Why Aren’t We Curious about Nannies?

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This paper is an exploration of a topic whose specific intrapsychic significance has remained relatively unformulated in the psychoanalytic literature. Though nannies (that is, caregivers whose job it is to care for children at home in their parents’ absence) have had a ubiquitous presence among professional working women and are frequently involved in the lives of patients seen in private practice, their psychological significance for both employers and charges has rarely been considered. The paper attempts to demonstrate how the nanny’s literal position is at risk for engendering ambivalence in parents and children alike, since she is necessarily there when the parents are not. It is postulated that the actual, reality-based power of the nanny as placeholder for parents in their absence may be instrumental in the tendency of our patients to scotomatize this relationship. In the first part of the paper, clinical examples are used to underscore the complexity of the nanny’s role, while the second half of the paper draws upon the text of the children’s classic Mary Poppins, to further explore the subject.

If one browses the PEP-web—a digital psychoanalytic archive that encompasses classic texts and journals dating as far back as 1871—looking to explore the topic of hired caregivers and their impact on development, it is striking to note that there has been little psychoanalytic

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speculation on the matter. Though there are hundreds of articles that reference nannies in the case material, there are only a very few that privilege hired caregivers as a unique area of interest. This relatively pervasive omission of nannies as a singular topic is an arguable scotoma in our literature, given the sociocultural backdrop within which most of our clinical work is conducted. Many high-level professional mothers whom we meet in our consulting rooms are, at this point in time, typically employers of caregivers, and many of our patients have themselves grown up with household help. Parents who can afford psychotherapy and psychoanalysis can also afford to pay other women to care for their children while they are at work. Psychoanalysts and psychotherapists themselves often work with other people’s children, while employing nannies to care for their own.

Given the pervasiveness of this phenomenon within the same demographic as those who seek our services, why haven't analysts been more curious about a realm that at the very least may create unformulated background noise for many of our child and adult patients? In America the rise of nonfamily members caring for children coincided with more women in the workplace and the rise of the women's movement. Prior to these developments, nannies were culturally linked to an elevated socioeconomic status both in America and abroad. At the time the Disney movie *Mary Poppins* was released in 1964, so few families in the United States had in-home caregivers that special consultants were enlisted to make the movie more palatable to the movie-viewing public (Flanagan, 2005).

Ironically, our psychoanalytic forefathers in Europe and England almost all emerged from socioeconomic backgrounds in which it was understood that children would be raised by hired help. Though Freud himself, in a letter to Fliess (1897) and again in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), alluded to his sense that his own nurse, “the woman who provided me at such an early age with the means for living and going on living” (1897, p. 262), occupied a pivotal position in his unconscious, the actual index of the *Standard Edition* contains only two independent citations of the word *nurse*, and in both, it is as a derivative of the maternal representation, not as a topic in its own right, meriting Freud’s usual scrutiny. He makes the assertion that for the child, the nursemaid “or servant” is necessarily experienced as a stand-in for “the superior figure of the mother”(1909, p. 207n) and that the “nurse comes to play the mother’s part and the two become fused together”(1918, p. 119) in fantasy and recollection. Despite this seeming trivialization of the importance of the caregiver as a separate person, Freud was deeply preoccupied by the presence and departure of his own nurse. There are
frequent references to nursemaids throughout his case histories, but he says little else of a theoretical nature about their meaning. A very recent paper (Colombo, 2010) notes a peculiar paradox in Freud’s thinking about nursemaids and governesses, possibly due to his own complex and likely unresolved relationship to his early nursemaid, Monica Zajic.

The nursemaids . . . are indeed compelling figures [in Freud’s work], both marginal and central. They are marginal as persons of little power in the household, and as figures attracting scant interest in both early and ongoing psychoanalytic theory—considered, if at all, as maternal transference displacements rather than figures in their own right. Yet their importance is striking if unacknowledged: they crop up in cases, anecdotes and vignettes with greater frequency than mothers, and provide data about Freud’s earlier mothering experiences. Moreover the nursemaid, typically presented by both Freud and a great deal of the [minimal] literature as a mere replacement/displacement of the mother, is insistently located in the realm of hard fact rather than fantasy (Colombo, 2010, p. 836).

This author goes on to note that even after Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory, he continued to assert the “reality” of seduction trauma perpetrated by nurses and governesses as if this were a separate category where the lines of fantasy and reality were blurred. “Both pervasive and textually insubordinate, this relationship poses contradictions and exceptions to the theories being elaborated, and challenges to Freud as theorist” (p. 840). The lack of clarity in this area—even by Freud himself—despite his clear fascination with the person of his own nursemaid, suggests that the figure of the nanny can reside in a problematic and potentially split psychic space.

