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## Personal and relational ideologies of master therapists

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**Abstract:** This original study used a descriptive and interpretative qualitative approach to analyse interview data from twelve world renowned master therapists and academics. They each have vast amounts of expertise in the profession of psychotherapy as demonstrated through their copious peer reviewed publications, development of therapeutic approaches, and their international contributions to the profession. Results yielded 4 domains including: 1) Personal Ideology; 2) Relational Ideology for Life in General; 3) Relational Ideology in Love and Romantic Relationship; 4) The Rewards and Risks of Personal and Relational Ideologies, with 6 main categories pertaining to the master therapists' most fundamental values in their lives, careers, relationships, romantic encounters and notably, in how they consider their life's work as their life's legacy. Finally, the risks and rewards arising from their ideologies are outlined. Participant accounts included the use of the term "purposeful rebellion" as a means to scientifically challenge flawed ideologies in the psychotherapy field and wider society. They reported experiencing deep, genuine care, and easiness in maintaining professional relationships with colleagues, peers, students, and with their clients. Their professional status feels immensely personal, and with this may come the consequence of an imbalance between work and life, especially in early career while aiming to become established and to influence and shape the profession. These findings overlap and expand upon previous studies of renowned therapists and suggest a synergy when it comes to the ideologies between their personal and professional selves.

**Keywords:** Master therapist; Professional identity; Expertise; Ideology; and Personal values

Ideology is a complex social system of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and perspectives. A person's ideological system includes such topics as morality, ethics, and existential concerns. It also concerns understanding of the self and the self in relation to others, the concept of love, political orientation, spirituality and religion (de St. Aubin et al., 2006; Tomkins, 1963). A person's particular personal ideology is similarly complex and can include beliefs about relationships, ethics existence, purpose, and meaning. Ultimately, it is a personal guide to "how life should be lived"; and distinguishes what is right from what is wrong (de St. Aubin, 1999; McAdams, 1988).

While the field of psychotherapy places a heavy emphasis on self-development, self-awareness, and reflexivity, little is known about the personal ideology of contemporary leaders in the field. Master therapist literature has generally focussed on the profession-related factors of the master therapist, such as common characteristics of master therapists and their theoretical or therapeutic orientation (Goldfried et al., 1998) and their ethical values and professional development (Crisp, 2014; Pitman et al., 2017; Skovholt & Jennings, 2016). There is a paucity of studies examining the person behind the professional. This study explores the personal and relational ideologies of some of the most currently renowned therapists i.e., the influencers of psychotherapy and counselling/clinical psychology.

## Literature Review

The determinants of effective therapy have long been a source of scientific study in the professional domain. It is known that there are therapist factors, relational or alliance factors, and client factors contributing to therapeutic efficacy and outcomes (Horvath, 2001). Therapists' credentials, such as the level of the degree they hold, is somewhat correlated to client outcomes. However, credentials by themselves remain largely insufficiently related to the effectiveness of therapy (Norcross & Wampold, 2011; Orlinsky, 1999; Skovholt, Hanson, et al., 2016b; Smith & Glass, 1977). Similarly, as found in a longitudinal analysis, levels and range of experience may not necessarily be linked to improved client outcomes; both increase and decrease in client outcomes are observed with experienced psychotherapists (Goldberg et al., 2016). Psychotherapists generally self-report experiencing professional development and growth throughout their career, as found in a 20 year longitudinal study with a multinational sample of 4,000 psychotherapists (Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). The most significant factors, however, for client outcomes are related to the therapeutic relationship and skill of the therapist. The therapist's ability to be empathic, warm and to form a solid therapeutic relationship with the client are repeatedly noted as the most important therapist-factors. Additionally, the therapist's own attachment style and internalised relational ideology is a significant factor that impacts that therapeutic relationship (Norcross & Wampold, 2011; Steel et al., 2018). Even within the professional domain, there is clearly some relationship between personal and professional characteristics for therapists.

### Master Therapists

Therapists who are developers of psychological therapies and are prolific writers and scholars, would generally be regarded as having a significant shaping influence on the professions of clinical and counselling psychology and psychotherapy (Kottler, & Carlson, 2014). Master Therapists are those experts in the psychotherapy field who have "stood on the shoulders of giants". They build on what they have learned from others, and are reflective and continually open to learning (Skovholt, Hanson, et al., 2016a, 2016b). Mastery and clinical expertise are not solely based on years of experience. They are created within the complex system of the client-therapist dyad, personal therapy, supervision and continued professional development, each of which contributes to the professional journey from novice therapist to becoming an effective master therapist (Orlinsky, 1999; Orlinsky &

Rønnestad; Skovholt, Hanson, et al., 2016a, 2016b). The term "expert" or "master therapist" solely refers to the therapist's expertise and is unrelated to their preferred theoretical orientation or qualifications (Skovholt, Hanson, et al., 2016b).

Given their influence on psychology and therapy (and thus on the lives of all those who engage with their professional services; therapy, supervision, training, conferences and publication, policy development etc.), it seems relevant to understand what shapes and guides the lives of those directly and indirectly shaping peoples' understanding of what it means to live well, wellbeing, and the attainment of an enhanced quality of life.

### Personal Ideology of Therapists

Therapists' identity is often intertwined with their therapeutic orientation and ideologies (Jennings, Skovholt, et al., 2016; Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016). Therapists are often asked about their theoretical understanding and professional beliefs. They commonly respond with identifying statements such as, "I am a humanistic therapist." Research into therapists' ideologies is sometimes included as *traits* and *characteristics* (Jennings, Skovholt, et al., 2016; Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016; Orlinsky, 1999; Skovholt, Jennings, et al., 2016). In contrast to this current study, Jennings, Sovereign and Bottorff et al. (2016) investigated the professional, ethical values of master therapists. Their study was conducted via qualitatively analysing the master therapist's own description of their work, and hence their findings relate to the "psychologist self" rather than the "personal self" (Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, et al., 2016).

