experiences, especially with his or her parents during childhood and adolescence. Fifth, the therapist assists the patient to recognise the images of himself or herself and of others. I only applied the first two tasks and maybe reached the third task in Olivia's interviews because the interviews with Olivia were not a therapeutic practice, and the fourth task might be a potentially painful and challenging process for Olivia (Bowlby, 2005).

Through her narratives above, I argue that Olivia may construct a sense of self as not doing emotional communication with others. In particular, Olivia acknowledges her lack of emotional communication with Jason. She represents herself and her husband as both quiet. She also represents herself as processing negative emotions on her own and maintaining engagement with her family through playing together with her husband and son on weekends.

Here it is worth recalling Jason's ways of communication in his case. Jason represents himself as not wearing his heart on his sleeve and as controlling his emotions. However, Jason also recognises that this traditional way of communication is insufficient to strengthen and nurture a bond with his son. To some extent, Jason values and learns to encourage emotional experience in engaging with his son. Although he did not recall the details of his relationships with Olivia, there may already be a hint of how he engages with Olivia.

According to Bowlby's theory of attachment (2005), an individual aspires to go to individuals who can understand and provide comfort and protection. From Olivia's description, she represents Jason as unable to understand her experiences of work (i.e., *Because he didn't understand what I told him*). She also constructs Jason as unable to communicate with her in a manner in which what she expresses might be met with comforting and sympathetic responses (i.e., *He wouldn't want to listen to me talking about my work*). Olivia represents herself as not expressing emotion and processing negative emotions on her own. She did not specifically express that she

felt uncomfortable or hurt. However, I could feel that she needed to be understood and supported by others when she cried in the second interview, as I mentioned before. Therefore, I argue that Jason may not show enough affection towards Olivia. In turn, I argue that Olivia may choose not to show Jason her distress and seek comfort; instead, she learns to seek comfort in solitude (i.e., *Sometimes I go out to play, listen to songs, and watch a movie [...] Sometimes I come back and put on my headphones and go out. It feels good. I'm willing to be alone sometimes*).

According to Bowlby (2005, p.177), expressing emotion is the most important way of communication between two individuals and “information about how each feels towards the other” is most vital for constructing and reconstructing self and the other. In this sense, I feel that emotional expression is the most beautiful, flowing and important experience in building a relational foundation. Based on the data and my observations in current research, in Olivia’s relationship with Jason, I argue that both are sensitive and caring, although it seems that both present a tough exterior to the outside world. They need to find practical ways to develop the capacity to communicate openly and to feel secure to express their emotions. From Winnicott’s perspective of male and female elements in an individual (2005), the capacity to be like this must be given time to appear, develop, and become established as part of Olivia and Jason’s relational tools. As I mentioned in the introduction, play is philosophically defined as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. In

this sense, I argue that Olivia’s explorations of her relationships with Jason in her narratives with my support, to some extent, may reach the sphere of play in relation to exploring more affectionate ways of communication and may potentially lead to new ways of being in relationship with Jason. However, whether her explorations in the interviews become continuous in her own life remains unanswered in this work.

#### **4.7.2 ‘To let him experience it...I just accompany him’: Taking comments on emotional communication a step further**

Core narrative extract ‘**To let him experience it...I just accompany him**’

The following re-transcribed narrative segment was selected in which Olivia describes her experience playing with son.

<b>Part 1: We go out to play and experience new things</b>	4. I JUST accompany him
<b>Strophe 1:</b> the experience playing between me and my son	5. he is EXCITED to go OUT
<b>Stanza 1:</b> We experience new things	<b>Stanza 3:</b> I take him out when I have a break
1. it means to eat something NEW	6. I usually take him out
2. or to PLAY something NEW	7. ON Sundays
3. to let him EXPERIENCE it	8. WHENEVER I have a BREAK
<b>Stanza 2:</b> I accompany him, and he is excited	<b>Stanza 4:</b> when I go to vegetable market I like to take him
	9. I LIKE to take him OUT

10. WHENEVER I go to the vegetable

market

**Stanza 5:** We just feel it

11. we DON'T say MUCH

12. JUST FEEL it

13. feel it

**Stanza 6:** All about my personality

14. MAYBE my PERSONALITY

15. is that I don't have MUCH

16. to SAY

**Stanza 7:** I don't like talking when feeling

tired

17. I FEEL tired

18. ALL day

19. and DON'T like talking

**Stanza 8:** I'm under a lot of pressure at

work

20. I'm BUSY with my work

21. I have a lot of work to do

22. I'm under A LOT OF psychological

pressure

In this narrative, Olivia describes her play with her son as experiencing new things. In particular, she states that they eat something new and play at something new together. Her words are still simple in the above narrative. In the second interview, I can see she is at peace or joyous when she recalls her experiences with her son. As mentioned in section 4.7.1, spending time and playing together with her husband and son on weekends emerge as Olivia maintains her family's engagement.

Meanwhile, she also represents herself as processing negative emotions on her own. In this sense, I argue that she may value quality time playing with her son. Olivia represents their play as she accompanies her son and lets her son experience. In the play between Olivia and her son, Olivia represents herself as respecting her son



(i.e., 'to let him experience it', 'I just accompany him'). She represents her son as excited. It seems that both Olivia and Jiahao enjoy the experience that they share in play. She describes herself as feeling good that they experience things together. In the first interview, when I asked Olivia how she plays with her son, she said:

*I don't often sit there and play with a toy with him. I can't sit still. I will take him out. He would instead go out than stay at home. He seldom sits so quietly [...] I'm quite casual. Nothing impresses me. Recently I just went out to play with him in the mountains and to relax. It felt good just to go out and be together. It was good to eat together, to climb mountains and to relax. There is really nothing more memorable.*

Further on, Olivia describes how she likes to take her son out whenever she has a break. She also describes her son as enjoying going out instead of staying at home. It might indicate that Olivia also considers her son's needs. It is worth noting that Olivia represents their play as quiet, and based in feeling. In other words, she constructs their communication in play as mainly communicating nonverbally. She describes this as her personality. As I mentioned in section 4.7.1, Olivia describes herself as quiet, and I feel that Olivia is sensitive and caring. As I suggested before, I felt it was challenging to support and encourage her to talk and express her feelings. Drawing upon the limited data, I interpret that Olivia constructs a coherent sense of self as not expressing feelings verbally because she states, 'maybe my personality is that I don't have much to say' and 'I don't think there's anything to say. I will just do it'.

In this sense, I observe that there are contradictions in her narratives. On the one hand, according to Winnicott's comments on male and female elements in a person (2005, p.109), I assume that Olivia is more 'being' (female elements) than 'doing' (male elements) as she does not express many feelings verbally. On the other hand, it is worth noting that, as I mentioned in section 4.7.1, Olivia wishes to communicate openly (i.e., she expressed her tears and talked about her work pressure in the second interview), but she cannot communicate in this manner with her husband. I wonder if Olivia's not expressing feelings can be seen as her rejection of her own female elements (new being) as well. In other words, I wonder whether Olivia's holding onto her feelings means she does not fully allow her male elements (doing) into work. I argue that not expressing herself with confidence might indicate that Olivia may not trust and accept what significant figures (i.e., her husband) are offering in her life. As mentioned in section 4.7.1, she values making her own money, and she negatively describes the notion of staying at home and asking for money. These outcomes can also support this point.

For a deeper and more affectionate connection, I think Olivia can learn how to feel her way (female elements) and express herself with warmth (female elements). By doing so (male elements), a dance between Olivia's male and female elements may lead to continuous movement with rich potential for building a deep connection and nurturing bonding with her family. In Winnicott's theory of creativity (2005), the sense of self contains a mixture of male and female elements and depends on an

appropriate integration of both male and female elements. I argue that playing together with her husband and her son (in section 4.7.1) and trying to communicate with her husband (in section 4.7.1) can be viewed as Olivia's attempts to build deep connections and nurture the bond she shares with her family. In this way, her potential moves to create a deeper and more affectionate connection may come into her 'being' or not come into her 'being' because the environment should also be considered (Winnicott, 2005, p.96). This aspect remains unanswered and open in the current research.

#### **4.8 Further discussions**

In this section, further discussions regarding the methodology, literature review and outcomes will be provided.

##### **4.8.1 Gee's poetic approach and narrative inquiry**

From a relational perspective, parents' experience of play, parents' narratives, and the researcher's interpretations based on particular theories can be viewed as "conversational moves" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.679). Positioning the research in narrative inquiry, I believe that the narrative methods focus most sharply on shifting our attention to what an individual can bring to a situation. To take it a step further, I apply a narrative approach to the research as a method of meaning-making for both participants and the researcher. In other words, private

constructions of parents and the researcher's interpretations contribute to this doctoral research.

As Riessman (1993) suggests, stories are “constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (p.5). In narrative inquiry, we construct ourselves and live within narratives. Narrative can be viewed as the portal to an individual's thinking and experience (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). A sense of “who you are” is created by an individual's engagement in both the narratives that individuals choose to tell and how they tell these narratives (Hiles, Cermák & Chrz, 2017). In particular, according to Hiles, Cermák, and Chrz (2017), how people tell their stories should be emphasised. From psychoanalytic perspectives, emotions, instead of the temporal sequencing of narratives, are represented as a route into unconscious logic (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Based on these points of view, I drew on Gee's (1991) poetic approach when re-transcribing selected participant core narratives. By utilising this approach, the re-transcribed narratives in this research are organised into lines and then thematically organised into stanzas, strophes, and parts.

According to Gee (1991), “the discourse structure of a text (in the current discussion, a narrative text), at a variety of different levels, functions to set up a series of *cues* or, better put *interpretative questions*” (p.2). Cues internal to the text, which emerge from how the text is worded, provided the researcher and readers with the possibility of linking parents' accounts to their narratives. As Frosh and Young (2017) suggest,

utilising Gee's poetic approach is a way to privilege the narrator's experience and meaning from inside of their narratives. Gee's poetic approach draws on a "global organisation" which "flows from the organisation of the discourse system itself (line and stanzas) and from the lived and earned coherence of a person's life" (Gee, 1991, p.37-38). By applying Gee's approach to using language, the researcher and readers might reconstruct "a particular model of a word or part of one" and "a certain part of a philosophy of life from a particular point of view" (Gee, 1991, p.37).

