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# Do therapists ever get lonely?

Gary Shepherd

## Alone Together Symposium

York St John University

Friday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2019

# Do therapists ever get lonely?

- *When working with clients for some time, I often feel a sense of relatedness and a fleeting wish for a friendship outside of the therapeutic space*
- *The feelings I am left with are a sense of loneliness, regret and thoughts of 'what might have been' in our friendship*
- *Am I alone with these feelings? Have I not done enough work on myself!?*
- ***Do therapists ever get lonely?***



# Melanie Klein (1882-1960)



- Developed theories of early child development
- Object relations theory
- A large part of our life is spent re-enacting some of our earliest experiences of which we are completely unaware
- 'On the sense of loneliness' (1962)

# 'On the sense of loneliness' (1962)



- *the most natural and ubiquitous feeling we all possess is the feeling of being alone*
- *“an unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words”*
- *“the depressive feeling of an irretrievable loss”*



# Do therapists ever get lonely?

- I have started to wonder if:
- The therapeutic process itself is one which stirs-up **early** feelings of loneliness in the therapist
- Is loneliness a **natural by-product** of working with clients.
- Is being a therapist in some way an **unconscious attempt** to **heal** our own existential loneliness, which is an **impossible task** in itself

# Does therapy re-ignite infantile loneliness?

1. The way in which we set up therapy between the therapist and client
2. The way in which we set up operational boundaries when working with clients
3. The way in which Clinical Supervision is set up

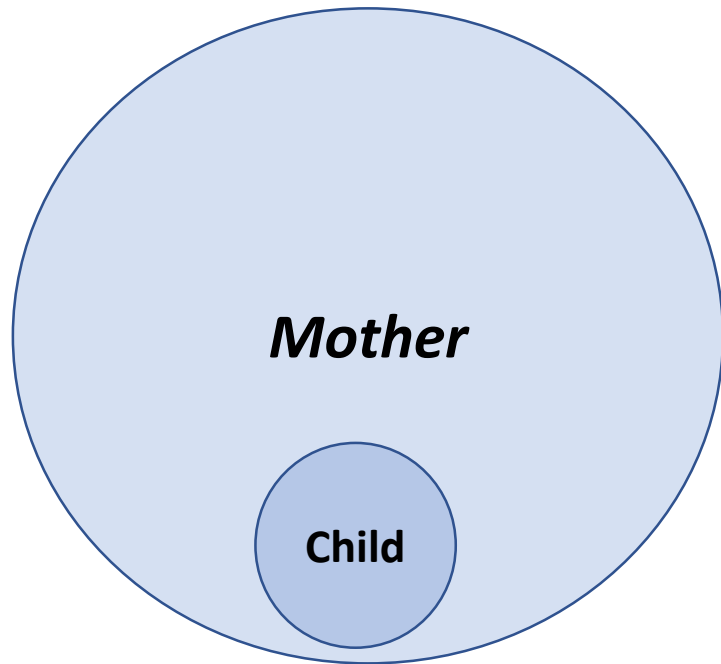


# The newborn infant's world

- Feelings of integration with the mother
- Holding on to good experiences and 'getting rid' of unpleasant experiences
- Realising both good and bad experiences are their own
- Attempting to reintegrate the unpleasant experiences with their good experiences