### Master Therapist Characteristics

There are two key models in the literature for understanding the characteristics of master therapists: the Cognitive, Emotional and Relational (CER) model and the Synthesis Model. The Cognitive, Emotional and Relational model by Jennings & Skovholt (2016) is based on their qualitative interview study of 10 United States based master therapists (MTs) and is one of the predominant models of understanding master therapists and the characteristics that set them apart from novice therapists. The Synthesis Model of master therapists from around the world (abbreviated as Synthesis Model) is based on a Qualitative Meta-Analyses (QMA) of seven culturally diverse MT studies. It synthesised findings of seven master therapist studies from Japan (Hirai & Goh, 2016), Singapore (Jennings, D'Rozario, et al., 2016), Portugal (de Carvalho & Matos, 2016), Korea (Kwon & Kim, 2016), Czech

Republic (Řiháček et al., 2016) and Canada (Smith & Whelton, 2016) illustrating diversity in the commonalities across cultures. Both the CER model (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Jennings & Skovholt, 2016), primarily based on United States MT samples, and the Synthesis Model expand our understanding of master therapist characteristics and ideologies with culturally diverse samples (Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016).

Interestingly, Skovholt, Jennings, and Mullenbach (2016) also report the so-called "paradox characteristics" of master therapists, which includes: their drive for personal and professional mastery, without having a sense of fully having achieved; eagerness to learn in life in general, as well as about profession-related topics; they demonstrate a professional ability to deeply enter the inner world of another, while conversely, they may personally prefer solitude. Master therapists possess an excellent ability to provide an emotionally safe space for their clients while simultaneously being able to firmly challenge when necessary. They are capable and highly skilled in the therapeutic process, while being humble about their expertise and knowledge. There is deep integration of their personal and professional selves, yet simultaneously, they are able to maintain physical and mental boundaries between these aspects of life (Skovholt, Jennings, et al., 2016).

Ideologies may also be categorised through the expression of political, spiritual and religious beliefs (McAdams, 2015; McAdams et al., 2019). Spirituality and religion can offer a unified set of ideologies, while in comparison to religion, spirituality often has less defined ideologies. Extensive research has been done regarding the influence of personal, social and religious beliefs on the interaction of therapists with clients (Barron, 1978; Davis, 2012; Lee et al., 2013; McClintock et al., 1965; Vasco & Dryden, 1994; Worthington et al., 1996). The lack of recent research in this may signal a shifting ideology or understanding about psychotherapy and religion or spirituality, and this may be because the field of psychology prizes scientific understandings, being secular, and seeks techniques for working multiculturally or pan-culturally, and with people of interfaith and atheist clients alike (Reber, 2006).

### **Relational Ideologies of Therapists**

The term "relational" is employed above with the underlying belief that people exist in context with other beings. This inherent assumption is a core part of counselling psychology and psychotherapy theory (Cooper, 2009; James et al., 2018; Packard, 2009). One of the ethical values expressed by master therapists in the previously reported study by Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff et al. (2016) was the value of relational connectedness. Master therapists reported strong beliefs in

the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships with others in their professional lives. This included honouring therapist-client relationships and being in a consistent relationship with direct colleagues and peers and the larger profession of psychology (e.g., other experts and overseas colleagues). They also report that having a good support system with their family, partner, and friends is vital for emotional and practical support.

Mullenbach and Skovholt (2016) expanded upon the CER model by further investigating the (E) emotional domain of the model. They reported the value of relationships and social support systems for MTs as a source of support in life. They also report how master therapists in their lifelong learning encounter multiple stressors, such as, at times, their own personal (potentially traumatic) history as a potential contribution to internal distress. Other factors that foster resilience and facilitates effective coping with the challenges of being a psychotherapist are their ongoing, supportive relationships within and outside of work, such as family, and romantic relationships, along with peer support, supervision and personal therapy (Mullenbach & Skovholt, 2016). While there are overlaps and connecting principles across ideologies, there are also some tensions between them, as relationships by their very nature are complex, multifaceted, and challenging. Relational ideologies are an extension of personal ideologies, in the sense that they incorporate the ideologies personally held and extended from the self to others.

Rønnestad et al., (2019) presented key findings from two major empirical studies of therapists' development and learned that counsellors and psychotherapists reported variation and complexity regarding their formative influences over two main dimensions, described as "currently experienced growth" and "currently experienced depletion." These were respectively predicted by their reports of experiencing either healing involvement or stressful involvement with clients. Healing involvement was defined as being personally invested, committed, efficacious in relationship and as being highly skilful and being able to achieve flow-states in therapy along with expert and constructive coping strategies when dealing with challenges (Orlinsky et al., 2005). Stressful involvement was characterised by intervention skills, difficulties in clinical and therapeutic practice, coping strategies, nature of relating to clients and in-session feelings. The results show that more seasoned therapists reported more healing involvement with clients in their therapeutic work than more novice therapists. In particular, master therapists reported remarkably elevated levels of healing engagement and less rupture and repair processes, and have better therapeutic outcomes than novice therapists, and this makes this cohort very worthy of further study and increased understanding.

## Design & Methods

### Participants

Participants included 12 peer-nominated renowned therapists selected using the following criteria: a minimum of 20 years in practice as a therapist; a large volume of journal publications (approximately 50 papers each as a minimum); book publications and having had an active role in clinical practice, academia, research, and training. At the time of interviewing all participants were active in their roles, though some were post formal retirement. To ensure anonymity their demographics are described narratively and clustered in this paper: 2 participants identified as female and 10 as male; 10 people identified as straight and 2 as LGBTQI+; 3 participants were between the ages of 50-60, 4 were between 60-70 and 5 between the ages of 70-80, at the time of interviewing; 3 participants were married, an additional 5 were married for a second time, 2 were divorced and 2 widowed and re-partnered. Eight participants had a United States of America nationality, 1 Canadian and 3 from the United Kingdom. There were no people of colour unfortunately in the sample. Describing themselves professionally, 10 participants identified their theoretical orientation as Integrative and 2 reported as Psychodynamic; 1 participant was formally retired, 1 worked part-time, and the remaining 10 worked full-time; 4 qualified as a Counselling Psychologist, 2 as a Clinical Psychologist, 4 as a Psychotherapist and 2 held a dual qualification as both a Counselling and Clinical Psychologist.