In the current research, I draw on Gee's poetic approach to promote "conversational moves" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.679) and to seek "possibilities for the mutual construction of the real" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.684). What is worthy of reflection is that, as I mentioned in the section on ethics, I did not bring the narratives and my interpretations back to the participants for member checking in the current research. From a social construction perspective, member checking can offer us conversational resources. These resources may contain "new and transformative meanings as they are joined with the situated actions of others" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.686). Thus, having no member checks can be viewed as one of the limits in the current research.

However, Gee's poetic approach, which privileges the narrator's experience and meaning from the inside of their narratives, provides us with an opportunity to proceed from the bottom up. As Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett (2001) suggest, proceeding from the bottom up invites us to "move to the world of action" (p.685).

Second, in narrative inquiry, I argue that applying Gee's poetic approach is one crucial part of an artistic process in which an artificial endeavour exists within layers of intention and reconstruction (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Third, I argue that utilising Gee's poetic approach, which is crucial for honouring and respecting the teller's narratives, can be viewed as my endeavour to maintain fidelity in my aesthetic play with the data.

#### **4.8.2 Why is the researcher drawing on psychoanalytic ideas?**

Picture an oak leaf on its branch asking "Why am I hanging around with these other leaves?" [...] humans, like oak leaves, are not found in isolation, not possible in isolation. Human minds are fundamentally social phenomena that become focalised and secondarily elaborated by individuals.

Mitchell (2014, p.xii)

D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas are applied to the current research. As mentioned in the previous section, the former ideas interpret and influence how I am as a researcher when working with parents' accounts within my current research practices. The latter ideas are utilised as significant resources for the analysis of parents' narratives in my research practices. It is worth noting that Winnicott criticises Klein's notion of the 'depressive position'. Winnicott suggests that Klein's term 'depressive position' implies a mood illness in healthy development which is not part

of normal emotional development (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In Winnicott's work, we can observe the happy fate of depression by suggesting that a person getting depressed or feeling sad is a sign of health. I feel that the term 'depression', designated by Winnicott, tends to be more emotionally healthy. In other words, a developing self stands at the centre in Winnicott's theory of emotional development. Creativity for Winnicott is universal and is regarded as an aspect of being alive or response to external phenomena (Winnicott, 2005). Thus, as far as Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas are focused on everyday living, I intend to approach the narratives of parents from the interpretive stance of Winnicott.

Winnicott's psychoanalytic insights regarding transitional space, developing self, playing, and creative living directly relate to the theme of play in the current research. From Winnicott's perspective, people can unfold themselves if they learn to listen more to the inner child within the adult and the voices of the free-form lens and play (Nussbaum, 2006). Specifically, Winnicott (2005) develops the critical idea of an intermediate space between the mother and the child. This space is situated between the inner self and external life in which an individual experiences a creative existence (Winnicott, 2005). Additionally, according to Mitchell (2014, p.xiii), relationality is viewed as "universal and fundamental". A relational turn has been witnessed in the field of psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 2014). He suggests:

Mind has increasingly been understood most fundamentally and directly in terms of self-other configurations, intrapsychically and interpersonally, present and past, in actuality and in fantasy.

Mitchell (2014, p.xiii)

Winnicott is one of the most important relational theorists (Mitchell, 2014). Winnicott (2005) claims creative playing is not only relational but also a healthy means of self-expression. As mentioned in the literature review, an important concept to note is the facilitating environment, the capacity to use objects (Winnicott, 1969). I argue that the capacity to use objects suggests an orientation towards shared reality and co-creation in relationships, which Gergen (2009) also suggests. Thus, both Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas and social constructionist ideas are from a relational orientation, which is an important reason I choose to draw on Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas in the current research.

As discussed in 4.3.2, according to Gergen's theory of multi-being (2009), we become a particular sort of person in each relationship, and how we act may become potential useful in the future. Specifically, in each relationship, "a self we become through a relationship", "another's way of being", and "a choreography of co-action" are three sources for potentials of being (Gergen, 2009, p.137). In this sense, authenticity is viewed as a relational achievement in Gergen's theory. It is worth noting that this relational perspective encourages openness and truthfulness in our relationships instead of focusing on a true self and a false self, as described in



Winnicott's theory. Based on Gergen's theory, it might be misleading for us to emphasise masks in relationships when encouraging ways of relational being. At least for now, based on my understanding, I argue that both theories, which illuminate self differently, seem to nourish our understanding of an authentic self in constructing ideas as a relational being and living as a relational being.

Importantly, we cannot ignore the differences between the relational and the early psychoanalytic vision of personal multiplicity. To distinguish one from the other, a crucial notion of "doing" is described in Gergen's theory of relational being (2009, p.139). According to Gergen (2009), 'doing' means our conflicting and multiple possibilities as both evil and good, which may or may not reach consciousness, can exist as intelligible actions within our relationships. It reminds me of "playing is doing", in Winnicott's theory of play (2005, p.55). In this sense, I feel that 'doing' from a relational perspective seems to be playing. As Gergen (2009) suggests, "in a context where there is no dialogic tension - no voice of denial - anything is possible" (p.143).

Considering Winnicott's belief regarding the significance of happy fate in his themes, from a constructionist perspective, I argue that Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas are highly communicative because Winnicott focuses on a developing self and potentials for creative living. From a relational perspective, I feel that Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas, along with ideas underlying social constructionist orientation,

may open up possibilities for constructing parents' narratives (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001).

It is human beings who are likely to destroy the world. If so, we can perhaps die in the last atomic explosion knowing that this is not health but fear; it is part of the failure of healthy people and healthy society to carry its ill members.

Winnicott (2016, p.76)

Taking comments on his belief in the significance of happy fate a step further, Winnicott also emphasises healthy communal life in which its members “assume ongoing responsibility for the well-being of others in the group” (Praglin, 2006, p.8). According to Praglin (2006), to assume responsibility for others, for Winnicott, implies that individuals “move outside themselves with a newfound sense of courage” (p.8). In this sense, Winnicott and Gergen encourage positive cooperation and touch on initiatives to bring communities together.

#### **4.8.3 Relationality: play and self**

This section will discuss the relationality between play and self in two aspects, the chosen theories, and the research results. I reaffirm that I choose to locate my research in a social constructionist paradigm. The play itself and the relationship between play and self both are understood and explored in relational orientation. As Mitchell (2014) suggests, relationality can be investigated in many ways. I feel that it is a challenge to

elaborate on relationality. Mitchell (2014) provides several questions for understanding the relationships between different insights and interactional concepts. In consideration of the relationality between play and self, I choose to reflect on questions as follows. These questions are borrowed from *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity* by Stephen A Mitchell (Mitchell, 2014, p.xv):

1. What do they have to do with each other?
2. Are different theories describing the same basic phenomenon differently, or do they concern themselves with different phenomena?
3. What is the relationship between play and self?

Theoretically, Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of the self in play theory (1997) and Winnicott's transitional space in play theory (2005) form the researcher's understanding of the relationship between play and self. According to Sutton-Smith (1997, p.173), adults' play cannot be served as a preparation for maturity but can be discovered as "the rhetorics of the self", which is viewed as some valued personal experience. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the "rhetoric of the self", play is viewed as "a way of seeing and being", "a state of mind", "a special mental set towards the world and one's actions in it" and is more focused on individuals than group (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.173). As mentioned before, Winnicott's insights are utilised as significant resources for analysing parents' narratives. According to Winnicott (2005, p.71), play is regarded as a "creative activity and the search for the self". Winnicott

(2005) suggests that playing emerges in a potential space between the inner and external worlds, the intermediate area of experience. Most importantly, his perspective on self encourages us to consider the experiencing self in terms of “growth” and “development” (Winnicott, 1960, p.589). In consideration of Sutton-Smith and Winnicott’s valuable and deep insights, play and self can be understood in a relational orientation in the current research.

The play itself is in parents’ personal experience and is continually given narrative expression in their own lives, “a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature” (Huizinga, 1998, p.15). For example, in Jessica’s case, play is constructed in her narrative and in the process of constructing her narrative. In Jessica’s narrative, she describes her play with her daughter which she creates by herself. Jessica’s parental identity provide her with possibilities for creative play with her daughter. As a result, her creative attempts break the standstill in their communication. Second, Jessica’s creative attempts enrich dialogic interaction between Jessica and her daughter. As Gadamer (2013, p.387) suggests, “[t]o reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were”. In Jessica’s narrative, she constructs different positions, a mother and a playmate, concerning her daughter. In their play, Jessica is no longer merely a mother when she puts herself into the position of a playmate.

Meanwhile, I feel that Jessica's self may be subtly changing in the position of a playmate. As mentioned before, applying psychoanalytic ideas to Jessica's story, her playing as a courier could be something that she could trust, without reverting to her anxiety and anger states with herself and her objects. Instead, in her traditional ways of being a mother, she states that it is difficult to ask her daughter to do things directly because her daughter resists doing as Jessica wishes.

Jessica's case reminds me of the metaphor of a jazz band raised by Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001). They suggest that jazz players "are engaged with continual streams of activity: interpreting others' playing, anticipating based on harmonic patterns and rhythmic conventions, while simultaneously attempting to shape their own creations and relate them to what they have heard" (2001, p.699-700). According to Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001, p700), if an idea dawns on one person, others support the person to develop his/her idea by "comping". I feel that this dialogical process may be unfolding in parents' narratives. Although children's voices are not considered, which can be viewed as one of the research limitations, as mentioned in the outcomes and discussion (4.2.1 and 4.2.2), I recorded an informal conversation with Jessica's daughter in my field notes. I notice that her daughter says that she feels unhappy when Jessica loses her temper; she feels delighted that they play together; she wants to make a gift to Jessica. Perhaps Jessica's daughter's words can give us hints to this emerging dialogical process in their relationships.