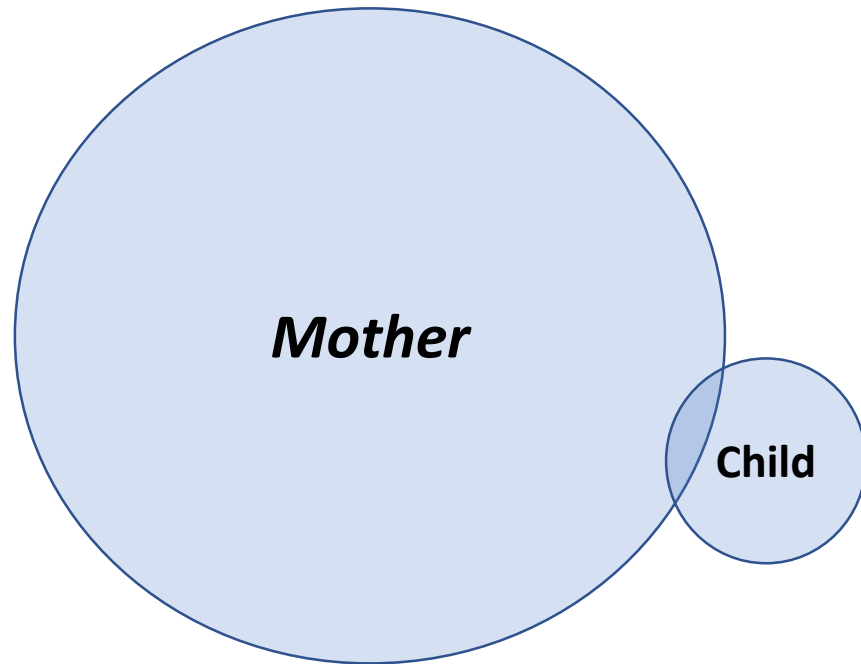


# Mother and Child Separation



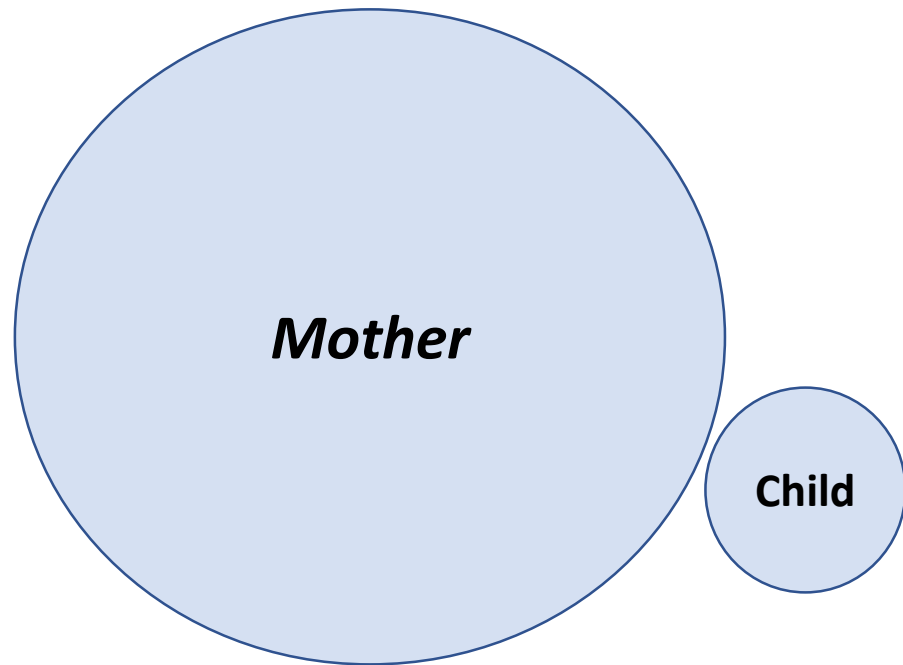
The new-born infant feels a total integration of themselves with their mother, a perfect wordless state where mother and child are one.

