

# A Case Study based on True-false Self Theory: An Exploration and Analysis of Narcissism and Shame

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**Abstract:** Under the background of comprehensively strengthening and improving the mental health work of students in the new era, combined with the practical work of psychological counseling, using Winnicott's true and false self theory, this paper deeply analyzes the shame experience of a 24-year-old male graduate student client, discusses the trauma of his relationship with his parents in the early stage of growth, and focuses on analyzing the influence of his mother's narcissistic behavior on his false self formation. Further, this study will analyze the root of his narcissistic damage and sense of shame, explore issues such as the sense of meaninglessness, worthlessness, and the hollow state experienced by his client, and provide reference value for the complex interaction between individual psychological development and significant others.

**Keywords:** Narcissism; Sense of shame; True and false self

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## 1. Introduction

Shame, as a universal and profound emotional experience, has a profound impact on individual mental health, behavior patterns, and interpersonal relationships <sup>[1]</sup>. In clinical practice, some clients who are troubled by the family environment try to change their parents by self-learning psychological knowledge to heal themselves. In the counseling and visiting relationship, they take the initiative to seek help but find it difficult to establish trust, and there is inner shame and estrangement in the counseling and visiting relationship. The concept of "false self" put forward by psychologist Winnicott can explain this phenomenon, which believes that in the early parent-child relationship, the mother is "not good enough" to respond appropriately to the infant's spontaneous actions, but requires the infant to obey herself, which will promote the infant to form a false self <sup>[2]</sup>. Most of these mothers are narcissistic, unable to perceive the baby's omnipotent needs. To obey the needs of the mother and the external environment, the baby prematurely represses itself, isolates itself from the real self, and forms an empty shell. Gradually, when they come into contact with the real experience, they will feel strange and ashamed, which may be an important reason for the individual shame in this case <sup>[3]</sup>. Through the case of a male graduate student

counseling, this paper analyzes the formation mechanism of shame and explores healing ways to help such clients get in touch with their true feelings, so that students can redefine the meaning of life, regain their sense of self-worth, and repair the contradictory experiences in interpersonal relationships.

## **2. The theoretical background of Winnicott's true and false self**

Winnicott's concept of "True and False Self" holds that an individual gradually constructs his or her self-identity through interaction with the primary caregiver (usually the mother) in his or her early upbringing environment <sup>[4]</sup>. In this process, if the infant's needs are responded to in a timely, appropriate, and emotionally charged manner, then the infant develops a true self <sup>[5]</sup>. The true self is spontaneous, natural, and vibrant, and is based on the baby's innate potential and true sense of the world. The authentic self individual is free to express his feelings, desires, and thoughts, and these are expressed out of genuine needs within.

If the infant's needs are not adequately, appropriately, or emotionally responded to as he or she grows up, the infant may develop an adaptive strategy to survive by constructing a false self <sup>[6]</sup>. The false self is based on accommodating and adapting to external expectations. Individuals with the false self may appear submissive, accommodating, or overly concerned with the opinions of others in their behavior, not out of genuine internal needs, but to maintain relationships with others or avoid conflict. Winnicott emphasizes that the false self is not entirely negative or false, but is to some extent a survival strategy developed by the individual in response to adverse circumstances <sup>[7]</sup>. However, over-reliance on the false self can cause the individual to lose connection with his or her true self and feel empty, anxious, or lacking self-identity, so one of the goals of psychoanalytic therapy is to help the individual regain connection with his or her true self and achieve self-integration and growth.

## **3. Case reports**

### **3.1. Summary of the visitor's background**

Xiao A is a 24-year-old male graduate student with a medium build, regular features, and a gentle temperament. Xiao A was diagnosed with tic disorder in the lower grades of primary school. He underwent psychotherapy and medication and took a year off from school. During counseling sessions, he often appeared to be half-smiling, uncomfortable, or embarrassed. His expression does not match his heart when he tells a sad story, and his expression of shame sometimes appears.