Related to this is the need to understand parent-child play and even prompt parents to play with their children from a dialogical perspective. As I mentioned in the literature review, Gadamer perceives “genuine play” as the “dance of presenting and recognising meaning” (Vilhauer, 2013, p.75). He interprets the account as prompting interpersonal engagements in dialogue-play with others to “facilitate mutual understanding for our common good” (Vilhauer, 2013, p.75-76). Gadamer recommends the practice of genuine dialogic play with others as the interactive path of developing ourselves, which contributes to education and our existence as human beings (Vilhauer, 2013). The discussion above may make us think further: what is play for, and how do we understand and grow ourselves in relation to others?

#### **4.8.4 When taking Wang Yangming’s philosophy into consideration, what do I mean?**

As mentioned in the methodology, I choose to locate my research and practice from within to without. Firstly, this means that I endeavour to learn and draw upon Western philosophy in my research practice while I have a sense of deeply-rooted belonging in Chinese wisdom. Second, it means that I endeavour to respect parents’ voices and understand their ‘self’ while I learn to respect and understand my ‘self’. I believe that locating my research and practice from within to without creates a sense of coherence and benefits my research practices with reflexivity.

Wang Yangming’s study was once characterised by himself as “learning of the body and mind” (Tu, 1976, p.188). As mentioned in the methodology, his doctrine claims a

unitary relationship between *zhi* 知 and *xing* 行 (*zhi xing he yi*), suggesting the unity of knowing and acting (1916). However, the unity of knowing and acting cannot be simply understood as applying theory in practice. Instead, it is the process of self-realisation and then full actualisation of what should be done into concrete actions and behaviours. For example, as mentioned before, I play with the data seriously by utilising Gee's poetic approach in the process of working with parents' narratives. In line with Wang Yangming's doctrine, I argue that understanding and actualising play in the current research is as important as exploring parents' narratives in relation to play.

As discussed in the introduction, philosophically, I define 'play' as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. Although Wang Yangming's doctrine does not directly discuss the issue of play, his insights regarding developing "the original nature of mind" (Wang, 1916, p.96) in his whole doctrine is suggestive of a sense of play. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I argue his suggestion of developing "the original nature of mind" (Wang, 1916, p.96) can be understood as meaning that one person only needs to be in the state of equilibrium, a state in which one person is in the present state of harmony, which can then develop "in accordance with his [sic] capacity" (Wang, 1916, p.97). Here this sense of play is like a dance between inner and outer, enlightenment and cultivation.

This sense of play reminds me of the transformative dialogue suggested by Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001). They suggest that "fluid movement in and out of our

extant conversational resources” is invited instead of “new various forms of practice” being crafted (2001, p.707). I feel that this fluid movement is perhaps in a person’s state of equilibrium. In other words, as individuals develop “in accordance with his [sic] capacity” (Wang, 1916, p.97), they can preserve “cherished discourses and relationships that give them life” and can expand the resources they already hold in transformative dialogue (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001).

Wang Yangming’s suggestion also reminds me of a sense of self suggested by Winnicott (1969). As mentioned in the literature review, in Winnicott’s theory (2005), a sense of self is formed in relaxation experiences in states of trust, and physical, mental, and creative activities manifested in playing. Winnicott’s work indicates that the true self tends to be spontaneous, creative, and feel real (2005). That is to say, in these non-purpose or formlessness experiences, a sense of self naturally emerges.

Thus, Wang Yangming’s doctrine provides me with thoughtful philosophical advice in relation to ‘play’, ‘a sense of self’, ‘fluid movement’, and ‘dialogue’. To borrow Gergen, McNamee and Barrett’s (2001) words, all these points above give me life when conducting this research.

As mentioned before, the term ‘play’ is philosophically defined as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social, and cultural contexts. Wang Yangming’s doctrine, as a cultural resource, is applied to reading Chinese parents’ narratives. Harmony is an essential value of Chinese culture and an essential aspect of Chinese Neo-Confucian



philosophy (Angel, 2009). The pursuit of harmony can be viewed as one characteristic of Chinese culture (Wang, 1916). According to Wang Yangming's doctrine (1916), harmony means everything matters.

Furthermore, collectivism is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, which is different from individualistic orientation. However, collectivism has its dangerous side. As discussed in the outcomes and discussion, from a social construction perspective, problems emerging from the bonding process in Chinese culture, I think, tend to be related to relational suppression. Here, the term 'relational suppression' contains cultural meanings. It perhaps means that a person, to some extent, needs to sacrifice their personal aims with collectivism. I feel that this is a potential cost of establishing harmony. In Chinese culture, I argue that if we view this sense of harmony as having a dangerous side, it is different from what is suggested in Wang Yangming's doctrine. The sense of harmony having a dangerous side, I argue, feels superficial. Under this sense of harmony is an undercurrent of tension and conflicts. Based on this point, the insecurities regarding losing oneself through cooperating with others may stand out. For example, in Jasmine's case, I interpret that Jasmine's insecurities and her dominant voice in her family might be related to her discovering an inner coherence. Furthermore, perhaps we can understand it as playing in terms of searching for the self.

In Wang Yangming's doctrine, qi (material or physical force within oneself) differentiates us from others and determines an individual's uniqueness. As

mentioned in the outcomes and discussion, it is worth noting that this is “a coherent way of making space for a sense of individuality that is unlike the problematic self-associated with si yu” (Cocks, 2015, p.348). Si yu can be defined as selfish desire in Wang Yangming’s doctrine (1916). However, the confusion of “a coherent way of making space for a sense of individuality” (Cocks, 2015, p.348) with “the problematic self-associated with si yu” (Cocks, 2015, p.348) persists in some interpersonal situations in the context of Chinese culture.

Although social constructionism has been developed within a Western cultural framework, I believe that the human emotions behind this orientation are universal. Attempting to probe into human emotions, I argue that we can recognise common problems and maybe work them out together. According to Gergen (2009), dangerous dances are recognised as undesired repetitive patterns. In these undesired repetitive patterns, as Gergen (2009) writes, “No one wants to ‘fight it out,’ and yet, once the fight has begun it is difficult to excuse oneself, to ‘cut and run’” (p.111). I argue that what prevents us from participating might differ in Western and Chinese cultures, but we aim to improve participation. From a relational perspective, as mentioned before, we can perhaps promote “conversational moves” (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.679) and seek “possibilities for the mutual construction of the real” (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.684). I argue that Wang Yangming’s doctrine and social constructionism complement each other in the current research.

#### **4.8.5 Playing in an in-between world: a transitional space**

As mentioned in 4.9.3, Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas of transitional space are utilised as significant resources for the analysis of the narratives of parents. For Winnicott (2005), a transitional space refers to an intermediate area of experience situated between the inner world and the external shared world. From a relational perspective, Winnicott (2005) suggests that "it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" (p.3). Playing in the intermediate area of experience, for Winnicott, is synonymous with self-experiencing and creative living (Abram& Hjulmand, 2018). In relation to parents' personal experience, whether through parent's narratives or their present moment of narrating, they are entering and working within a transitional space. Furthermore, parents' play is explored, understood, and interpreted in accordance with what might be happening in a transitional space.

By utilising Winnicott's theory (2005), Jessica's narrative can be viewed as a transitional space in her present narrating moment. Jessica's experience with her daughter is reworked and reflected by her present self. In Winnicott's theory (2005), a sense of self is formed in the experience of relaxation. As mentioned in 5.3.3, Winnicott emphasises the importance of building up a supportive environment for an individual's self-discovery. Correspondingly, as mentioned in the methodology, the technique of free association was utilised when conducting interviews. The participants were encouraged to associate and express whatever came to mind on and

around the topic. That is to say, a safe place is created for participants for exploring vulnerabilities and unconscious motivation. In Jessica's transitional space, I assume that Jessica explores matters to do with the self, which I narrate as her experience of loss and disillusionment in relation to her power, in her present moment of narrating. Jessica's experience of loss is going through some positive changes (4.2.2), from denying to negotiating to depressing to accepting. These changes in her narrative indicate that Jessica reconstructs her anger, which may help Jessica step out of destructive interactions with her daughter.

In Rob's case, he represents himself as combining his hobbies with his job. Applying Winnicott's theory (2005), in doing so, I argue that a transitional space - a lottery project related to football and basketball might be created by Rob, a resting space for Rob in which his experience will not be challenged. Studying the lottery, I argue, might be Rob's experience of being with the environment-mother, a 'good-enough' space for Rob to feel enjoyment, as well as to experience a journey of progress.

In Mathew's case, Mathew gives a detailed example of playing blindfold games. In the example of playing blindfold games, I assume a transitional space might be created in their play for Mathew. He clearly expresses mutual enjoyment in blindfold games which he plays with his children. Unlike the ways he engages with his children in daily life, which are constricted and impatient, the ways he engages with his children in play are mutually enjoyable and beneficial. He describes himself as

choosing the game and teaching the children how to play the game. Unlike his lack of initiative in daily life, he can seize the initiative in play.

Based on the concept of transitional space, I am concerned that a safe and supportive environment is important to parents' play. Before discussing play in parenting and parent-child relationships, which may be viewed as more child-oriented constructs, we perhaps could separate the 'parent' from parental obligation. It is also important to consider whether a good enough parent has a corresponding good enough environment for adapting to a parent's role and their other situations. Drawing on Winnicott's ideas of the transitional space, 'good-enough' environments for parents emerge from three aspects in the current research: an important other who is not included in the family system (a researcher), a relational psychological place between a job and a hobby and playing with children. Thus, in reading the parents' narratives, along with the related theories, I feel that one's self is far more the conscious and voluntary aspects of one's behaviour and far more flexible than it is in the so-called relationships we may experience in daily life.

By any stretch of the imagination, Winnicott's ideas of playing and the transitional space should not just be viewed as a creation in the field of psychoanalysis. As Davis and Wallbridge (2018) suggest, "[f]or Winnicott, too, an equilibrium or compromise between inner and outer reality is a vital part of the integration of the individual" (p.63). It is interesting to recall the discussion of "coordinating rhythm" here (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.694). As Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001) suggest,

“the point of improvisation here is to secure a mutuality of rhythm by means of which conversational participants may move closer, to share a space from which a new building forth may proceed” (p.694). This social constructionist perspective is so close to Winnicott’s ideas of the transitional space where play is included. I feel that “to secure a mutuality of rhythm” (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.694) and an equilibrium or compromise inner self and external life (Davis & Wallbridge, 2018) are so close together. This coordinating rhythm is especially so in Jessica, Rob and Mathew’s cases.