# Mother and Child Separation



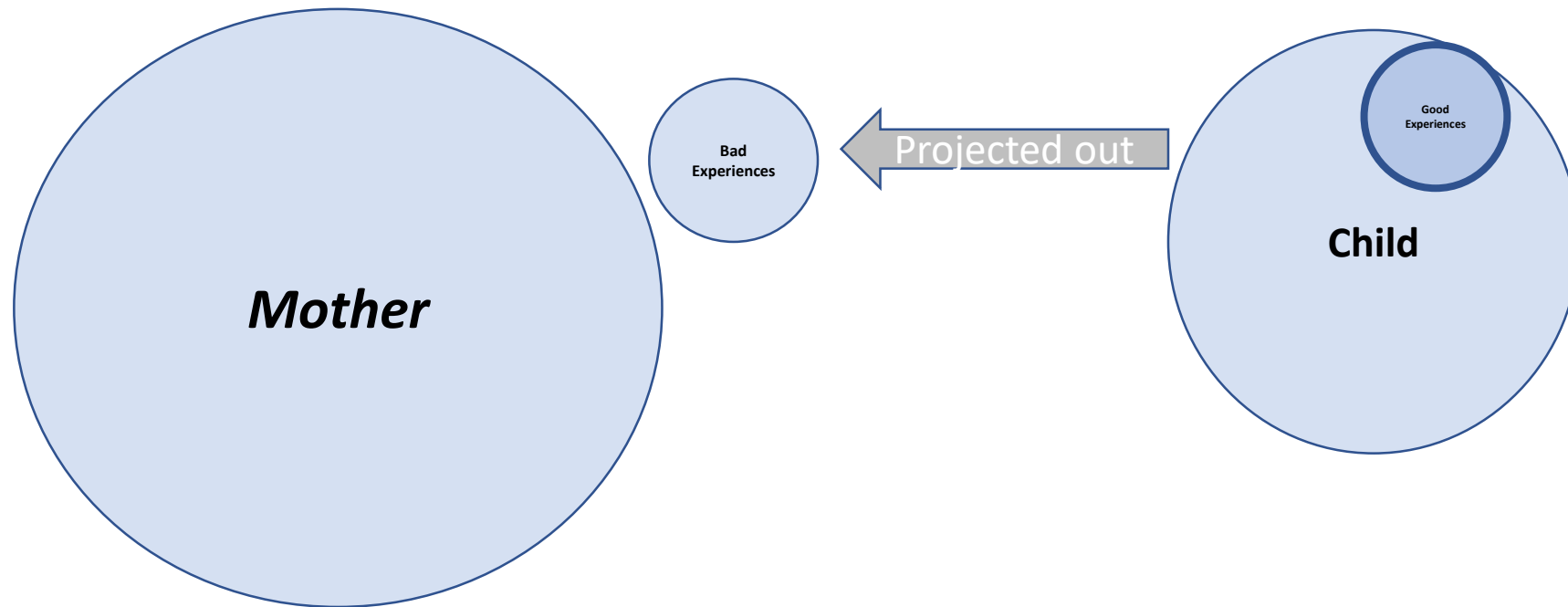
As time goes by the child realises it is no more part of mother and is **separate** in the world

# Mother and Child Separation



This realisation begins to set up feelings of **loneliness, longing and loss** within the child. Such feelings are, of course carried around with us all into **adulthood.**