### **3.2. The client's self-statement and experience**

#### **3.2.1. Family environment and early experiences are related to shame**

As an only child, Xiao A recalled sitting on his bed when he was 2–3 years old, feeling that the world was full of danger, and even feeling that his parents were also dangerous. The most notable memory was that he was holding a toy gun in the direction of the door where his parents came in and out. When he was a child, his parents were busy with work, his mother was an accountant, and his father was a porter, with unstable work. Later, his mother entered a state-owned enterprise and was well-paid. Usually, his mother likes to complain, thinking that she got rheumatoid arthritis after giving birth because she was not well taken care of, and his father is weak and has few words. When Xiao A was in his primary school year, he attended a school in the urban and rural areas, where the environment was a jungle, and when his grades declined, he needed to rely on strength to protect himself from bullies and taunts. In third grade, Xiao A was suspended from school with tic syndrome, he took medication and

saw a psychologist during the period, and later interpreted the experience as a family illness when she minor-majored in psychology.

Two years ago, his grandpa fell ill with senile dementia, and his father stayed at home full-time to take care of him. The family joked that his grandpa looked like himself when he was 2–3 years old, with a teasing tone. Xiao A felt very ashamed and thought that he abandoned himself, and Xiao A often wondered why he was born since he was so troublesome. Mother being temperamental and dogmatic, has claimed to have read a lot of parenting books. When relatives put forward that a child crying should be coaxed, the mother insisted not to care, after a while, which made small A feel very ashamed, like a person was stripped of clothes to see. Once Xiao A said he wanted to run away from home, his parents did not stop him but let him go far, he cried at the door for a long time and then went home ashamed. On another occasion, he held a whetstone to his neck and said he would kill himself if he was not treated well, but his father told him to do it. One scene that impressed him deeply was when his mother took him riding a bike. Xiao A sang nursery rhymes happily on the back seat of the bike. Suddenly, his mother lost her temper and said that she did not like it, as if the nursery rhymes offended her.

Growing up in a hostile environment and tense family relations, Xiao A can only form an alliance with his mother and play the role of a good boy to comfort his mother. He needs to fight against his father and others for this, and he often feels ashamed in the process of taking sides. When his father tries to improve his relationship with him, he often does not come home, which makes him feel that his father is about to abandon him. His mother, the eldest, was raised by his divorced grandfather and was beaten and abused constantly growing up, so Xiao A believes her mother has never been loved. His father is the second child in the family (three brothers) and gets less attention, so the parents do not know how to treat the child, thus Little A feels that he is actually a burden. There is a sense of self-guilt in Xiao A, as the mother complained about poor health after birth, blaming his father for not taking care of themselves, which also makes Xiao A feel guilty and ashamed, thinking that the mother did not give birth for his sake.

In school, Xiao A always felt rejected and laughed at. Growing up, boys think he is a “licking dog”, and girls often express their disgust. Before, Xiao A was a little fat and tended to please others in interpersonal relationships. He did not get real respect, and the sense of shame always followed him.

### **3.2.2. Major life events and their impact**

Four major events have had a profound impact on Xiao A: First, the triangular entanglement with her parents when he was young; The absence of his father and his mother’s narcissism made it difficult for Xiao A to safely reveal his true self; Second, he suffered from tic syndrome in primary school, a physical and mental symptom of frequent abdominal twitching. Third, the entanglement between college and his girlfriend, after breaking up for a long time to forget; And fourth, the relationship with the tutor (authority), he resented the tutor’s oppression and abusive behavior and was angry at the “weakness and conciliation” occasionally shown by the tutor. These experiences are closely related to the true-false self theory and shape his sense of shame.

## **4. The “shame” analysis from the perspective of true and false self theory**

### **4.1. Formation and application of false self**

According to Winnicott, the self is an innate potential that, under favorable circumstances, can develop the ability to distinguish between “me” and “non-me.” When the mother is not good enough to meet the needs of the baby in time,