Has so little been said about nanny figures because they were presumed to merely amplify or echo the maternal representation? Clearly they do and they don’t. Bornstein (1949) takes pains to distinguish the roles of Frankie’s (her paradigmatic child analysand) mother and his nanny, suggesting that in reality his nanny may have been the more reliable caregiver. Hardin and Hardin (2000) speak of “early primary surrogate mothering,” thereafter referring to hired caregivers as “EPSMs.” Here too we see the symbolic conflation of nanny and mother, though in making this link the authors confirm the actual power nannies can have over their charges. In their paper, the emphasis is on the potential for trauma and loss that can be threaded through the relationship between child and nanny. They too take note of the absence of curiosity about the overall phenomenon of in-home substitute care as a more general phenomenon, noting that there has been much more written
about day-care arrangements. It should be noted here that though day care and group care at the caregiver’s home are options that parents often choose, the scope of this paper will be restricted to the nanny herself; in choosing a nanny, a mother is opting to have an individual who will necessarily have an intimate and, in the case of only children, dyadic relationship with her charges. About this little is written. “In reviewing the developmental literature . . . we observed that the influence of EPSMs is all but totally ignored” (Hardin and Hardin, 2000, p. 1232). Though the above paper is replete with fascinating data concerning the loss of EPSMs and early grief (including a very rich vignette about Helena Deutsch’s son’s loss of his nanny), no further light is shed upon the literature’s neglect of the nanny’s singular role and person. In one of the other rare examples dealing more specifically with individual hired caregivers—notably a comparison of the differences between nanny-raised toddlers to those who are not—Nachman remarks that “there may be a very rapid repression of caregivers and their nurturing activities” (1991, p. 87) but does not speculate upon why this might be so.

Why do we not talk about nannies? What makes the subject close to invisible as a matter worthy of special consideration in our psychoanalytic archive? Is there something that keeps it hovering under the radar, a kind of devalued preoedipal downstairs juxtaposed against the more privileged oedipal upstairs and its fairly limited/inevitable cast of characters? In my own practice with children, I know that I have to remind myself to ask about a family’s history of hired caregivers when I start a consultation, and I must confess, unless particular note is made by a parent, I usually move on quickly to other more “significant” aspects of history and development. I have had several cases in my practice in which important nanny-related material—involving loss of a beloved nanny or abusiveness by a problematic caregiver—came up late in the treatment. In these instances the nanny data constituted on the one hand a kind of “smoking gun” for the child’s symptoms but, on the other, only came up fortuitously and late in the parent work. Are we to assume that representations of nannies/caregivers are necessarily subsumed within those of mother and are not in a separate category?

1. Throughout the paper, I will typically use the word mother as a kind of shorthand for parent. Though it is still typical for the nanny to be the person who stands in for the mother in particular, the twenty-first-century family can often consist of two mothers, two fathers, or a single parent of either sex. Moreover, in some families with a mother, it is the father who performs the more stereotypic maternal duties, giving rise to the expression “Mr. Mom.” Thus, in this paper, it will be understood that the word mother is a condensed...
If we are to resist history’s tendency to overlook the significance of the nanny as an influential personage in her own right, it is important to investigate the ambiguity and the power of the position itself, as well as the person who inhabits it. This paper will argue that the nanny may function as a kind of personified embodiment of the darker side of the parent/child dyad, a concrete representation of the inevitable and often-unconscious ambivalence and conflict that children can and necessarily will produce in their primary caregivers.

Neither Winnicott nor Anna Freud, nor even one of our contemporary pioneers in the relationship between parents and infants, Daniel Stern, has ventured explicitly into this area of huge relevance to those working with families and children. In his classic book *The Motherhood Constellation*, Stern acknowledges that a new mother needs what he calls “a supporting matrix” (1995, p. 173), a psychological and actual milieu that can “hold” her in her mothering functions. By implication, such a matrix could include those hired to care for babies, but nanny figures are not discussed. Though ironically there are no substantive references to nannies in Bowlby’s seminal trilogy, *Attachment, Separation*, and *Loss*, we know from his autobiographical history that in fact Bowlby was consciously aware of the profound impact his own nanny had upon him, particularly her departure when he was four years old. According to his son, Bowlby likely spent twenty-three hours a day with his nanny, as opposed to the one spent with his parents (Bowlby, 2004).