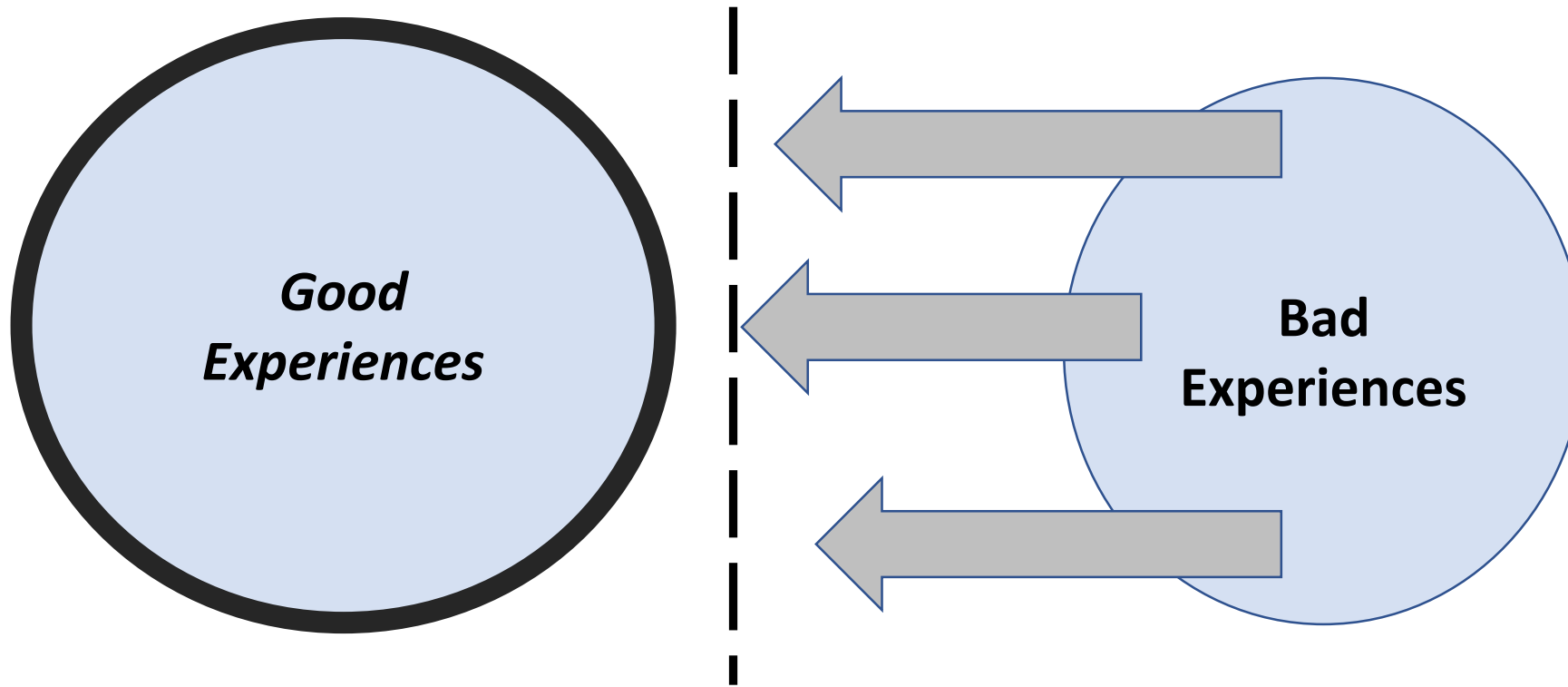
# 'Splitting' Process



In the first weeks of life the infant experiences both **satisfying** and **distressing** experiences

The satisfying experiences are held and **protected**  
The distressing experiences are **projected** out onto mother

Attempting to integrate  
the 'split off' part



When the child  
attempts to re-  
integrate their  
bad experiences  
they come across  
a problem:  
There is  
**resistance** to do  
so as this may  
lead to  
obliteration of  
the good  
experiences