#### **4.8.6 The relationship between environment provision and the parents’ capacity to play**

According to Winnicott (2005), playing is regarded as discovering the self and a creative experience. Winnicott (2005) emphasises that the individual cannot be viewed as an isolate when touching the central problem of the source of creativity, the environment. These aspects lead us to consider the relationship between environmental provision and the parents’ capacity to play.

In Olivia’s case, on the one hand, she represents herself as not expressing emotion and processing negative emotions on her own. Specifically, Olivia constructs her communication with her son in play as mainly communicating nonverbally. On the other hand, in the second interview, I could feel that she wished to communicate openly and needed to be understood and supported by others when she expressed her tears. However, from her description, she describes her husband as unable to

understand her work experiences and she cannot communicate in a manner which might be met with comforting and sympathetic responses. In her husband's (Jason) case, Jason represents himself as not wearing his heart on his sleeve and as controlling his emotions. I argue that Jason's details of his relationships with his son hint at how he engages with Olivia.

Based on her narratives, I interpret Olivia's playing together with her husband and her son and trying to communicate with her husband as Olivia's attempts to build deep connections and nurture the bonding she shares with her family. However, not expressing feelings with confidence might indicate that Olivia may not trust and accept what significant figures (i.e., her husband) are offering in her life.

From Olivia's perspective, her potential moves to create a deeper and more affectionate connection may come into her 'being' or not come into her 'being' because the environment (i.e., her husband, her son, and new things), the source of creativity, should also be taken into consideration (Winnicott, 2005, p.96). From her husband's perspective, Jason recognises that his traditional way of communication is insufficient to strengthen and nurture the bonding he shares with his family. To some extent, Jason values and learns to encourage emotional expression in his family. Whether Jason's change will encourage Olivia to express feelings with more confidence remains open in the current research.

Readers might raise a question here. How is parents' emotional experience in relation to play? Based on Olivia's unique case, understanding Olivia's emotional experience

in itself might have functional effects on knowing her emotions and possibly observing her ability to play. As discussed in 2.4.1, Henricks (2020) suggests that different levels of self are engaged in play; “our highest levels of consciousness try to impose themselves on our more basic patterns of functioning. Our lower levels challenge, confuse, and sometimes overwhelm our cognitive faculties with their demands” in play (p. 130). From this perspective, some sort of cognitive mapping is comprised in situations where one person stands (Henricks, 2020). Then powerful emotions may be invoked by these mental assessments (Henricks, 2020). In Olivia’s case, she describes her husband as unable to understand her experiences of work and as unable to communicate with her in a manner in which what she expresses might be met with comforting and sympathetic responses. I argue that this aspect, which might embody Olivia’s mental assessments in the situation where she stands, may invoke her sadness (i.e., *[h]e wouldn’t want to listen to me talking about my work*). According to Henricks (2020), those powerful emotions, which are invoked by mental assessments, “help the subject act quickly or, just as suddenly, freeze in place” (p.129). In Olivia’s case, she was feeling her communication with Jason in our interviews and exploring more affectionate ways of communication. However, whether her explorations in the interviews become continuous in her own life remains unanswered in this thesis. Therefore, in Olivia’s unique case, her potential moves to create a deeper and more affectionate connection may come into her ‘being’ or not come into her ‘being’, which may also be affected by how she explores (doing) sadness.



As Henricks (2020) suggests, some play behaviours, such as movement and emotional expressions, depend on ancient brain regions and social interactions which involve cooperation with others. According to Olivia's narrative, I understand creating a deeper and more affectionate connection as playing (Winnicott, 2005). In this case, her narrative accounts suggest that parents' ability to play can be influenced by the environment including their partner, their children, and other resources which are related to them. Secondly, her narrative accounts suggest that parents' ability to play can be affected by recognising and exploring their emotions.

#### **4.8.7 Reflecting on the reflexive work**

The practical process of engaging in reflexivity is inspired by Winnicott's theory of transitional space (2005). His relational insights regarding playing in transitional space provide references for reflexive work. As he suggests, playing functions as processing self-experience and communicating (2005). In reflexive work, researchers need to increasingly pay attention to knowing and sensitivity, understand better their relational self and cultivate balance in relation to others (Berger, 2015). Drawing on Winnicott's ideas, researchers can process and nourish the reflexive work in the transitional space. This means that researchers can cultivate playful understandings of reflexive work. In the intermediate area of my research experience, I continually learn to play with transitional objects regarding the research subject and further enable the researcher-researched relationship to develop. The practice of engaging in reflexivity is also inspired by my personal meditation practices. In 5.4, the discussion of a

humanising process in the current research indicates the researcher's mindful engagement in reflexivity.

Through my engagement with reflexivity, my own embodied relational understandings are developed and, in turn, serve a sensitive and mindful exploration of play. In participants' narratives regarding play, particularly the accounts relating to their difficult emotions, I notice that parents have automatic ways of reaching towards their significant others. However, they do not approach their difficult emotions with enough sensitivity and openness, especially in Jessica, Jasmine and Olivia's narratives. Their destructive ways of reaching toward their environment indicate the importance of inviting reflexive engagement in family settings. The quality of play in reflexive practice may exhibit itself in conduct.

#### **4.9 Summary of research outcomes**

This section will provide a summary of my research outcomes based on my research questions.

##### **1. How do parents experience play in their daily interactions?**

In these 13 core stories of Chinese parents, parents' play was explored and was diverse in the particular family context. Parents' experience of self, which they perceive, relate to, and reveal in their interactions with their children, specifically in their play-based interactions, emerges in different ways. Based on six Chinese parents' narratives, play emerges in the following ways.

First, play emerges in relationships with children: 1) Jessica: playing as a courier in relationships with Yaya 2) Mathew: playful fight in relationships with Xixi; 3) Mathew: playing the blindfold game in relationships with Xixi, Hanbo and other children; 4) Jason: physical play and psychological play in relationships with Jiahao; 5) Olivia: playing as experiencing new things in relationships with Jiahao.

Second, play is constructed by the researcher as different transitional spaces: 1) Jessica: playing in relationships between Jessica and her narratives; 2) Rob: playing in relationships between his hobby and work; 3) Jasmine: playing in relationships between Jasmine and nature; 4) Jasmine: playing in relationships between Jasmine and the researcher; 5) Mathew: playing in relationships between Mathew and the blindfold game.

Third, play is constructed by the researcher as emerging in relationships between parents and family: 1) Jasmine's attempts to co-create values in relationships with her family.

Fourth, the capacity of play is constructed by the researcher in relation to emotions and the environment: 1) Jessica: her relationships with anger; 2) Jasmine: her relationships with anxiety; 3) Olivia: her relationships with sadness; 4) Jasmine: her relationships with her husband and mom; 5) Oliva: her relationships with her husband.

Regarding the first research question, their experience of play is explored in the stories parents choose to tell, and the process by which parents narrate their stories. From a social construction perspective, play is multiple (i.e., play emerges in different forms), relational (i.e., play emerges in relationships with children), changeable (i.e., play may be disrupted by Jasmine in relationships with anxiety) and dynamic (i.e., Jessica in relationships with the researcher) in the current research.

## **2. How is the relational self constructed in play-based interactions?**

In relationships with children, parents construct themselves in multiple roles. For example, in Jessica's narrative of 'please open your door', she creatively shifts her position as a mother into a playmate. In Jason's narrative of '[p]laying with children in the family should be divided into two parts [...] physical play and psychological play', Jason constructs himself as a father, a person who loves playing sports, a playmate, and a friend. He invites multi-beings into his relationship with his son, which can be valued for its creative vitality. In Mathew's narrative of 'I like to play outdoor sports with him', Mathew constructs himself as a playmate, instead of a father, when he narrates play in relationships with his children.

Playing in the intermediate area of experience, according to Winnicott, is synonymous with self-experiencing and creative living (Abram & Hjulmand, 2018). In the transitional space, parents construct their experience, tending to be here fully. To some extent, parents are liberated from their position as only 'parent'. In Rob's case, playing in his hobby and work serves as a trusty transitional space. However,

Rob might potentially construct this in-between place as a space where he seems to isolate himself and avoid interpersonal relationships. Secondly, in the transitional space, parents construct their experience in a state of flow. For example, Jasmine represents a state of flow in her relationship with nature. She describes their play in the countryside as '*playing with snow, when it snows or playing with rain, when it rains*'.

In relationships between parents and family, the participants explore inner coherence and cooperation together with the family. In Jasmine's case, she works with her insecurities regarding losing herself and cooperating with others. However, Jasmine may not reach dialogue-play in her interpersonal engagements because her monologue dominates her relationship with her husband.

Parents' discourse contains cultural meanings, especially in Jasmine and Jason's cases. For example, Jason constructs his traditional ways of communication as controlling his emotions. In the culture of Confucianism, a father's role tends to be strong.

### **Summary of reading of core narratives**

In Jessica's narrative of '*please open your door*', Jessica, as a mother, strives for effective communication within the mother-daughter relationship. Her attempts to play as a courier can be viewed as a generative process. She creatively shifts her position from a mother into a playmate. Moreover, her creative innovation is brought to the standstill of their communication. Thus, in Jessica's play as courier with her

daughter, Jessica constructs different positions, as a mother and a playmate. From a relational perspective, Jessica's creativity is funnelled into her relationships with her daughter, and this enriches the dialogic possibilities for Jessica and Yaya opening up to each other. For example, in Jessica's narrative, Yaya happily opened her bedroom door without hesitation when her mother played with her. Applying psychoanalytic ideas to Jessica's story, Jessica's play as a courier was something that she could trust, without falling into anxiety and anger states with herself and her objects.

In Jessica's narrative of *'picking her shoes up'*, Jessica's play emerges in a transitional space, her narrative, where Jessica searches for self in her stories about the experience of loss and disillusionment in relation to her power. Jessica's experience with her daughter might be reworked and reflected by her present self in this narrative. In her story of *'picking her shoes up'*, she constructs her position as suppressing her anger towards her daughter's autonomy. Then, she constructs her position as losing her temper. Her daughter's autonomy might trigger Jessica's inner frustration in relation to her loss of power. In this sense, I argue that Jessica constructs herself as losing power in her story. Through narrating her story, Jessica reconstructs her anger and can step out of destructive interactions with her daughter.