This powerful affiliation with a woman from a different class background who was not the mother was endemic to the English upper classes. Winston Churchill is one of the few distinguished figures to openly credit his own nanny’s influence on the development of his adult character (Gathorne-Hardy, 1993; Storr, 1988). Wet nurses preceded nannies as women to whom upper-class children were “outsourced” for care. How relevant is it to her history and even to the trajectory of her contribution to world literature that Jane Austen, for one, was taken away from her mother and raised as well as suckled by another woman for at least her first year? This was common practice in the eighteenth century in families of this class background (Tomalin, 1999). Perhaps
this little-known fact about a well-known author underscores how little the early years and the impact of those who care for small children have entered into the collective imagination.

Just by virtue of taking the job, a nanny may inadvertently step into a no-man's-land that professionals and parents alike have trouble reflecting upon. This topic seems to reside in an intellectual limbo. Between mothers and babies, there may truly be no such thing as a baby, since boundaries and sensibilities commingle; but without an adult to care for a baby, there could be no possibility of the baby remaining alive. Thus while there may for a while be no such thing as a baby, there must always be such a thing as an adult to care for one! Thus, there is necessarily great power conferred upon any adult who cares for a baby or young child. Upon that adult, its literal life depends.

If the person who cares for the baby is not a parent, then she will necessarily fall into a divide that exists between mother and baby. This in-between is not only a relational construct but an actual one as well. The caregiver is literally a placeholder for the mothering person and by her very presence denotes the mother’s physical unavailability. If the nanny is conceived of (by parent, child, or nanny herself) as a substitute or surrogate, she is likely to disappoint the child and elicit resentment and rivalry in the mother. Further, if the nanny’s impact on the child and parent is not considered and given its due (existing as she must between them), the effect of her mere presence (superimposed upon the empty space left by the mother’s departure) is potentially insidious and conflictual. She is there when or because the mother isn't. The nanny’s role, thus, is conducted in a powerful and potentially negative space, the zone of the mother’s absence.

Very little has been written in our literature in particular about the impact of hired child care on children’s minds, nor on the difficult bind nannies may be put in merely by showing up for the job! In one of the few psychoanalytically researched and psychologically thorough explorations of this subject, Cancelmo and Bandini (1999) map out the frontier that must be negotiated when parents hire outsiders to care for their children at home. Their book, *Child Care for Love or Money*, does justice to the complexity of the subject matter. The authors describe how modern family life is conducted in a newly evolving territory that they call the “extended familial space.” It is both a real and symbolic place. It is both the physical household as well as each member’s emotional connection to the people who reside in it. It is a space where the potential for emotional attachments and day-to-day struggles of family life are now expanded to include caregivers, who, by
their physical proximity to and intimate involvement in family functions are inevitably drawn into the family dynamics (Cancelmo and Bandini, 1999, p. xiii).

Later they note that falling as she does into this in-between, almost-transitional realm, requiring her to behave “as if” she were a family member yet with none of the usual prerogatives, the nanny has an “impossible profession” (p. 61). Perhaps even more than the parents themselves, the nanny seems positioned to be a repository of “transference” (Connor 2010; Cancelmo and Bandini, 1999) and projections, not only from the parents but from the child as well. In her book Maternal Desire, psychologist Daphne De Marneffe frankly notes: “Turning the care of our newborn, baby, or small child over to another, non-familial person, someone we often have known only briefly, is a momentous emotional and psychological act, even if we pretend that it isn’t. It is fraught with an ongoing combination of relief, fear, hope and sadness” (2004, pp. 153–54).

In a particularly relevant exploration of the taboo realm of maternal ambivalence, a psychoanalyst, Barbara Almond (2010), explores how little has been cited about the high level of risk when the inevitability of what Winnicott called maternal “hate” is not duly acknowledged and accepted. She observes that infanticide seems to occur in contexts where women are so overwhelmed by their life circumstances and psychopathology that rather than asking for help they commit the unthinkable crime. Her excerpt from Winnicott as to why a mother might be prone to hate her baby retains its timeless brilliance:

“The baby is a danger to her body in pregnancy and at birth. He is ruthless, treats her as scum, an unpaid servant, a slave. He is suspicious, refuses her good food, and makes her doubt herself, but eats well with his aunt. After an awful morning with him she goes out, and he smiles at a stranger, who says, ‘isn’t he sweet?’” (Winnicott 1947, as quoted in Almond 2010, p. 16).