the baby cannot distinguish between me and the sense of non-self, to survive, it will automatically pick up the mother's "narcissistic" needs and confuse it with its own, and its false self is formed<sup>[8]</sup>. The infant's subservience to the mother results in a state of isolation from the spontaneous, authentic self that gives central meaning to life<sup>[9]</sup>. In this case, the visiting mother is a "narcissistic" mother who can see from her experience of neglect that the "narcissistic" mother rarely feels the real needs of the child, and keeps recounting how difficult it is to keep talking about the physical decline, the lack of social interaction, the loss of quality of life due to the cost of childbirth, and the inconsiderate father of the child. The attitude toward the baby's needs is rejection, denial, and pain, the visiting experience is anxious, the mother cannot hold him well, and the mother does not let him cry, thinking that she has seen the relevant content of psychology, advocating that they can hold the baby when they do not cry, never "coax" the child, he has to suppress their submission to the environment, to act as a "container" for the mother's anxiety<sup>[10]</sup>. As Xiao grows up, he needs to take care of his mother like a "Xiao Adult", and make up for the father's position, as the father's withdrawal makes him isolated and helpless. Therefore, the client is cautious and fearful at a very young age, fearing the negative emotions of his mother. It is recalled that once when he made his mother unhappy, she immediately took away his favorite dishes on the table. He was stunned at that time and could only admit his mistake to please his mother to get food. When he was a child, his mother was good at using a variety of "moral" constraints, such as being generous, even if he did not want to give up, but also to "Kong Rong let pear". To gain his mother's approval, he should not refuse to visit and express sadness, because then he would be labeled with a lot of labels and feel ashamed. The visit gradually became a relative and outsider in front of "other people's children." His academic and interpersonal aspects were relatively smooth, until graduate school, where he seemed to be successful, but in the graduation season, the visit ushered in a huge sense of emptiness, he does not know what he really wants, instead he just wants to lie down, but he was feeling too uneasy to truly relax.

## **4.2. The function of the visit brought by false self**

In this case, Xiao A rarely feels his mother's embrace. Narcissistic mothers tend to be more focused on their own needs and feelings and have difficulty truly understanding, accepting, and responding to their children's emotional needs. For example, when Xiao A cries out to his mother about his needs, hoping for praise and hugs, the narcissistic mother may turn the conversation around to herself, emphasizing how amazing her own similar experience is and ignoring the child's feelings. This environment makes it difficult for the child's true self to fully develop, leading to the formation of a false self. But the false self also seems to bring about function.

### **4.2.1. Adaptive function**

Meet mom's expectations and maintain the harmony of family relations: To obtain mom's limited attention and approval, Xiao A will strive to create an image that conforms to his mother's expectations. For example, if his mother wants to be well-behaved, sensible, and polite in front of her relatives and friends, Xiao A will try to suppress his true emotions and thoughts and behave flawlessly on various occasions. He will try his best to maintain a false image even though he is not willing to do so. To avoid conflict with the mother or family conflict, he will adapt to the family environment by pretending to be himself. For example, when the mother loses her temper due to some trivial matters and angrily takes away the dish during the meal and does not let the family continue to eat, Xiao A will act submissive, immediately admit his mistake, and repress his emotions to maintain superficial harmony even if he feels wronged or does not understand inside.

#### **4.2.2. Protect the function**

Avoid emotional harm: Due to mom's narcissism, children may often be ignored, belittled, or ridiculed when expressing their true feelings. To protect his fragile inner self from further harm, Xiao A will develop the false self as a psychological defense mechanism. For example, when Xiao A encounters something unhappy at school, he would like to be comforted by his mother, but past experience tells him that his mother may think it is a small matter not worth mentioning, and even blame him for not being strong enough. As a result, Xiao A learns to hide his true feelings and face his mother with false strength.

Create a psychological safe space: In the absence of a mother's real holding environment, Xiao A's heart is full of insecurity. The false self can create a relatively stable psychological safe space for the child to feel accepted under this false shell <sup>[11]</sup>. For example, Xiao A builds an ideal self inside of him that is always able to cope with challenges and be liked by others. When the child is faced with difficulties in real life, he can hide in the safe space created by the false self and escape the pressure of reality for a while.

#### **4.2.3. Social function**

Gain the recognition of others and integrate into the social circle: In interacting with others, Xiao A will use his false self to show the best side of himself to gain the recognition and love of others. For example, in school, Xiao A will try to be friendly, helpful, and good at school, and become a good boy in the eyes of teachers and classmates, especially in a flattering way around girls and female teachers. In this way, the child can get more attention and praise, and make up for the lack of emotional support in the family <sup>[12]</sup>. The false self can help Xiao A better fit into the social environment and fit into the group. For example, Xiao A will share his homework or brag with the same sex, and let others copy his homework to establish an emotional connection. He has felt a little overwhelmed in social situations for a long time. But by showing his false self, the child can follow social rules and expectations, maintain good relationships with others, and avoid being isolated.