In Rob's narrative of *'I study the lottery [...] it is a kind of relaxation'*, Rob's play emerges in a transitional space, a combination of his interests and his work. On the one hand, Rob feels enjoyment and experiences a journey of progress. It is worth noting that his capacity for concern might also develop. On the other hand, Rob deals

with Me (his advice for costumers) and Not-me (his consumers' choices and lottery results) in his narrative. He also seems to use this space to isolate himself and escape from frustrations. Thus, this might be a paradox: a transitional space is also a particular space for isolation and avoidance.

In Rob's narrative of '*It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day*', Rob's play emerges in searching for potentials to defend against conflict. His conflict is caused by how he works and is reflected within his inner dialogue. In this example, he constructs himself as a worker, father, and husband. In other words, his multi beings are represented in his inner dialogue. I suggest that Rob's 'doing' inner dialogue might be constructed as playing in which he seeks coherence in his life which means that he is searching for potentials to defend against conflict. Meanwhile, Rob's inner dialogue seems to be a battle for the self in which disorder is brought into consciousness.

In Jasmine's narrative of '*you're (I'm) getting overwhelmed and bored*', her play emerges in her attempts to co-create with her family, creating a bonding and nurturing family. Jasmine's play is disturbed by her anxiety: her over-concentration on her two children, multi-tasks, her high standards for herself and her family members, and a failure in environmental provision. The environmental provision (her husband's support) plays a crucial role in Jasmine's play.

In Jasmine's narrative of '*I create a poster on the wall*', her play emerges in searching for inner coherence. She works with her insecurities about losing herself and

cooperating with others, which I understood and interpreted based on Chinese culture.

However, Jasmine may not reach dialogue-play in her interpersonal engagements because Jasmine's monologue dominates the relationships with her husband.

In Jasmine's narrative of *'My husband, I, and my kids go to grandma's house in the countryside every weekend'*, Jasmine's play emerges in her and her family playing in the countryside, *'playing with snow, when it snows or playing with rain, when it rains'*. In this narrative, Jasmine connects back to herself or can be alone in the presence of an important 'another', nature in the countryside. In our interaction, I argue that Jasmine may create a unique space of play for herself here. Unlike her dominant way of being in her daily life, a fluid way of 'being' emerges from this very different 'lens'.

In Mathew's narrative of *'Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around'*, Mathew's play emerges in playing together with his daughter, where Mathew participates in parenting to support Jasmine as a mother, but also to nourish the bond with his younger daughter. However, Jasmine's dominant role in relationships with Mathew suppressed his full participation in co-action with his children. A transition emerges from avoidance of interaction with his elder son to suggestions regarding his children's education and more interaction with children.

In Mathew's narrative of *'I like to play outdoor sports with him'*, Mathew's play emerges in playing the blindfold game, where Mathew potentially develops his capacity to interact playfully with his environment. In particular, Mathew constructs



himself as enjoyable and refreshed, which is different from his constructs when he engages with his children in daily life: *'impatient'* and *'stern'*. He constructs himself as happy, which is different from his construction of life as *'meaningless'*. He constructs himself as *'[choosing] to play'*, which is different from his constructs when he engages with his parents, *'obey'* and *'ask [...] for their permission'*.

In Jason's narrative of *'Playing with children in the family should be divided into two parts [...] physical play and psychological play'*, Jason argues that play includes physical play (sports) and psychological play (experience). Jason constructs himself as a father, a person who loves playing sports, a playmate, and a friend. He invites multi-beings into his relationships with his son, which can be valued for its creative vitality.

In Jason's narrative of *'We will support him if he wants to be more independent'*, Jason's play with his son is integrated with his construction of self: as independent. Jason encourages a sense of autonomy in his psychological play with his son. Applying Winnicott's theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena (2005), Jason perceptively assists his son in observing and using objects in their play.

In Olivia's case, I argue that her explorations of her relationships with Jason in her narratives with my support, to some extent, may reach the sphere of play in relation to exploring more affectionate ways of communication and may potentially lead to new ways of being in relationships with Jason. However, whether her explorations in the interviews become continuous in her own life remains unanswered in this thesis.

In Olivia's narrative of '*to let him experience it [...] I just accompany him*', Olivia's play emerges in experiencing new things with her son. In their play, she constructs their communication as mainly communicating nonverbally. It is worth noting that Olivia constructs a coherent sense of self by not expressing feelings verbally. I observe contradictions in her narratives. On the one hand, she is more characterised by 'being' than 'doing' herself and rarely expresses feelings verbally. On the other hand, she wishes to communicate openly. However, we can view Olivia holding onto expressing feelings as her not fully allowing her male elements (doing).

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

At last, they made so much noise that I awoke, and thought to myself, what a false dream that is, of *children*? The child is the father of the man [sic]; and wiser. Children never do such foolish things. But men do.

Ruskin (1904, p.197)

### 5.1 Introduction

This research was carried out as a process in which I seemed gradually to awaken from familiar senses of self into a more genuine, authentic self. Like waking up from a dream: you never knew it was a dream until you suddenly woke up. As life and awakening continue, knowledge will continue to expand. In this final chapter, at the beginning of this life after awakening, I will provide some conclusions regarding current research limitations, future research recommendations and a reflection of the current research.

This research journey began with my concern about self-discovery and my relationships with my father. Knowing oneself and prompting others to know themselves has been my intent, through the lens and experience of play. An encounter with a five-year-old girl strengthened my desire to carry out my research. I am curious about what happens between parents and their children in daily life and how adults narrate memorable moments with their children. How are adults' 'selves' re-sculpted in interactions with children? Are there any possibilities for adults' own play to

emerge? Despite a great deal of psychological research into infants' and children's play, I have found that less research is focused on adults. In the current research, the term 'play' is defined as a functional aspect of human experience in its own nature and a pathway to the self in relation to interpersonal, social and cultural contexts. Meeting to play and playing to meet can be viewed as the joint contribution of self-growth. Therefore, play becomes a place with endless possibilities.

My research choices and practices were deeply embedded both in Western systems of knowledge and Chinese culture. Philosophically, I chose to locate my research in the social constructionist paradigm and to conduct my research practice in line with Wang Yangming's philosophical principle of zhi xing he yi (the unity of knowing and acting) (Wang, 1916). The narrative method is utilised together with elements of psychodynamic theory to explore the possibilities for understanding the 'flow' of experience. Private constructions of the individual with others and the researcher's interpretations were both explored in the narrative inquiry. The free-association interview technique was utilised and the emotional experience of the participants was valued from three perspectives:

1. I reviewed my practice of interactions with parents to build up a trustworthy research environment and encouraged parents to express how they felt about a situation.
2. I interpreted parents' narratives by focusing on the emotional experiences that happened in their narratives.

3. I gave myself permission, space, and time to feel the data and play with the data explicitly involving serious matters.

In the current research, I explored six Chinese parents' experiences of play, especially in the interactions with their children, in three families. In particular, I focussed on the possibility for self-discovery and its potentials in their experience of play. Within Chinese parents' narratives, play and self-discovery emerged in different ways. Their narratives were interpreted in both data and in theoretically driven ways. I argue that this was the most beautiful but also the most dangerous process for me as a researcher. In order to thicken the reading of parents' narratives, psychoanalytic concepts were also considered within my interpretation of the data. If I regard my interpretation of data as play, the uncertainty involved in this process and the researcher was challenged.

## **5.2 Limitations of current research**

In the current research, a small sample, six Chinese parents in three families, is investigated, and one should be cautious about generating and applying outcomes in the current research to other parents. In other words, the transferability of the outcomes regarding a broader understanding of parents' play experience and their experience of self is limited.

By using two interviews to collect data, participants had a chance to reflect on and further explore what they mentioned in the first interview. However, I could not

collect resources further to the second interview due to the limited time. For example, Olivia's potential moves to create a deeper and more affectionate connection may come into her 'being' or not come into her 'being' because the environment (i.e., her husband and her son) should also be considered (Winnicott, 2005, p.96). This aspect remains unanswered and open in the current research.

Play mainly emerges in parents' interactions with their children in the current research. In this sense, play should be considered as a relational, two-way interaction. In the current research, children's voices are not considered.

In the current research, play is placed into a professional encampment, narratives, and studied (Henricks, 2020). According to Henricks (2020), play is studied in different professional encampments by play scholars, such as narratives, ideologies and rhetorics. However, as Henricks suggests (2020), what people in other domains are doing is being entirely ignored.

As a reflexive researcher, I have observed my beliefs, thoughts, and practices embedded in Chinese culture and how these aspects might have influenced the research and the use of language in the thesis. However, practicing writing as a full self is challenging because it involves monitoring ongoing thoughts and emotions and choosing words mindfully. According to Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001), language might be the creator of conflicts; it should be responsible for conflicts. I'm willing to express myself if readers have any questions about this research.

### **5.3 Recommendations for the future research**

Recommendations are provided for the future research in this section. I have explored six Chinese parents' experience of play, especially in their interactions with their children, in three families. In particular, I'm interested in the possibility of self-discovery and its potentials in parents' experience of play. I suggest that experience of play can be explored in different "fields of relationships" (Henricks, 2020, p.120).

Due to the research target, Chinese individuals' values based on Chinese culture should not be ignored in the current research. For example, in Jason's case, he emphasises his child's education in play within the culture of Confucianism where: children's education is an emphasis (Jung and Wang, 2018). However, utilising Western knowledge to interpret Chinese parents' experiences remains a challenge.

### **5.4 A humanising process cultivated in the research**

Rational perception, with all its phases of humour, are best expressed by a child, who has few second thoughts to divide the image of his momentary feeling. His [sic] simplicity adds much to the manifestation of his intelligence. The child is the last and lowest of rational creatures, for in him the "rational soul" closes its long downward flight with the bright final revelation.

