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Collective Mothering and the Medical Model — Letter

By Michael Soth

A letter responding to Emmy van Deurzen-Smith's paper 'The Future of Psychotherapy' in the European Journal of Psychotherapy (1997). Soth contests the implicit medical-model framing of professionalism in psychotherapy and argues for a model of 'collective mothering' — care as a primary paradigm rather than a supplement to technical expertise.

KEY THEMES

— Response to van Deurzen-Smith on the future of psychotherapy
— Medical model professionalism and its shadow
— Collective mothering as an alternative paradigm
— The devaluation of care in professionalism
— What makes psychotherapy distinctively different from medicine

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The Medical Model as Hidden Assumption

Emmy van Deurzen-Smith's paper on the future of psychotherapy raises important questions about professionalisation, but its implicit assumptions about what counts as professional practice deserve examination. The medical model — the framework in which the expert diagnoses the patient's problem and applies the correct treatment — is not merely one possible structure for psychotherapy; it is the dominant cultural assumption which the entire professionalisation agenda tends to reinforce.

The danger is that in aspiring to professional respectability, psychotherapy imports the medical model's assumptions without critically examining them. The result is a form of practice which talks the language of empathy and relationship while operating with the implicit stance of the expert treating the patient. This contradiction is not merely theoretical — it manifests in the consulting room in ways that can be counter-therapeutic.

Specifically: if healing comes through relationship and genuine human contact, then a professional stance which prioritises expertise, technique, and the management of boundaries above the quality of genuine human meeting may be working against the very thing that makes therapy therapeutic.

Collective Mothering

The term 'collective mothering' arises from trying to name what I believe is actually most therapeutic in psychotherapy — and what the medical model systematically devalues and renders invisible. This is the experience of being genuinely held: of having one's distress received, witnessed, and soothed by another human being who is genuinely present and genuinely cares.

This is 'collective' because it is not primarily an individual transaction between expert and patient, but a form of communal, relational care which humanity has always practised — in communities, in families, between friends — and which psychotherapy has institutionalised and theorised. It is 'mothering' not in any gender-specific sense, but in the sense of the primary relational care which developmental psychology has shown to be the ground of healthy psychological development.

The professionalisation of psychotherapy need not require abandoning this dimension — but it does require consciously protecting it from the encroachment of medical-model assumptions which tend to render it invisible, supplementary, or merely the 'warm background' to the real technical work.

A Different Kind of Professionalism

It is possible to be genuinely professional without adopting the medical model's implicit stance. Professional ethics, clear boundaries, accountability, and ongoing development are all entirely compatible with a model of practice which places the relational and care dimensions of the work at the centre rather than the periphery.

What a different professionalism would require is a different account of what the therapist's expertise actually consists of — not primarily theoretical knowledge or technical skill, but the developed capacity for genuine human contact: the ability to be genuinely present, genuinely affected, genuinely caring, while also maintaining the awareness and self-knowledge to use that capacity therapeutically rather than gratifyingly.

This is a demanding form of expertise, and it deserves to be recognised as such. But it will only be recognised if we are willing to contest the medical model's claim to define what counts as professional competence in our field.

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