It is indeed fascinating that Winnicott understood this much without having ever had children himself. Perhaps as a pediatrician, he was also privy to aspects of the parent-child relationship that few professionals other than nannies ever get to witness firsthand! In addition, being an adult who often had to do disagreeable things to a child, Winnicott was exposed on a constant basis to the ways that children will not naturally cooperate with procedures that they do not like, not only with their own parents but especially with less-familiar adults. He was not sentimental about children, due to his psychological genius but also due
to his constant exposure to them. Winnicott thus understood and was one of the first to bring the possibility of maternal “hate” out of the closet. He saw that children’s helplessness and neediness coupled with their tendency to arouse powerful negative emotions were capable of catapulting a mother down a rabbit hole of disowned and disavowed representations, as will be seen in the following case example.

I had occasion to see a six-year-old child who had pushed a pet down a flight of stairs (and caused its death), requiring the child to be brought to me in crisis. The parents were extremely worried that this child had an attachment disorder, since he had been adopted from a disadvantaged family relatively late (at one year old). When I met this child with his mother, I was struck by what appeared to be a sturdy and reciprocally loving bond between them. The presenting problem did not seem to fit with the relationship that I saw before me. As I learned the history of the event, it became clear that the child had been left in the care of a psychologically abusive nanny who tended to obstruct his need to contact his mother. The pushing of the animal occurred in the context of the child’s panicky bids to reach his mother by phone, which were continually rebuffed and scorned by his nanny.

A by-product of the consultation was that the parents decided to fire the nanny immediately, which in turn led to a great improvement in the child’s state of mind, as well as that of the parents. They realized that the nanny’s pervasive lack of empathy was an important variable in the child’s violent action, resulting in what presented in a kind of encapsulated “reactive attachment disorder” (to the nanny). As I probed into the history of this child’s parents, I learned that the mother had herself been psychologically abused by her own mother. Fortunately, in the face of this crisis, this mother was able to quickly develop some insight as to how her early experiences predisposed her to hire unqualified caregivers who perpetuated an intergenerational cycle of emotional abuse. The mother’s unformulated confusion over what small children need from adults who care for them led to a circumscribed blind spot that permitted her to hire unqualified caregivers. Further, her guilt over needing to spend money on someone who would in effect be doing her job and making her life less complicated led to difficulty about getting what she and her child deserved. In addition, in dismissing her own emotional needs, as well as those of her child, she was also inclined to devalue the importance of a nanny’s need for a reasonable salary and working conditions. She instead prioritized cost over quality, opting for a “cut-rate” price on a very young foreign au pair whom she had never even had a chance to interview in person. In return for room and board and a minimal wage, this nanny was ex-
pected to work ten-hour days with little respite. Rather than put herself in her child’s (or nanny’s) position by identifying with his vulnerability, this mother made a risky choice that led to a reenactment of her own childhood past, albeit via the dual proxies of her nanny and son. This mother’s own unacknowledged rage toward and identification with her original inadequate caregivers got displaced and projected onto both her child and her nanny, leading in turn to sadistic enactments by both child and nanny: the nanny toward the child, and the child toward an animal. The fact that this mother so readily entrusted her child to an inexperienced stranger, whom she in turn underpaid and overworked, merely added to (but clearly was not responsible for) the nanny’s tendency to act out against the child. One can see here how this child/mother/nanny web of relationships was, until examined, permeated by the precipitates of the mother’s disavowed early relational traumata.

In another instance, a parent who had sustained multiple early losses would hire a series of excellent and well-qualified nannies (highly vetted in contrast to the other mother’s negligent hiring practices) to whom the child would become attached, only to summarily dismiss them when the child reached the age the mother had been when she lost a parent or beloved relative. In that instance, we can see the mother’s need to revisit her own history of object loss through the medium of her hired caregiver’s relationship with her child. Both the above clinical examples are given merely to illustrate the possibility that nannies or caregivers can be (and may be unconsciously drafted by the mother into being) the repository for and conduit of conflicted parental transferences and representations. With the added factors of a nanny’s inexperience, psychopathology, or other complex social or cultural factors, psychological hazards can characterize the enterprise for mother, child, and nanny alike. On the other hand, for children whose parents are working or traveling or who have significant psychopathology themselves, the nanny can obviously be a truly ameliorating presence, precisely because she is not the mother. In an example of the above, a child’s striking compassion seemed to be an identification with a Buddhist caregiver rather than with highly driven and competitive parents. Just recently The New York Times profiled the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, who, musing upon her mother’s lack of interest, noted: “No one took any notice of me except Nanny” (Lyall, 2010).