### **4.3. The problem of false self**

Although the false self is functional, it will bring A lot of psychological problems to the visitor in the long run <sup>[13]</sup>. In this case, Xiao A has the following key issues.

#### **4.3.1. Emotional isolation and loneliness**

The false self causes Xiao A to become emotionally estranged from his true self. He has difficulty expressing his true feelings and experiencing deep emotional connections. The prolonged emotional isolation has left Xiao A feeling lonely and helpless, and empty and absent inside him even in crowds. Xiao A always feels that there is a "shell" following him, and he is rarely really happy. He often feels nervous and anxious. When falling in love, quarrels, pulling and even getting out of control can make Xiao A feel strong emotional fluctuations, and Xiao A has the pleasure of "sado-masochism." When the other party likes him, he will want to escape, as he feels that this love is not a real stimulation.

#### **4.3.2. Self-identity problem**

Since the false self is constructed based on meeting the expectations of others, Xiao A has difficulty forming a stable self-identity <sup>[14]</sup>. Constantly switching between narcissism and low self-esteem, especially appearing meditative when it comes to job hunting and internships, he will have doubts about his own worth and abilities and lack confidence and self-esteem. In the school stage, Xiao A's self-identity almost depends on the attitude of his

mentor, so he is prone to have a lot of emotional twists and turns towards his mentor.

#### **4.3.3. Social obstacles**

The false self causes Xiao A to show unreal or artificial behavior in social interaction, and it is difficult to establish sincere and in-depth interpersonal relationships. Xiao A is afraid of being rejected or abandoned by his classmates, so he tends to maintain a distant sense of boundaries and try to avoid intimacy and real emotional communication. It can be seen from some classmates who borrow things from them that, on the one hand, Xiao A is ingratiating, but when he finds that the other party does not reciprocate in the way she wants, he will get angry and upset.

#### **4.3.4. Transmission of intergenerational trauma**

The parenting style of a narcissistic mother may make the child form a catered and ingratiating behavior pattern, but at the same time, Xiao A is also narcissistic and cannot really translate into confidence, which is a transmission of intergenerational trauma<sup>[15]</sup>. In counseling, Xiao A has a lot of similar aspects to his mother's narcissism, such as only wanting the good side of things, being unable to accept the dark side, having difficulty getting rid of the shadow of the past, difficult to integrate, understand the truth but also difficult to have a good sense of experience.

In general, the inner conflict and depression brought about by the false self led to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression in the second grade of primary school. Even accompanied by somatization hypoabdominal tic syndrome, Xiao A felt isolated and helpless at that time and took a year off from school to gradually ease. As an adult, Xiao A often felt confused, lost, and powerless, not knowing how to cope with his emotions and life (as can be seen from his first visit to the counseling room because of a breakup).

### **5. The integration of true and false self**

Xiao A's mother has a profound influence on him. She is unable to provide enough care, excessively interferes with and controls Xiao A's life, expects the child to act according to her own will, deprives him of autonomy and independence, and is indifferent to Xiao A's emotional needs. There are many neglects, occasionally even making fun of the child, expressing inconsistently, and using "joking" to fob off. In such an environment, Xiao A developed a deep sense of shame and gradually drifted away from his true self. Coping and healing with shame is a long and complex process. A counselor can help a visitor develop self-awareness by recognizing that his or her feelings of shame stem from past experiences, not from any flaws or mistakes in himself or herself. By increasing their self-awareness, they can better understand and accept their emotional needs. Gradually get to know their inner world and recognize their true needs and feelings. Through the demonstration of the counselor, a more real connection with the visitor, the defense of the fake self, encourage the visit, and even in this process, the counselor may need to temporarily take over the function of the client's fake self at some time, and help the visitor re-establish various self-functions based on the real self.

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## Disclosure statement

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