### Measure

This study analysed data from one subsection of an original study titled "Renowned Master Therapists, Personal Lives and Professional Mastery - A Life-story Approach" (Hannigan, 2023), in progress and unpublished. Twelve of the original sixteen participants provided separate informed consent for analysis of their data for the current study.

The original study employed an adapted version (with author permission) of *The Life Story Interview Schedule* (McAdams, 2015). It consisted of twenty-seven sections and Personal and Relational Ideology was one subsection comprised of the following five domains and questions:

1. Personal Values:

Consider for a moment the religious or spiritual aspects of your life, if any. Please describe your beliefs and values. Whether you are religious or not, please describe your overall ethical or moral approach to life.

### The Current Study

The literature investigating the common professional characteristics and ideologies of 'expert' or 'master' therapists has grown. Research spanning more than 20 years has been concerned with examining various qualities, characteristics and behaviours of the most senior, renowned, and exceptionally competent psychotherapists or so called "master therapists" or in today's parlance 'influencers' in the profession. These studies and preliminary models of understanding master therapists' characteristics tend to consistently use similar qualitative approaches, samples, and inclusion criteria.

The most relevant studies examining master therapists include: general traits and characteristics (Blatt, Sanislow, Zuroff, & Pilkonis, 1996; Skovholt, Ronnestad, & Jennings, 1997; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Jennings, Goh, Skovholt, & Banerjee-Stevens, 2003), ethical values and principles (Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, Mussell, & Vye, 2005), and therapeutic alliance (Raue, Castonguay, & Goldfried, 1993; Sullivan, Skovholt, & Jennings, 2005). Similar and popular topics of interest include group therapy (Kivlighan & Quigley, 1991), the role of power dynamics in therapy (Murphy, Cheng, and Werner-Wilson, 2006), cultural competence (Goh, 2005), therapeutic and professional growth (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005) and romantic relationships and family system considerations of master therapists (Murphy, Cheng, and Werner-Wilson, 2006). All these studies featured the professional growth, experiences and/or work-oriented knowledge of the master therapist. Psychotherapy and counselling psychological literature abounds with journal articles on theoretical approaches and treatment interventions, even though common factors research determined that all therapeutic approaches are similarly effective – the so-called "dodo effect" (everyone is a winner, and we shall all have a prize), suggesting that therapy simply works and is better than no intervention (Luborsky, 1995; Mansell, 2011).

There is no literature directly studying the personal ideologies, values and personally held beliefs of master therapists. Since the existing literature has only studied the professional ideologies of master therapists, this study is uniquely positioned to study the personal and relational ideologies of these renowned master therapists.

2. Political/social values:

1. How do you approach political or social issues? Do you have a particular political point of view? Are there particular social issues or causes about which you feel strongly?
2. Single value:  
What is the most important value in human living?
3. Personal relationship & love:  
Speak to me about the most important elements of intimate and close relationships and how you understand the concept of romantic love.
4. Other:  
What else can you tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and the world? (What else can you tell me that would help me understand you most ...)  
What is your personal philosophy of life?

## Data Analysis

Generic Descriptive-Interpretative Qualitative Research analyses (GDI-QR) was used to analyse this study's data (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Timulak & Elliott, 2019). GDI-QR is an adaptable approach to qualitative research analyses, designed to fit the nature of the data collected, the topic under investigation, and the researcher's style.

All data were fully transcribed verbatim and excerpts pertaining to ideology were isolated for data analysis. Transcripts were read and re-read by some of the research team. There were 3 Counselling Psychologists on the research team, the principal investigator (study supervisor, and the person who conducted the original PhD study with 16 participants), a counselling psychology trainee, at the time of analysis (now qualified) and a co-supervisor. The 4<sup>th</sup> research team member was the supervisor of the original PhD study, a psychologist, who became involved for the submission of this paper.

Data analyses were conducted using the following steps: 1) All initial themes or pertinent reactions to the research questions were recorded. 2) Participant expressions that were considered to pertain to *ideology relevant data* were recorded as *meaning units* each communicating a discrete and meaningful unit of information. 3) Each meaning unit was then further analysed, and where relevant, meaning-capturing summaries were made as *arising categories* within each interview. 4) These were then re-coded per interview question (1 - 5). 5) Meaning units were gathered and re-organised with

similar meaning units forming categories and subcategories of data. 6) All categories were grouped by a domain of enquiry and with *essential sufficiency*; displaying results with an interpretative or abstracted meaning that still accurately represented the initial descriptive data. The data were cross-checked, refined and re-cross-checked with the co-supervisor. All potential discrepancies were reviewed, discussed, and revised until consensual agreement between the counselling psychologists was established. The representative quotes used in support of the analysis were also reviewed and considered by the team until consensually agreed.

Relevant credibility and trustworthiness recommended processes were implemented. These included extensive auditing and consultation with a colleague (Timulak) who has specialist knowledge of the data method, given he was a developer of this Descriptive Interpretative approach to data analysis (GDI-QR), (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Timulak & Elliott, 2019).

## Philosophical, Epistemological, and Ontological Position

The authors of this study are all psychologists with varying levels of exposure to the study of philosophy. We comprise three counselling psychologists trained in a broad range of therapeutic approaches. We identify our theoretical orientation as integrative with a profound respect for humanistic and process experiential approaches to therapy. We hoped our study would evoke reflexivity in comparing one's own ideologies to those considered by many as leaders in the field of psychotherapy.

The data were analysed employing a critical realist, epistemological position understanding that the participants provided an insight into their subjective experiences and perceptions of their personal and relational ideologies through the interviews provided and in the context of the relationship developed with the interviewer of the original study. A humanistic, phenomenological stance was adopted during data collection allowing for personal and heartfelt disclosures regarding the participants' lived experiences regarding the development and evolution of their ideologies, through experiences, copious multi-directional influences, and reflexivity along the path of maturation over time. The authors did not seek the "truth." Instead, we sought to gain a felt sense of how the participants constructed and articulated their narratives about their core values and guiding principles, and how these shaped their ideological ways of being throughout the career lifespan, as they dedicated themselves in their roles as therapists and psychologists.

## Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the School of Psychology, Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin. The 12 participants provided additional written informed consent to participate in this specific study (from the original interview transcripts) and their anonymity in this study was assured. The identities of the original 16 participants will be revealed upon completion, and hopefully through future publication of the original study, due for completion this year (2023).