Meynell (1897, p.42-p.43)

A researcher is not a writing machine who should only address rational perception. In the spirit of play, they should be welcomed to embrace their deep and complex emotions. By doing so, a researcher's sensitivity might be excavated, tested, and developed. Inspired by the image of a child narrated by Meynell (1987), I feel that hopefully, a researcher can learn to cultivate their simplicity and poise themselves to manifest "a more relationally responsible language" in their research (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p.689). In other words, I argue that the practice of humanised care should be invited into research. In the current research project, the humanising process reflects explicitly on three aspects: therapeutic, playful, and artistic attempts.

### **Therapeutic attempts**

In order to balance my personal life and the research, I have consciously given myself therapeutic time and space to do meditation and nurture myself without external disruption. Only after regular meditation do I permit myself to do the research and write the thesis. The therapeutic time is vital to make myself aware of and accept my impulsive and habitual reactions to situations and to learn to cultivate mindful responses. In practising how to give myself more patience, acceptance, trust and gratitude, dealing with relationships with myself, a sense of an in-between world has been gradually strengthened in my consciousness. In this sense, my complexity has been better observed, pacified, and managed. Further, my therapeutic attempts serve as resources to develop an understanding of humanised care in relation to others (Todres,



Galvin & Dahlberg, 2014). The strengthening sensitivity in the in-between world during the therapeutic time is of essential value for me to attune to the enhanced emotional qualities, which can nurture an atmosphere of trust and help the researcher-participant relationships to flourish. Similarly, humanised care can also be approached to better manage my emotional tension when encouraging the relational conversation between theories in the current research.

### **Playful attempts**

In the current research, play is observed, tasted, and constructed in relation to others. Based on this point, my playful attempts in the research process include shifting my attention from focusing on “the cared-for-in-themselves to a focus on the cared-for-in-relation to others” (Todres, Galvin & Dahlberg, 2014, p.9) and cultivating mindful choices to respond to situations. In other words, the cultivation of ‘approaching to’ is embodied in the playful attempts. The in-between world is viewed as a space where my creative responses to challenging situations are allowed to unfold softly in research. In the intermediate area of experience, the attitudes towards myself and others are better observed and cultivated; negative thoughts are weakened, and stable attitudes with kindness towards others are gradually formulated. The playful attempts can shift my attention to experience the research with kindness and allow the researcher-researched relationship to flow.

### **Artistic attempts**

As discussed in 4.8, utilising Gee's poetic approach can be regarded as an artistic process in which an artificial endeavour exists within layers of intension and reconstruction (Blumenfeild-Jones, 1995). Gee's poetic approach to language privileges the narrator's experience and meaning from inside their narratives. 'Cues' internal to the text provide the researcher with possibilities for analysis. Coherently representing core narratives allows readers to link parents' accounts to their narratives. Gee's poetic approach lets conversational moves from the narrator to the researcher to the readers unfold naturally. The narrator's originals and the researcher's reconstruction are sensitively considered for creating poetic expressions of core narratives. Meanwhile, the researcher cares for the complexity of the relationships between the narrators and the researcher with openness and sensitivity as much as possible. The researcher then feels better emotionally prepared to approach readers. The language the researcher chooses in the thesis might be poised to use in a measured way.

## **5.5 Reflection**

As mentioned in 5.1, this research was carried out, along with a process where I gradually awakened from familiar senses of self into a more genuine, authentic self. It would be like waking up from a dream: you never knew it was a dream until you suddenly woke up. I gradually draw near to the teachings of Buddha when learning social constructionism, facing a deeply distressing family situation and writing the thesis. The teachings of Buddha indeed reached into my consciousness almost near

the end of the research. I reflect on the research, along with the teachings of Buddha, at the end of the research journey. I believe this reflection will take me on a new, joyful journey.

*Let's have a conversation*

*With Buddha, Wang Yangming, Gergen, and Winnicott*

*Before the end of this journey*

*We are all welcome to join*

*And play*

### **5.5.1 Illusion (相)**

All that has a form is illusive and unreal. When you see that all forms are illusive and unreal, then you will begin to perceive your true Buddha nature.

Johnson (n.d.; for original Mandarin see Box 5.1)

**Box 5.1**

凡有所相，皆是虚妄，若见诸相非相，即见如来。

--- 《金刚经》

This piece of text comes from the Diamond Sutra, translated by Alex Johnson (n.d.). All existence with external form is illusive and unreal, implying a negation of form, not an absolute negation of everything. In the teachings of Buddha, “all conditioned

phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, or shadows; like drops of dew, or flashes of lightning; thusly should they be contemplated” (Johnson, n.d., p.1).

Gergen’s thoughtful insights are deeply connected with Buddhist views. From a social construction perspective, our conflicting and multiple possibilities as both evil and good, which may reach or not reach consciousness, can exist as intelligible action within our relationships (Gergen, 2009). Based on this perspective, “doing knowledge” is emphasised in Gergen’s work (2009, p.246).

Winnicott’s thoughtful ideas are consistent with Buddhist views too (Hoffer, 2018). “On the seashore of endless worlds, children play”, Winnicott quotes (2005, p.128). As he suggests, “To control what is outside one has to do things, not simply to think or to wish, and doing things takes time. Playing is doing” (p.55).

We can see Buddha in Gergen and Winnicott’s ideas and insights (forms). However, if we only focus on the form itself, we may get lost in it. Specifically, in the teachings of Buddha, “if a disciple still clings to the arbitrary illusion of form or phenomena such as an ego, a personality, a self, a separate person, or a universal self existing eternally, then then that person is not an authentic disciple” (p.4). Furthermore, ‘doing’ phenomena or playing means we “leave behind all distinctions of phenomena” (p.13). We might gradually learn to view phenomena as interdependent instead of different.

## **The parents**

In the current research, I have been trying to construct parents' narratives from a relational perspective and explore the possibilities for playing in adults' lives. I feel that playing is 'doing' phenomena (form) in relationships for parents.

### **The researcher**

When conducting this research, I have been facing a deeply distressing family situation. Such a personal experience truly tests my faith in conducting this research. Only after regular meditation do I permit myself to do the research and write the thesis. However, when seeing the individuals' 'devil' acts and my parents' suffering for a long time, I frequently felt sad inside my body. Inevitably, I had a long period of depression. In a sense, I was not 'doing' phenomena in those moments. When confronting any illusions, I'm practicing being the one casting the spell, not the one being captivated by it.

### **5.5.2 The practice of compassion and charity (布施)**

In the practice of compassion and charity a disciple should be detached. That is to say, he should practice compassion and charity without regard to appearances, without regard to form, without regard to sound, smell, taste, touch, or any quality of any kind.

Johnson (n.d.; for original Mandarin see Box 5.2)

**Box 5.2**

菩提于法应无所住行于布施。所谓不住色布施，不住声、香、味、触、法布施。须菩提，菩萨应如是布施，不住于相。

--- 《金刚经》

Gergen (2009) raises a question, “*knowledge for whose benefits?*” (p.211). In other words, “what is worth doing” (Gergen, 2009, p.211). In the process of constructing ‘phenomena’, we should be responsible for “generating meaning” (Gergen, 2009, p.373). This process can be understood as nurturing ‘us’ in relationships.

Winnicott (2005) suggests the importance of building up a supportive environment for an individual’s exploration. The environment provision as an abundant mother makes individual’s playing possible (Winnicott, 2005). We should strive to be mutual, nourishing environmental provision.

When Love and Life first meet, a radiant thing is born, without a shade.

When the roads begin to roughen, when the shades begin to darken, when the days are hard, and the nights cold and long ---then it begins to change.

Love and life *will* not see it, *will* not know it ---till one day they start up suddenly, crying, ‘O God! O God! We have lost it! Where is it?’ They do not understand that they could not carry the laughing thing unchanged into the desert, and the forest, and the snow. They do not know that what walks beside them still is the Joy grown older. The grave, sweet, tender thing

---warm in the coldest snows, brave in the dreariest deserts ---its name is  
Sympathy; it is the Perfect Love.

Schreiner (2002, p.5)

There is no separation and only a threat of separation within human beings (Winnicott, 2005). In the practice of compassion, love, life, and joy tend to harmonise with one another. Trust and security spontaneously flow into our relationships. Our attention no longer turns to a threat of separation; instead, we turn to creative living.

### **The parents**

When I look back on this research journey, parents' capacity to play contains two essential aspects: their relationships with the environment (the partner, the child, the parent, and other social and cultural resources) and their relationships with the emotions.

### **The researcher**

Children can be good teachers for adults. They always remind us of who we are. The practice of compassion was initially inspired by a five-year-old girl who I met at the beginning of this research journey (in 1.2). To feel her love and to be loved by her supports and sustains me. Is her love a spontaneous practice of compassion? Yes. She is a fantastic teacher. As I rebuild my faith in life and practice refocusing on my research, my supervisor provides me with great energy, help, patience and encouragement. I will be forever grateful for their enlightenment.

### 5.5.3 An internally intuitive process which is spontaneous (无有定法)

Buddhas and disciples are not enlightened by a set method of teachings, but by an internally intuitive process which is spontaneous and is part of their own inner nature.

Johnson (n.d.; for original Mandarin see Box 5.3)

#### Box 5.3

如来所说法，皆不可取，不可说，非法，非非法。

--- 《金刚经》

Wang Yangming's doctrine, which I discussed explicitly in 2.2.2, 3.2.1, and 5.3.5, is deeply connected with Buddhas' teachings. 'Nature' is also interpreted by Wang in his work which is embodied in his letters. His doctrine claims a unitary relationship between *zhi* 知 and *xing* 行 (*zhi xing he yi*), suggesting the unity of knowing and acting. However, we cannot understand the unity of knowing and acting simply as applying theory into practice. Instead, it is the process of self-realisation and then full actualisation of what should be done into concrete actions and behaviours.

Gergen (2009) emphasises fully engaged participation in his work. For example, he encourages attempting to "fully be there" for the reader (2009, p.225). 'I', to some extent, is welcomed by this way of writing. This fully engaged participation allows the individual to 'dance' in the moment. Gergen (2009) quotes, "Organising is a



conversational process, an inescapable self-organising process of participation in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change” (p.313).