# Re-enacting the earliest experiences

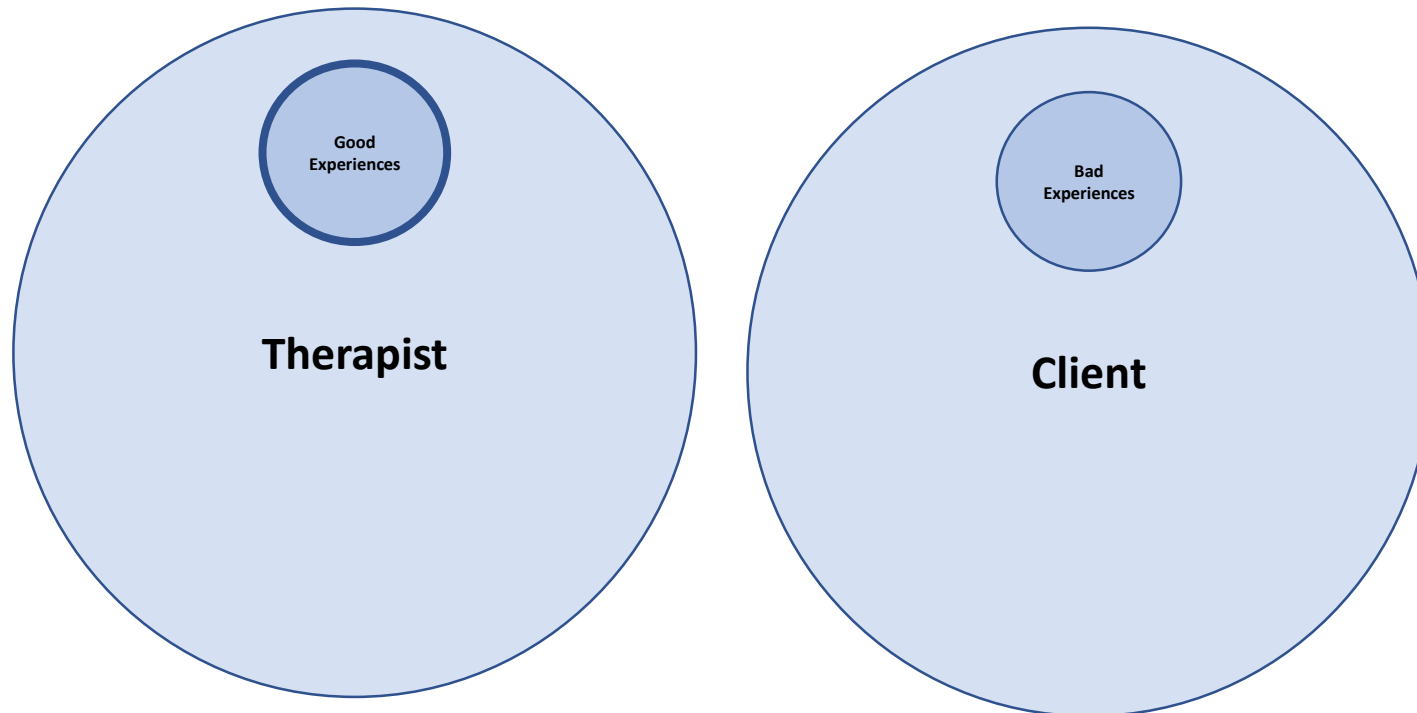
- Klein believed that our early experiences have a profound affect upon our adult experiences of life.
- **Loneliness** and feelings of **isolation** and **never really feeling 'whole'** are all experiences which derive from our earliest and long forgotten infant experiences.
- A large part of our life is spent re-enacting some of our earliest experiences which we are completely unaware of but which stir-up *loneliness feelings*.

# Does therapy 'stir-up' loneliness



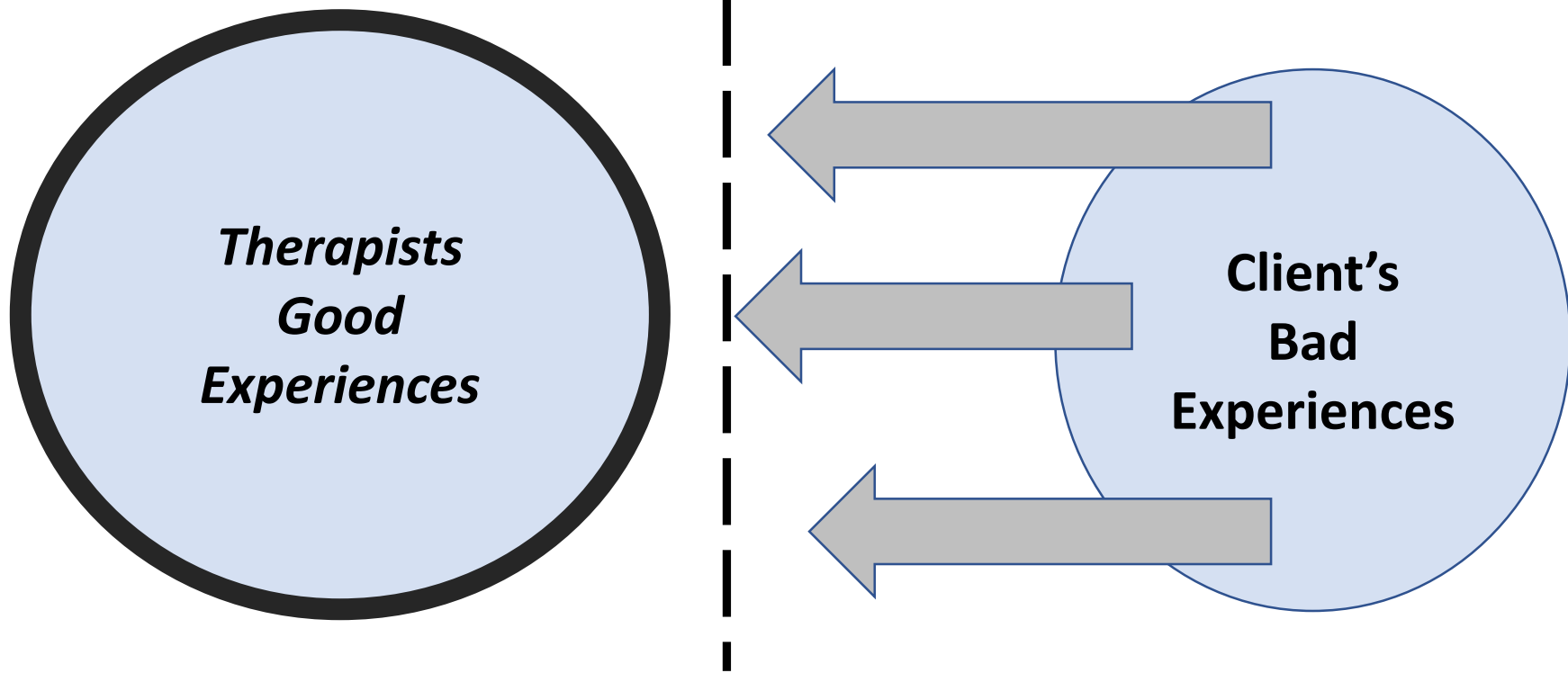
1. The way in which we set up therapy- where the therapist is **OK** and the client has problems needing to be '**fixed**'
2. The way in which we set up professional and ethical boundaries when working with clients- mirroring the impossible task of re-integrating '**lost**' aspects of the self
3. The way in which Clinical Supervision is set up- creating the phantasy of reuniting a **mother** figure with the **therapist's self**