## Results

The results are displayed in Table 1, and are organised into overarching domains, categories, and subcategories. The domains are: 1) Personal Ideology; 2) Relational Ideology in Life in General; 3) Relational Ideology in Love & Romantic Relationships; 4) The Rewards and Risks of Personal & Relational Ideologies. Each category and subcategory include reference to the frequency of participants that contributed towards that category. The results are displayed according to the occurrence: generalisable results for all or most participants are referred to as *general* findings (>80%, at least 10/12 participants), *typical* findings are representative of at least half the participants (6/12) and *variant* findings are representative of fewer than half but more than 4 participants (minimum of 4/12). Idiosyncratic findings with fewer than 4 participants are not included in this report. Anonymised quotations of the findings are reported throughout this chapter to support the categories. These samples are coded with MT for master therapist, with participants organised from 1 to 12, in no particular order, and with accompanying reference to the research data set.

### Domain 1: Personal Ideology

Under this domain personal ideology, one category and three subcategories were identified. The renowned therapists' most fundamental value seems to be to make a meaningful contribution to society via their professional contributions and creations. In essence this is also their legacy. They hold fundamental values and beliefs regarding doing "good" in all endeavours and prize the concept of being authentic. Their "purposeful rebellion", as it was described, is their way to advocate for what they believe is right, by scientifically and purposefully challenging flawed ideologies in the psychotherapy field and in society in general. There was an emphasis in some cases, for example, on discussing the ethics regarding quality over quantity regarding public health service delivery models. In some places, there appears to be political

Domain 1	Categories and subcategories
<b>1. Personal Ideology</b>	
1.i. Drive to make a meaningful contribution in life via career & personal legacy 12/12	Being authentic & doing good, as a guiding principle 6/12 Challenging flawed dominant discourses, as a purposeful rebellion 5/12 Career and sense of self overlap in a synergistic ideology 5/12
Domain 2	Categories and subcategories
<b>2. Relational Ideology for Life in General</b>	
2.i. Meaningful life is fundamentally lived through close relationships 12/12	The romantic partner as most meaningful relationship & as a source of support 8/12 Parenthood is one of life's most fulfilling roles 6/12
2.ii. Intimacy via work - fulfils relational needs for closeness 10/12	Professional life is relational and often easier to maintain 8/12 Therapeutic relationships as real and relationally fulfilling 5/12
Domain 3	Categories and subcategories
<b>3. Relational Ideology in Love &amp; Romantic Relationships</b>	
3.i. The concept of love includes acceptance & 'good enough' 7/12	Love means mutual respect, acceptance, and authenticity 5/12 Love is a 'good enough' partnership, which requires genuine commitment and a capacity to overcome adversity 4/12
Domain 4	Categories and subcategories
<b>4. The Rewards and Risks of Personal &amp; Relational Ideologies</b>	
4.i. A life's legacy - defining identity through achievements & career success 12/12	The intellectual pursuit and quests are endless – determination & self-discipline 8/12 Recognition and self-worth attained through excelling, and shaping the profession 7/12 Insecurities, internal pressure, conscientiousness as drivers to succeed 6/12
4.ii. There is more to this life than work, something has got to give in retirement/later life 11/12	The work/life balance seesaw requires personal, relational and professional sacrifices 5/12

Table 1. Personal & Relational Ideologies

drive to increase the yield of high-through-put numbers of clients, through public health services rather than the provision of longer term, high quality and empirically informed psychological treatment that actually makes a measurable difference for society's most vulnerable. Their personal and professional ideologies clearly overlap, and these ideologies synergistically merge and meld with their pursuit of leaving a

meaningful legacy: a legacy that illustrates their research informed knowledge of best practice standards and guidelines for the implementation of good quality, psychologically informed treatment.

**Category 1.i: To make a meaningful contribution to society via career & personal legacy.**

In the domain of Personal Ideology, master therapists reported having a meaningful and positive impact on society, and they described the rationale and approaches implemented in achieving this. The word 'legacy' is used to describe the importance and personal meaning of professional contributions including research, writings, publications, and teachings to have a meaningful impact in their own right. The finding speaks to the various reasons and motivations behind the drive to meaningfully, and positively impact society. As one of the master therapists reported:

"I get really interested in stuff, so I can get really caught up in something ... I mean, I think the kind of, the real thread for me is trying to do something that makes a social contribution" (MT5)

Some report how their drive to contribute to society stems from a fascination and passion for the field of psychotherapy:

"Virtually all my activities are towards promoting health, happiness and knowledge and, uh, - all of them, you know, to repair the world." (MT9)

For others, the legacy pursuit may have a very personal reason driving it, such as pursuing and continuing the life goals of parents:

"I think the narrative of my life has something to do with carrying on the ambitions that [my parent] wasn't able to achieve, and [their] ambitions were all about making the world a kinder place." (MT3)

**Subcategory: Values of being authentic & doing good, a guiding principle.**

The MTs typically hold ideologies regarding aiming to do good in everything they pursue and being authentic as a person:

"I'd say doing some good, like whether that's in research ... or psychotherapy or that's in family or that's in the grocery store. I guess the general thing is, I value being a constructive force in every regard. So, I guess that's my guiding principle." (MT3)

**Subcategory: Challenging flawed dominant discourses, as a purposeful rebellion.**

The 'purposeful rebellion' variant theme consists of challenging flawed beliefs and norms by advocating for their beliefs and perspectives. For example, MTs will rebel against existing psychological theories, practices, or mental-health policies (amongst others) by purposefully challenging these with their scientific research, publications, knowledge, and wisdom attained through research and experience. They note how this is an integral part of their identity:

"Because of my political history and also my childhood. I mean what I have always done is challenged ... It's a combination of being rebellious and critically analytic." (MT3)

And another participant captures how for some there is a sense of a 'must' in challenging these discourses, "I think it (specific and dominant therapeutic approach) has the least to offer of the therapeutic approaches ... and I know this is an exaggeration, but I see it as an evil-force, and I can't lie down and let it be unchallenged."