Winnicott (2005) suggests that playing is spontaneous instead of compliant and acquiescent. The transitional phenomena “have become diffused” from playing to shared playing, gradually spreading over the cultural experience (Winnicott, 2005, p.7).

According to the teachings of Buddha, what “Buddha has realised and spoken of cannot be conceived of as separate, independent things and therefore cannot be described” (Johnson, n.d., p.6). Just as I observe and explore Wang Yangming’s doctrine, Gergen’s work of relational being, and Winnicott’s work of playing, there is something universal in them that cannot be described and can only be realised through empathy, intuition and spontaneity. This is the most challenging part for me to express in this research journey. I’m often touched when reading and learning from their works. I can deeply feel a sense of oneness in their unique works. In turn, their works encourage me to explore play and the relational self in a unique way.

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## **Appendix A: Interview transcripts**

Due to the word limit, only selected interview transcripts will be presented in Appendix A1-A6.

### **Appendix A1: Interview Transcripts with Jessica**

#### **4.2.1 ‘Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving’**

**Interviewer:** I noticed that you and Yaya played a little game.

**Jessica:** Yeah. I asked her to drink some water, but she locked her bedroom door just now. I used delivery as a way to attract her attention. And then she felt very happy to open her door and drink water. If you just ask her to open her door directly, it will be difficult, because she won’t open her door or sometimes will have hard feelings to do as you wish.

**Interviewer:** What did you say?

**Jessica:** “Please open your door! Your delivery is arriving.” And she found it funny and she would like to open her door. Then she got this cup of water. She felt like receiving something that was delivered to her. I think sometimes we can try different ways of doing something, and these ways will arouse her interest and motivation. Maybe the effect will be better than just asking her to drink water directly or enforcing her to drink water...well, I think it’s hard to raise a child.

**Interviewer:** How did you come up with these ideas?

**Jessica:** She doesn’t habitually drink much water. In daily life, I would say, “please hurry up! Drink your water! If you drink your water, I will give you a treat.” But sometimes, I would also enforce her to drink water and tell her if she does not drink much water, she will get sick. Anyway, I have tried different ways. Maybe the way I used just now was the best for her. It also depends on her mood and what ways she is comfortable with. She does not actually take initiative to drink water. She is lack of initiative in many things. She does not know what she ought to do. She has changed in this half a year, she has more and more ideas and her expression ability is getting



better and better. So, sometimes I feel quite headache in the process of getting along with her.

**Interviewer:** What makes you feel headache?

**Jessica:** For example, she talks back (smiles reluctantly)

**Interviewer:** Do you have any special memories?

**Jessica:** I find that she has a strong sense of self-esteem now. For example, if she wore clothes which she thought pretty, she would be very confident and excited that day. I didn't agree with her choices sometimes. But she thought she was beautiful. I think it is necessary to advise her to consider about other choices and meanwhile I don't want to impose something upon her. I respect her choices. Sometimes I just want her to have an eye on the things she doesn't try before. You can force yourself to do something or try to accept something new for you. I really want her to know that. Don't be too wilful. She always does things she thinks she wants to do so. She could sometimes listen to others' voice. I think this is very important to her. She could consider others' voice which may be beneficial for her. Maybe at her age, she cannot think too much as we do. She maybe simply thinks that she wants to do something which she likes to and if she doesn't like it, she will not do it. So sometimes, I choose to respect her. I will slowly let her know something I understand until she is old enough to understand the complex notions of.

#### **4.2.2 'picking her shoes up'**

**Interviewer:** Is there anything in particular that you've gone through that has impressed you?

**Jessica:** Picking clothes...She picks her clothes up in the morning and sometimes we take too much time in negotiation in the morning. It's getting better now. When I realise that she would like to pick her clothes by herself, I will let her to choose what she would like to wear the night before in case she will take too much time to do so the next morning. And then...other problems will crop up in the morning...Such as picking her shoes up...which must give us an unexpected 'surprise'. She could be like that sometimes: too insistent no matter how tough my stance is. I remembered...one day...she wanted to wear a pair of dirty sneakers. I calmly told her to wear a pair of clean shoes, I would wash that pair of dirty sneakers for her that day and she could wear this pair of sneakers the next day. I didn't know...It seemed like she didn't

understand what I had said totally. She insisted...then she herself went to the bathroom and cleaned her dirty sneakers with wet paper. But they were still dirty. I kept cool and didn't lose my temper. I told her that other children liked the style of her clean shoes and she could still wear her dirty ones the next day after I cleaned them. Then she reluctantly pulled on her clean shoes with actions of trying to take them off. I really didn't want her to wear the dirty sneakers...then I started throwing tantrums. But guess what...She still insisted on her choice even when we were late for school. She was not flexible to deal with this matter.

**Interviewer:** What did you do then?

**Jessica:** I was very helpless and ran out of my patience, then I yelled at her. Luckily, her dad was at home. I cannot imagine how to calm myself down in that circumstance without her dad and when no one send her to school. Her dad also helped me to persuade Yaya to wear the clean shoes. Why did she insist on her choice? How could she have her own ideas? She finally walked away in her dirty sneakers. When she arrived at school, her dad found that she acted as if nothing bothered her. It was as if none of this had happened in the morning. She just went in her classroom, took off her clothes and then putted down her bag. It was natural...Her dad could not see by her face that what happened in the morning made her feel unhappy.

**Yaya:** I have finished my homework!

**Jessica:** Give yourself a break! Is it very easy for children to forget such things? Sometimes, I cannot stay calm. But she didn't say that she must listen to me and doesn't want to make me angry after I was losing my temper. Maybe she needs time to realise her own problems and to change herself. Maybe when she stands outside in her dirty shoes and someone says to her, how dirty your shoes are, maybe she would not want to wear her dirty shoes again. But if I tell her that her shoes are dirty, she would not listen to my advice. She thinks, 'I like to wear the shoes, and I can clean them if they get dirty', I guess. So, let her feel the need to change herself, then a change in her attitude happens. She will change as she wish but not under others' pressure. No matter how many good or bad words adults say, and even we lose our temper, she doesn't care.

## **Appendix A2: Interview Transcripts with Rob**

#### **4.3.1 ‘I study lottery...it is a kind of relaxation’**

*Interviewer: Could you please share your experiences which keep you busy?*

*Rob: I’m managing a lottery betting station. So, I study lottery. It is a kind of relaxation.*

*Interviewer: How do you view your work?*

*Rob: Because I love this work, I am interested in lotto. I am studying lottery. This is also a kind of fun. I do not have time to exercise. If I have time to exercise, this is also a good way to relieve pressure for myself. Nothing else.*

*Interviewer: What do you and your wife usually do to relax?*

*Rob: We usually go out for dinner or go shopping. We seldom watch movies. It is also a way to relax. I don’t have time to play. My work time is limited and it’s hard for me to find time to go out and play.*

*Interviewer: Can you talk more about the time limit you mentioned?*

*Rob: I’m at the lottery betting station almost all day from eight in the morning to eleven at night. I have almost no weekends and no holidays. I only have the seven days of Spring Festival to have a rest. The station is always open. I have no time at all.*

*Interviewer: You said that you have great interest and research in work. How do you do it?*

*Rob: Everyone wants to win in my station. If you want to make the business better, you have to study the rules and the winning methods to help people who the lottery get certain benefits. Personally, I like football and basketball. I study related projects deeply. Then I give buyers recommendations...what kind of games are good...what kind of games you can win...help them make some money. I have time to study this.*

*Interviewer: You like playing football and basketball?*

*Rob: I prefer these two sport activities. There are just such two kinds of lotteries. I’m doing a lot of research. Guess the result of the game or something. Anyway, it is a great fun! If I get it right, I’m excited and proud of myself. If I can guess the results correctly, it is a very good thing for the buyers. I concentrate on this matter and don’t think about anything. Therefore, during the period of studying the lottery, I would not think about other things. No external factors would affect me; nor would they affect my mood. Even if there is something negative, I don’t think about anything else when I get into the state of studying the lottery.*

#### **4.3.2 'It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day'**

**Interviewer:** *What was your state before you had your kid?*

**Rob:** *I just worked and worked. I did this job for 14 or 15 hours a day. I just sited in the store and sold lottery tickets. I couldn't walk away. I had no kid and no pressure, just made money.*

**Interviewer:** *just now you said that the biggest pressure is to make money, nothing else...*

**Rob:** *Yes, the trouble is that you don't make enough money compared with you give in this work. It takes a lot of energy to sit there and type tickets 14/5 hours a day. On the contrary, I hope to have a proper opportunity to quit this job. First, I can spend my day with my kid and wife. On the other hand, I could go out with them on weekends and have dinner with them in the evening. But I should be in in the store for whole day. There's no time for anything else.*

**Interviewer:** *In last interview, you mentioned you would like to change a job...*

**Rob:** *I can do something by myself. At least I can do something with relatively free time. Don't stick to this position every day. Well, there's no way to hang out, no time to eat or drink, just stay in the shop. this life is also without any pursuit and this life is too boring.*

**Interviewer:** *You mentioned that you found a lot of fulfillment in your work in our last interview.*

**Rob:** *As I said before, I like to watch football games. One of the lotteries I sell is about guessing the results of football and basketball games. Lottery buyers don't understand them, but they want to buy some. I said I would research and explore. The purpose of the lottery buyers is to make some money. We will study the game carefully and find the most stable game to recommend to the lottery buyers. So, it's kind of fun at the level of getting them to win. Then they will be motivated to keep buying. But it doesn't mean that my hit rate is high, it means that I try to improve the hit rate. Now there is no other work to do. I have no time to accompany the family. Anyway, after a few years of work, based on the future of the general situation, the lottery industry may be worse and worse. Just recently, China has rated a world-class lottery liability system. There are limited ways to play...Less income. It is a disadvantage for us. But I won't change my job temporarily.*

## Appendix A3: Interview Transcripts with Jasmine

### 4.4.1 'you're (I'm) getting overwhelmed and bored'

*Interviewer:* what about when you're upset?