# The therapist and client set up in therapy



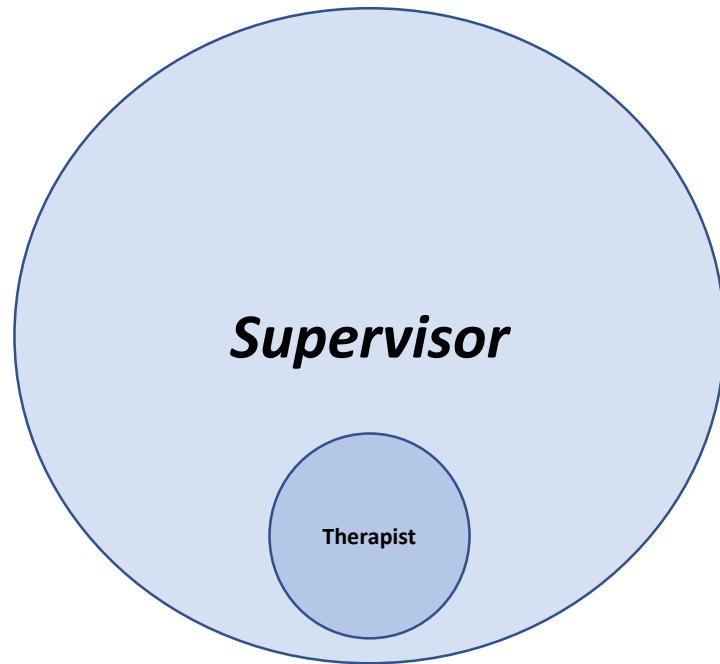
The set up in therapy unconsciously mirrors the split between an **'all good'** therapist and an **'all bad'** client

# How boundaries are set up in therapy



Professional and ethical boundaries represent an unconscious **protection** of the good object and a **defence** against the bad object

# The Supervision phantasy of reuniting with the mother figure



Supervision represents the opportunity for the therapist to **reunite with a parental figure**, discuss the split off aspects of the self (the client) and generate feelings of understanding and closeness with the Supervisor (mother representation)

# Do therapists ever get lonely?



- *“A ubiquitous yearning for an unattainable perfect internal state”*
- *“an unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words”*
- *“the depressive feeling of an irretrievable loss”*

Thank You  
Any Questions?

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