**Subcategory: Career and the personal sense of self overlap in a synergistic ideology, in pursuit of legacy.**

The MTs variably express that professional and personal identity overlap. They seem to have a congruence between their sense of personal and professional self:

"So, I would say my work and my life are very closely related. I don't think of work as a place I go or something that I do for money." (MT12)

And "I don't think of it as a career, I think of it as, having been able to do things that interest me." (MT8) These variant findings expand on the *meaningful contribution to society* finding, emphasising the personal meaning that career and their *legacy* has for the MTs.

**Domain 2: Relational Ideology for Life in General**

Under the domain of relation ideology for life in general, two categories, each divided into two further subcategories were identified during the analysis. This study's definition of ideology included the description "a personal guide to how life should be lived" and these findings go a long way to answer that: a) all MTs spoke to relationships as one of the most important aspects of life, in one way or another regardless of their theoretical orientations; b) this includes a strong belief or notion that professional-life relationships with psychotherapy

clients, as well as colleagues and students are valuable relationships too, and; c) MTs rarely categorise relationships as “good” or “bad”, instead, “being in relationship” and “relating” are the valued parts.

“Just the fact that for me that I have a successful career, I have relationships, I enjoy some hobbies, and I think I lead a pretty fulfilled life.” (MT1)

### **Category 2.i: Meaningful life is fundamentally lived through close relationships.**

MTs value *being in relationship* with others and state the significance that some have had in their lives; this includes references to significant romantic partners, colleagues, and mentors in the field and in some instance even their pet:

“In essence, I’m a relationship person, I don’t operate on my own and I think in terms of, what gives me a kick? It’s relationships. Whether they are at home, at work, in the family, dealing with a child, with my dog, with clients and so on, it’s relating to people. I’m very social, I love engagement and intensity.” (MT7)

Interestingly, generally MTs reported experiencing anxiety and in particular social anxiety:

“I didn’t believe I could talk to anyone else, other than friends, in the world about what was really going on inside of me. Em, then I suddenly started to see that everyone was anxious, just like me. And that everyone had an inner world that was as complicated as mine.” (MT6)

### **Subcategory: The romantic partner as most meaningful relationship & as a source of support.**

The romantic partner is typically mentioned as being of significant importance, and a valuable source of support for them, especially in challenging times. Both current and previous romantic partners were typically spoken about fondly and actively included in their life stories:

“[Previous romantic partner] was a complicated person but I mean [they] were incredibly supportive of me. And encouraged me to be creative and follow my own thoughts.” (MT6)

Others included general positive expressions towards their romantic partner:

“I think that’s easy, obvious, I suppose my high point must be my relationship with my partner, ...it was about finding a relationship that fits and works.” (MT7)

### **Subcategory: Parenthood is one of life’s most fulfilling roles.**

Although ‘parenthood’ is not explicitly prompted for during the interview, MTs typically expressed how much they valued being a parent. Typically, they spoke to the personal fulfilment from the parent role and the experience of loving their children intensely:

“Realising that I brought new life into the world, and ah, there’s nothing like it. ... I had never felt a love like that before.” (MT3)

“The birth of either of my kids rates as probably the single, and most exquisite moments of joy.” (MT12)

For others, they express their parenting approach with their children as being similar to that of being a psychotherapist, and it is another, deep form of a fun yet meaningful relationship:

“I see myself as a kind of facilitator of their own personal path and they’re own personal interests. So, it makes it really fun because you’re not trying to control people.” (MT11)

### **Category 2.ii: Intimacy via work - fulfils relational needs for closeness.**

This category of findings continues to emphasise relationships as vital, with specific reference to relational connectedness through the profession. It is named *intimacy*, as it speaks to the strength and personal meaning of these relationships. Professional relationships, such as those with colleagues and clients, were generally included as personally fulfilling: “It’s been as much about the relationship with the other people as it has been about the science.” (MT4)

### **Subcategory: Professional life is relational and often easier to maintain.**

Interestingly, MTs typically included professional relationships in their definition of love and spoke highly about the relational connections and fulfilment they received via professional relationships:

“I certainly feel it, ... that deep caring, prizing, connecting feeling, just seems to run through most of my day, and even in the research pursuit.” (MT9)

These findings relate to the MT’s role as an academic, researcher, author, and colleague in the profession. Typically, MTs express that colleague relationships are personally rewarding and can be easier to maintain (than personal

relationships) due to their professional and bounded nature. The fulfilment and ease of these professional relationships were expressed clearly by MT5:

“I think there’s something about writing books that people like, or when I can go to work, or when I’m at a conference people are just really nice and warm to me without me having to talk much or express much. ... I love conferences. It’s very rarely that I’ll see friends.” (MT5)

**Subcategory: *Therapeutic relationships as real and relationally fulfilling.***

In addition to the above findings in this category, MTs typically and distinctly refer to the importance of therapeutic relationships with clients. MTs express deep care and view these client relationships as “real” relationships: they are professionally and personally fulfilling, as illustrated here:

“I’ve published however many things, and that’s not what’s most meaningful to me. It’s not the sixty-five hours a week I spend in academia. It’s the four hours a week I spend doing therapy.” (MT2)

### **Domain 3: Relational Ideology in Love & Romantic Relationships**

Under the domain of relation ideology in love and romantic relationships, one category was identified, which was further divided into two subcategories. MTs fundamentally believe that a meaningful life is lived through relationship. Their romantic relationships and close relationships are most important to them, and they lean on these for support. They view parenthood as one of life's most fulfilling roles. Deeply fulfilling relationships extended well beyond close personal connections to also include bonds and alliances with colleagues and clients. MTs experience deep genuine care and easiness in maintaining professional relationships with colleagues, peers, students, and clients. These professional relationships are experienced as authentic attachments and they have been personally fulfilling. Their concept of love is grounded in what was reported as an in-depth understanding of human connections and connectedness: the concept of love was also deconstructed into several essential component parts, such as both partner’s commitment to acceptance of one another, and for each to be authentic within themselves. It was opined that there is no such thing as a “perfect” person, so this acceptance is essential in having the necessary relational stress tolerance to sustain relationship. Partnerships and romantic relationships were held together, in the opinion of some renowned therapists, with the “glue” provided from accepting the concept of the “good enough” partner and truly possessing the grit to implement strategies

to meaningful work through relational difficulties, life challenges and conflicts as a partnership. This too is an interesting finding given that half of these participants were senior in age, in their second marriage or re-partnered following loss of their spouse.