*Jasmine:* I yelled at the kids. I'm doing it less and less. I see how they educate children, and I see myself. I saw a small video, "Yang haipeng you saw it" I asked him, this is the reality of us. The children do their homework, and we are on the side. You like this...this is not right. The more we did this, the more nervous the child became. The more nervous he was, the less clear he was. I taught Hanbo is not because he cannot fix that problem. Instead, I feel his attitude is not good. Why would you say, okay, okay, that's it, that's it...Mother didn't want to hear that. You should say, mom, I can't do this problem, let's do a few more. We can't let that snowball get bigger. That won't work. I said every time I scolded you, it was because of your attitude, which made me angry and annoyed. So, I talked to his dad, I talked to his grandma, I said, "please don't call the child as stupid one". I hope them could be more patient. I was with the two of them, and they were very sensible. And I'm so touched. The beginning of human nature is good. It does not say that children are born to be bad children. It's just a matter of your parenting and your education. I think parental education is critical. I think too much in every night. Sometimes I would persuade my friend. Don't listen to your mother in law and father in law...two children are brought up together...don't do that. You at least take good care of the eldest brother. So, he can be more independent. Then you go to take care of the younger one. You have experience and patience. If you have two children, you have to work, and you have so many chores to do. You're getting overwhelmed and bored. Why I can't do it? Why they do it so well? Why is that my children are not good? That was what I did. Anxiety. You said I was anxious. This is the reason. I'm much better than before. It may be a little annoying during or near your period. I can't control myself. I'm just bored...then I want to lose my temper in front of my children and I begin to blame myself. Xixi told me that why I did that and that was not good. I said to her that he needed to buy a word, hanging on the wall. I told him that when I was in a bad mood, it was because of him. He's changed now. I got to the point. I said that I, as a woman, needed to be understood, and a man came up behind me and said,

*it's okay. I need a man like that, not every time I'm in trouble, you push me out, you push me into the wind, you let me stand in your way...I said you had to change. When he cares more about me, my attitude towards the children has changed a lot. If he makes a noise to me, I will be very grievance...it is very annoying. After the annoyance, I'm just like a small hedgehog...see who stab who and see who stab who, just like that. He quarreled with me...I texted him...he never replied to me. Why did he do that to me, He didn't make sense.*

#### **4.4.2 'I create a poster on the wall'**

*Hanbo: I only play once a week, and I want to play now.*

*Jasmine: if you tell me more, I'll take it off. What day is it today?*

*Hanbo: Thursday.*

*Jasmine: stop talking and go play with your sister. Tell dad to prepare some fruit for you. (continue our conversation) I asked their dad to cooperate with me. I also have trouble and I also have something is not good. We should...we should have a little progress in every year. Recognise our shortcomings and change them. But if we don't change them, we will make them over and over again. My husband...when my mom is here, he is lazy and play with his phone. he is better when my mom isn't here. I wrote a poster by myself...taped up on the wall. We can see it every day...A real father...Let two kids have a real father. Two kids can grow up with their dad. Dad cannot play phone games at home, cannot watch ipad when taking a shower, cannot watch the phone when getting up in the morning. We should be more attentive to two kids' needs in daily life...study and personality. We cannot speak in a loud voice. If we have time...read more...communicate with each other. We can choose to go out for a walk. We should be strict with ourselves.... go to bed early. As parents, everything is given priority to two kids.*

#### **4.4.3 'My husband, I, and my kids go to grandma's house in the countryside every weekend'**

*Jasmine:...Come back to my family... We and my two children go to grandma's house every weekend. Playing with snow when it snows or Playing with rain when it rains. When we are free every weekend and after they finish their homework, we go out every weekend with two kids. I think it's great!*

## **Appendix A4: Interview Transcripts with Mathew**

### **4.5.1 ‘Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around’**

*Interviewer: Are you playing together?*

*Mathew: Yes...Xixi and I like to fight playfully and chase each other around. We haven't done it for a while. Her mom said Xixi had to develop good habits for her as a girl.*

*Interviewer: how do you fight playfully?*

*Mathew: It's just the way she likes to play...the way which caters to her. She likes to ask me to hug her in circles.*

*Interviewer: So, you just accompany her to play the way she likes?*

*Mathew: That's right.*

### **4.5.2 ‘I like to play outdoor sports with him’**

*Interviewer: what do you usually do with him?*

*Mathew: I usually accompany him to do his homework. Play with him... He plays a lot by himself. He usually plays toys with the children. Sometimes we play badminton in the company. It is warm to play badminton. I like to play outdoor sports with him. He likes to play with his mobile phone sometimes. We adults also know; we like to play with the phone either. I don't spend too much time with children.*

*Interviewer: how do you usually play outside?*

*Mathew: outdoor sports... Some time ago, I bought rubber bands for him and taught him the rubber bands we jumped when we were little...oh and sandbagging...I bought a badminton and played badminton with him. Sometimes it's warm and we ride bikes. There is a big court near our company. It's really nice. So, we go and play in there. I'm very impatient. I don't like to discipline children. I'm quite impatient when teaching them. I want to give them a stern lecture when they are not good. Then their mom would tell me that I don't need to discipline them. She would say that I'm getting impatient in such a short time. So, I usually don't discipline them. But if I don't do so, their mom is very fretful. Then she may say that she can't manage two children by herself. Then she may say that she can't manage two children by herself. These two kids have to learn English and piano. She is tired these days.*

## **Appendix A5: Interview Transcripts with Jason**

### **4.6.1 ‘Playing with children in the family should be divided into two parts...physical play and psychological play’**

*Interviewer: how do you play on your own? How do you play with your children? as long as it's about playing...*

*Jason: as far as I am concerned, play with children in the family should be divided into two parts: behavioral play and psychological play. Behavioral play may be more about playing physical games...football...hide-and-seek games...which we used to play when we were kids. Psychological games...we spend more time with my son to watch movies...to travel...to extend his experience of sensing from different aspects of society and nature. I feel that we should play focusing on the education and moral and intellectual development at the same time. I feel that both physical play and mental play are very important.*

*Interviewer: what kind of interaction do you usually have with children in physical play?*

*Jason: football...basketball...running... If I have time, I would like to take him to the football field and basketball court for some sports.*

*Interviewer: what about psychological play?*

*Jason: because my time with my son is limited, I spend less time with my son because of work. I try to find opportunities to create conditions. We may travel, or participate in some parent-child activities in his kindergarten, I take him to know more about the society, and to understand the different forms of the society. I take him to know more children. Knowing some good friends will have a great help for his growth and learning.*

### **4.6.2 ‘We will support him if he wants to be more independent’**

*Interviewer: how do you think this has been slowly changed?*

*Jason: well... In fact, psychological play acts a role in my son's growth. After he meets different friends, people and things, he deliberately learns new things, and he can also complete things on his own. For example, he may think why Shiya can go to dinner with my mom and dad, and her mom and dad don't have to follow. Next time*



he will go by himself without our company. Why did Shiya do it? I also can do the same. If he mentally wants to be independent, then he asks for it, and slowly our parents... That means we parents totally support him if he asks for it. So, we take some exercise on purpose. After all, in the future, in primary school, middle school, high school and university, he needs to complete things independently. We parents can only assist him beside him, as far as possible not to let him make detours. He still needs to find his own way out. Overindulgence is not very good for my son around us.

**Interviewer:** how do you understand your education and love for Jiahao?

**Jason:** we don't overindulge our son. I think I play a lot of sports with him. I especially hope that he can learn to play football and basketball in the summer. I especially hope that he can play football and basketball...sweating, burned and tanned by the sun. I hope he does, because only if he feels and tastes this process, and know how hard it is, you can cherish every point and every achievement he earns. Success are hard-earned. I have grown up with sports, and sportsmanship is really special. Learning sports also has the advantages. Such as team spirit and the hard-working spirit. It's necessary.

## **Appendix A6: Interview Transcripts with Olivia**

### **4.7.1 'For the family, I don't worry a lot about it'**

**Interviewer:** is there any change after having children?

**Olivia:** I'm getting angrier than before. It's not as good as being single. Sometimes I look back. I don't know what it feels Oliviate, but there is a lot of work to do every day. For the family, I don't worry about a lot of it, but the family also can't without me. I'm not very devoted to my family. I leave early in the morning, about seven o'clock, and come back from work at six in the evening. I've been out all day.

**Interviewer:** how do you balance work and family?

**Olivia:** I can't stay at home all day and ask for money. It doesn't feel good. I earn some money to buy things for me, to buy things for the children, and to buy things for the family. I never ask my partner for money; I pay for things by myself. I think I've done a lot for my family. Although I am not at home with my child every day, I feel better about the material things I do for him and my mother-in-law. I try to give them, think about them, buy them some. In different ways... Actually, other... Ah... Nothing

*has changed. Because every day... I don't usually sleep with my son in my arms. It's easy for me. Hu jiahao sleeps with his grandma. When I get up in the morning, I sometimes get up early and go for a walk or something. I don't have to take care of the kid. I come back to brush my teeth, to wash my face, to put on my clothes and leave.*

#### **4.7.2 'to let him experience it...I just accompany him'**

*Interviewer: what do you think of your playing with him?*

*Olivia: it means to eat something new, or to play something new, to let him experience it...I just accompany him. Sometimes, he is excited to go out.*

*Interviewer: I think it is very interesting. I feel that although you don't talk much, it is good to do something together.*

*Olivia: I usually take him out on Sundays whenever I have a break. I Oliviake to take him out whenever I go to the vegetable market. We don't say much, just feel it, feel it. Maybe my personality is that I don't have much to say. I feel tired all day and doesn't like talking.*

**Appendix B Ethical Approval Letter (See next page)**



Downloaded: 31/07/2021

Approved: 11/03/2019

Changjie Meng

Registration number: 150252924

School of Education

Programme: Education (PhD/Education FT)

Dear Changjie

**PROJECT TITLE:** Play and the construction of self: Chinese parents narratives of parent-child relationships in early years

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 018833

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 11/03/2019 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 018833 (form submission date: 21/02/2019); (expected project end date: 01/01/2020).

Participant information sheet 1043002 version 8 (21/02/2019).

Participant consent form 1043003 version 5 (14/02/2019).

If during the course of the project you need to **deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation** please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt

Ethics Administrator

School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>

The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf)

The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.

The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.

The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.