**Category 3.i: The concept of love includes acceptance & being “good enough.”**

**Subcategory: *Love means mutual respect, acceptance, and authenticity.***

A variant number of MTs expressed the notion that the construct of love needs to be “deconstructed” to be understood. They understand love as deeply challenging; it is characterised by respect, acceptance, and authenticity, requiring these most vital interpersonal attitudes towards the other. These values were either expressed directly or backed up with examples from client’s stories. They shared how they witnessed clients wanting to fundamentally change their partner, thus displaying a lack of acceptance and respect for the other, or how they witnessed clients changing themselves to fit into a relationship; a lack of authenticity and respect for self, as demonstrated below.

“I think it involves being genuine with that person, showing them deeper and deeper levels of yourself, and appreciating them in all their complexity and loving them anyway. So many people want us to, transform their partners rather than transform their capacity to love a flawed person. So, I put a lot of emphasis on, ah, love doesn’t mean love if it’s not loving who the person really is. And, so, that’s a kind of, ah integrity aspect of love, trying to be honest about who one is and who the partner is and loving them, even though you know there are moments of hatred in that.” (MT3)

**Subcategory: *Love is a ‘good enough’ partnership that requires genuine commitment and a capacity to overcome adversity.***

In addition to the above, a variant number of MTs spoke to their perspective on love and relationships as being a reciprocal partnership between people with a slight transactional component:

“It’s a great thing, when it works, and it is a partnership. You give and take and you know, you give things the other person values and you take things you value.” (MT1)

Simultaneously, it was reported that a partnership requires an attitude of “good enough” because MTs believe no one can be perfect.

“[Commitment] even with its disappointments and, like any relationship – any intimate, long-term relationship, it is bound to have difficulties. No one’s perfect. [laughs] ... if you’re lucky ... if it is a good enough relationship.” (MT10)

The notion that relationships need to be worked to enhance closeness, and that the concept of love is a false one was also espoused:

“I think love is a false concept, it has to be deconstructed, so there is no such thing as love, but there is security, concern, and attraction and these are some of the pieces and the more of the pieces that you fit together you get closer to love.” (MT6)

#### **Domain 4: The Rewards and Risks of Personal & Relational Ideologies**

Under the domain of the rewards and risks of personal and relational ideologies, two categories were identified during the analysis, the first of which was further divided into three subcategories. MTs seemed to thrive in both personal and professional relationships and expressed enjoyment and fulfilment in life along with owning their insecurities, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. They expressed an apparent paradox of exuding confidence and accomplishment while being genuinely humble as individuals, they prized their work contributions rather than egotistically self-promoting themselves. They opined about their intense passion and intellectual curiosity for the field and how this dedication and commitment brought recognition. This distinction in turn for some enhanced self-worth from the rewards of professional achievements and this in turn contributed to their legacy quest. The rewards and risks domain represent consequences of certain ideologies on other valued parts of life and illuminates struggles in maintaining a work/life balance at times.

##### **Category 4.i: A life legacy - defining identity through achievements & career success.**

The following general finding, expressed by all MTs in this study, emphasised in one way or another, an identification with their legacy pursuit and their determination for excellence and to be renowned and remembered.

“I never had a sense of enough, ... It was just exhausting. I think a lot of that was probably from the fear of it, and the potential shame of not getting tenure because so much of my identity was wrapped up in, not just performing, but in excelling.” (MT2)

##### ***Subcategory: The intellectual pursuit and quests are endless – determination & self-discipline.***

MTs typically expressed a deep intellectual curiosity, a passionate and determined hunt that was often fulfilled via their professional engagements. Sometimes, it was expressed as a deep intellectual fascination with the field; “a great day would be, you know, to read, eh really interesting material.” (MT1). And “I’m at my most happy when I’m involved in the work that I’m doing and engrossed in it.” (MT12)

However, this pursuit of a legacy has copious demands that are “endless.” MTs also needed continuous stimulation, possessed a profound intellectual curiosity, and were sufficiently disciplined to make it happen, repeatedly:

“I see myself as having very limited gifts... There just isn’t enough time” (MT11)

“Family members are building wooden boats and you know, building cabins and I don’t have any of those skills.” (MT1)

“Because my mind moves fairly quickly from topic to topic. Umm, so it congeals around my personality, uh and my intellectual curiosity. I just can’t imagine doing any one of them full time.” (MT9)

MT1 also expressed how they have designed their life to be rewarded for this intellectual pursuit: “I have structured my life so that I can do some mental work and be rewarded for it.” (MT1)

##### ***Subcategory: Recognition and self-worth attained through excelling and shaping the profession.***

The motivation for MTs to achieve is evidently personally validating and meeting some of their personal needs. Typically, MTs elucidated how they believed they found recognition for themselves through their profession: “My orientation changed, and my self-conception became conscious... a recognition of an actual self.” (MT8)

MTs also spoke of a pressure to excel above and beyond, and that in return, this excelling fuelled their sense of self-worth and it was experienced as a type of intrinsic armour:

“Receiving that award definitely helps, it keeps me going, it gives me ammunition for my own inner struggle between the sense of integrity and integration, life history integration and despair.” (MT10)

The distinction between recognition for the self and their work was poignantly described with perhaps some acknowledgement of diminishing narcissistic tendencies through maturation, in the chase for professional recognition.

“I am very personally involved in it as well, so there is a sense of me needing to be special and recognised and all those narcissistic components, but I feel that less now than before, and sometimes I don’t feel it is me being recognised, as much as what I am saying, is being recognised.” (MT6)

***Subcategory: Insecurities, internal pressures, and conscientiousness as drivers to succeed.***

MTs typically described an internal pressure to achieve, and some expressed more clearly their personal motivations. For some, the pressure to continue to achieve was related to their place on their career timeline, their remaining vitality (vital years left in their lifetime) or their status in the field:

“My conviction is that my best work is still ahead of me. Even though there’s not much time, realistically speaking. There’s a lot less time than there used to be.” (MT10)

For others, this might be because of existential concerns to achieve a legacy so they can live on through their legacy:

“Well yeah, it was like someday I’m going to die but maybe if I make a difference in the world that’ll make it okay or maybe my work will live on after me.” (MT4)

Others spoke to the origins behind their drive to achieve, as a deeply personal drive to overcome insecurities, as profoundly articulated below:

“What’s really driving it is that I was small and I want to be bigger. I want to have an influence. I want to have an impact. I don’t want to be insignificant. I don’t want to be un-influential. I don’t want to be ordinary. I guess I want to be taller.” (MT11)

**Category 4.ii: There is more to this life than work, something has got to give in retirement/later life.**

Although generally, MTs articulated the importance of a work-life balance, this seemed to have been a hard-learned lesson. They generally illustrated how they gained a suitable balance throughout their life or after an impactful crisis: “So I think an ageing process for me has been from intensity or extremity to moderation.” (MT6)

This therapist expands on their struggle to achieve a work-life balance and how their attachment style played a role:

“This thing I've struggled with a lot of my life is the work-life balance. The balance between, ... because my work has been so important to me. At the same time, being connected to other people is deeply important to me. Now, I didn't used to know that. I formed this sort of ambition to make a difference in therapy research and it was hard to put that together with the part of me that was insecurely attached, that, you know, em, was vulnerable to rejection, you know so, right ... I later realised that people are more important than work.” (MT4)

***Subcategory: The work/life balance seesaw – brought sacrifices & consequences.***

MTs reported the consequences of lacking a work/life balance on other valued parts of life; this finding was variant in frequency. For some, this came in the form of loss for having missed out on quality time with their children:

“I think the greatest loss to me, spontaneously what triggers it is when my (now adult child) conveyed how unhappy they were, that they felt as if they were so unimportant to me, it was a complete shock. (They) said I was always so involved in my work and that I hadn’t been there for them.” (MT6)

MTs reported having missed out on downtime and quality time with loved ones. MTs often noted wishing for this for their future.

“To grow old with my [partner]. Have meaningful relationships with my kids as they become adults, and grandkids. To have more balance in my life.” (MT2)

MT10 captures these combined in their poetic and striking description and we thought this an appropriate quote to describe the longing for a work life balance and how it evolved with maturation and longevity in the profession.

“I mean the idea of remaining so active and researching and writing and so on and in one hand it’s attractive but on the other hand I feel it’s a burden. I think, my god, I’m old, please just leave me alone. Let me just sit in the sun like old people do everywhere, and at all times in history, have liked to do and, uh, you know, read a paper, do a puzzle, scratch my butt, or you know, whatever else. To estivate is to like, bask. To bask like a sea lion on the rocks in the sun and to, you know, roll over and occasionally, drop off into the water and find a fish and then clamber back up onto the rocks and lie about on top of your, you know, one’s mate. You know, that’s, that’s another image of living and,

uh, that is sort of very different from this highly agentic view of this achievement, you know (laughs). This very need for achievement, you know, 'legacy projects' and all this, kind of, you know." (MT10)

## Discussion

This study sets out to develop an understanding of the Personal Ideologies of 12 people (who provided separate consent) from the original 16 participants, who contributed to the original study of Renowned Master Therapists' Lives (Hannigan, 2023, unpublished). This study further builds upon the literature on MTs' professional traits or ethical values (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, et al., 2016; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). The results are discussed below in light of the broader literature.

An unexpected domain emerged during analyses, that was not prompted or specifically asked about, namely, The Rewards and Risks of Personal and Relational Ideologies (see Table 1, Domain 4). It represented and espoused the consequences from the tensions between certain valued ideologies on other valued ideologies when one's capacity and personal resources are simply limited. Sadly, in many respects, excelling in the profession comes with a price or potential consequence in the form of some tarnished personal relationships with loved ones, who felt abandoned by their parent's devotion to their career success and mastery. This can be observed in the category "There is more to this life than work, something's got to give in retirement/later life." The consequences of a deeply and personally rewarding career comes with valuable lessons, more fully learned, and appreciated only later in life. They also spoke to how they had learned that personal relationships could be equally validating, self-worth enhancing, and could provide a sense of recognition.

Our findings in this fourth domain are in line with the "paradox characteristics" found by Skovholt, Jennings, and Mullenbach (2016): for example, our finding of "The intellectual pursuits and quest are endless – determination & self-discipline", overlaps with their finding that MTs drive for personal mastery, with an eagerness to learn, yet they also simultaneously never fully arrived at having a felt-sense of attaining enough achievement. The "endless" aspect is clearly similar in both findings. Our finding may offer an interpretation, that it is not just the drive for mastery that feels endless, it is also the relentless pursuit to contribute and to make a meaningful impact in life. As well our findings contribute to their paradoxical findings by emphasising the

ideological integration between both the personal and professional selves. Interestingly, Skovholt, Jennings, and Mullenbach (2016) observed a distinct ability to set boundaries

between these selves; our findings perhaps suggest a synergy and little differentiation when it comes to their sense of personal and professional self, as explored through the lens of their ideologies.

The cognitive, emotional, and relational (CER Model) characteristics of master therapists, relational domain (R) in Jennings & Skovholt, (2016), and the Syntheses Model's Relational Orientation domain (Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016), are supported in an ideological understanding of the importance of relationships, as found in all three categories of findings in the Relational Ideology Domains, as described at the start of this discussion. Master therapists are not only strong in their relational abilities, they also deeply value, believe, appreciate, and live through relationship. "Professional life is relational and often easier to maintain," was reported due to its bounded nature. This broadens the understanding that MTs have a synergy between their ideologies and personal characteristics, demonstrating perhaps a strong motivation for congruence in their endeavours, both personally and professionally.

Lastly, our main finding in the Personal Ideology domain, was the expressed goal of wanting and having a "drive to make a meaningful contribution in life via career & personal legacy," which illustrates a primary passion of the MTs to live life through making a positive difference in both their lifetime and beyond. This may further relate to previous literature on psychotherapists, at all stages of expertise (novice-expert), who were shown to constantly experience professional growth and clinical improvements (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). These findings illustrate a persistent striving for growth and evolution. We found evidence to suggest that relationships and relational connection are significant and importance to the MT's. Indeed, this extends well beyond their personal lives (romantic partner, children) to include their professional lives (peers, students, and client-relationships) too, similar to relational connectedness as found in Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff et al. (2016).

Similarly, we found support for the ethical value of beneficence (Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2005). MTs expressed a clear drive to reduce human suffering and contribute to a better society. Interestingly, these findings emerged in the current study although the interview schedule did not prompt for professional or ethical values. Similar findings in our study emerged "to make a meaningful contribution to society via career & personal legacy" as an overarching ideology in an MT's life overall, and beyond their professional ideologies.

As noted in the literature review, there is a vast amount of older research on therapist's religious identification, spiritual practices, and political involvements. In this study, no categories contained findings concerning any of these.

Although involvement was prompted during the interview, only very few MTs expressed any such values, beliefs, or activities. This may be because the field of psychology prizes scientific understandings, being secular and seeks techniques for working multiculturally and with interfaith and atheist clients alike (Reber, 2006).

Perhaps their involvement in research, training, academia, and writing are diverse and varied, along with being authentic and self-determined ways of experiencing their ideologies. Evidence of this idea can be seen in the Personal Ideology category of 'Challenging flawed dominant discourses, as a purposeful rebellion.' This speaks primarily to the expression of their ideologies via their legacy. For example, undergoing sustained scientific research and theoretical investigations to promote enhanced wellbeing in society emphasises the personal importance this has for them, perhaps as religious, spiritual and political ideologies may have for others (Davis, 2012; Lewis Hall & Hill, 2019; Park, 2013).

## Strengths & Limitations

A strength of this study is its design of enquiry into the personal life and ideologies of renowned, master therapists. Although findings evidently include references to the professional self, most of our findings capture the personal self and the synergy between both aspects of the self.

The study deeply respects diversity as illustrated through participants' age, nationality, sexual orientation, and theoretical orientation. In terms of gender, however, only two female MTs were included in this sample. Females may be underrepresented as they are less in numbers at this career level in the profession despite female dominance in numbers undertaking postgraduate studies (Geraci, Balsis, & Busch, 2015). Although not all demographics are disclosed in this study, the study's sample somewhat corresponds with WEIRD samples (Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic) (Henrich et al., 2010), more culturally and racially diverse samples could allow for increased diversity, like those found as part of the Synthesis Model of Master Therapists from Around the World (Hirai & Goh, 2016; Jennings, D'Rozario, et al., 2016; Jennings, Sovereign, Renninger, et al., 2016; Kwon & Kim, 2016). While there is evidence of diversity and inclusion pertaining to certain criteria, as outlined, it is noted that unfortunately there were no participants of colour or mixed race in the present study.

Because the data were transcribed prior to this analysis, no potentially enriching qualities such as voice intonation of the participants could be included in the analyses. This study was looking at patterns across participants. Another methodology may lend itself for comparisons between subgroups of

participants, such as US, African and European/UK based participants.

As this is one of the first studies to focus on the personal aspects of being a master therapist, there is room for further, deeper research here. A more committed phenomenological or narrative inquiry study might offer greater depth towards exploring how the master therapists manage their shame and insecurities and find both solace and reward in their work.

## Conclusion

This phenomenologically orientated study employed a generic descriptive and interpretative qualitative approach to analyse interviews with twelve world renowned master therapist participants. The article aimed to address some key features of exploring the core guiding ideologies of some of the greatest and renowned therapists in the profession today. It is worth considering that therapists of all levels aspire to have these characteristics and may be encouraged to appreciate that being a master therapist is something that many can achieve, that it is an attitude as well as requiring extremely hard work and practice. This has potential implications for readers, researchers, clinicians, and trainers alike. This was partly the rationale for the original study which is in progress (Hannigan, 2023, unpublished).

Our findings capture the personally held beliefs of those who have devoted their careers to psychotherapy, a profession that aims to heal people through the power of relationship, competence and professional mastery in research and clinical practice. The deeply personal views expressed are espoused by participants with tremendous proficiency in academia, clinical and research practice in the profession devoted to better understanding humans and how they behave psychologically. It was thus hoped that their thoughts on such matters may be evocative and potentially enhance our understanding of what makes these master therapists expert in the profession.

There were six main categories relating to the master therapists' most fundamental personal and life-values driving and informing their careers, lives, relationships, romantic encounters and about their life's work. They shared personal reflections and summatively concluded that these encounters and endeavours from their careers and life would later likely constitute their life's legacy both personally and professionally. The essence of their rationale for being who they are as therapists, for devoting themselves to career-long personal and professional development is entwined in seeking to make a meaningful difference in people's lives and to

improve psychological functioning and wellbeing in those they encounter as clients, students, researchers along with their friends and family. The study illuminated their expertise and simultaneous humility and demonstrated the very realness of their strengths and frailty as human beings. Josselson (2007) suggests that participating in the process of sharing one's life during research stirs up a welter of narcissistic tensions in both the participant and the researcher and strikingly these master therapists presented with tremendous humility which may in fact contribute to their shaping influences in the profession and to their great professional and career success. Attitudinally, their willingness and ability to grow from adversity and to keep striving is admirable.

Finally, the risks and rewards arising from their ideologies were outlined showing that balancing work and life in the extremes of career devotion constitutes a potential hazard if not closely monitored and checked. The findings overlap and expand upon previous studies of renowned therapists and suggest a synergy when it comes to the ideologies between their personal and professional selves.

There may be significant and interesting but different implications for how these study findings are discussed depending upon whether ideology is seen as a set of values which inform individual action (i.e., a roadmap) or as a narrative meaning-making process that can be utilised for post-hoc justification of action. The latter perspective for example might have significant implications given that participants report the importance to them of their legacy and they may have perceived the manner in which these interviews may be reported as potentially constituting part of that legacy. It is deeply hoped that this study respects the integrity of the participants and all their worthwhile endeavours.

With our enduring commitment to the profession, it was a privilege to meet and to learn from these master therapists. We deeply appreciate the opportunity to study the personal ideologies of these renowned therapists and to gain such an up-close and personal insight into their lives, ideologies and how these master therapists perceived themselves, their contributions to society and the professions of psychology and psychotherapy.

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