Because she is the person who permits the mother to conduct a life outside of the home, where her maternal identity is not central to her daily pursuits, the nanny is at risk of being relegated to function as a kind of negative afterimage of the missing mother; such a superimposition can happen in the mind of the mother, the child, or the
nanny herself. Depending on a mother's awareness of what she feels about leaving her children and what she wants from or thinks about (or cannot let herself think about) the one who will temporarily stand in her shoes (one adult patient had a nanny who would literally wear her shoes when she was at work!), the nanny can either amplify and underscore good caretaking or can embody or enact negative parental representations. As previously illustrated, when a woman is unaware of the huge step she is taking when she hires another to care for her children, the situation has tremendous potential for eliciting splitting, guilt, and enactment.

This can happen in various ways. On the one hand, a particular nanny may be chosen not for her capacity to care for and protect, but precisely because her lack of experience or characterologic difficulties can be enlisted to embody split off aspects of maternal guilt and ambivalence. The child in turn can then act out against the nanny, keeping the mother idealized and protected from his/her aggression. In turn, the mother can displace or project hatred of the child onto a nanny whose role and position she can then devalue. Any nanny can become a target for the mother's feelings of hostility toward her child, but a poorly qualified one can be a prime mover of reenactment.

A mother's denial of her own needs for relief from her child, as well as shame related to murderous wishes or "hate" toward that child may lead her to seek out child care that is under par or puts her child at actual risk. If a mother does not feel entitled to ask for help or to admit her ambivalence about the demands of caring for young children, she may end up like the well-known novelist who described leaving her first child with a seemingly kindly stranger that she happened to meet at a supermarket.

It was around this time, pushing my grocery cart through the Grand Union with Audrey in her backpack, that a woman happened to stop me in the produce aisle to admire my baby... "You look like you could use a break," she said. "You better take care of yourself, or you won't be any good for this precious baby of yours." Five minutes later, I was in the checkout line... "I know this sounds crazy," I said. "But would you ever consider just... I don't know... taking her for a few hours sometime?"... I had never left my daughter with anyone before (Davis and Hyams, 2006, pp. 65–66).

One can see in this example how a mother's unexamined conflicts, in the context of an increasingly desperate need for time to herself, resulted in a rash decision to leave her child in the care of the first person who offered to assist. Spending all day in the company of very young
children can drive many to at least consider such a measure, particularly without recognition of the need for assistance. With a history of splits in self and object representations pertaining to the care of children, mothers like the ones described previously are at risk for making serious errors in judgment. Without the self-awareness or sociocultural permission to understand how much a parent normally needs relief, a mother may succumb to accepting something that is less than developmentally or emotionally adequate for her child. Parenting can be overwhelming, but even more so if one cannot admit that to oneself. A nanny is at risk for becoming an accomplice in a devil’s pact when a mother’s guilt over wishing to temporarily flee her child feels unacceptable.

Conflicts about hiring someone else to pick up the less-desirable aspects of daily care may lead a mother to accept or rationalize away less than ideal behavior in her nanny or to choose a person who is not suited to provide child care. A mother in my practice, though horrified by her nanny’s threats that her three-year-old son would have his penis “cut off” if he did not aim for the toilet, rationalized this castration threat with the idea that “that’s how they do it in her culture.” She felt too intimidated to intervene, particularly since she felt squeamish about dealing with toilet training. Another patient is aware that her nanny speaks more on her cell phone than to her child, such that the child is now able to do a perfect imitation of a one-way conversation, but she denies that this behavior could be problematic for her daughter. In both of these instances, neither mother felt empowered to use her better judgment, fearing that if she did speak up on her child’s behalf, she would lose the only help she could get.

When mothers elect or are required to go to work, they are not only leaving behind the more enjoyable side of being with their children, but are also outsourcing more difficult aspects of the daily grind. Children tend (if not intimidated by adults or not temperamentally mild mannered) to often be uncooperative, uncivilized, demanding, messy, strong willed, and not terribly pliable in the face of their own strong wishes and desires. Parents who are unprepared for the realities of the parenting endeavor are often blindsided by how stressful it can be. Who in their heart of hearts would not need some relief from the day-in-day-out intensity of caring for a being who is both highly vulnerable and equally demanding?

Once they are no longer solely responsible for the more-difficult aspects of child rearing, mothers may develop unrealistic fantasies of what the nanny is there for. Though clearly this goes with the territory for all parents, nannies who spend long hours with their charges sometimes are given the lion’s share of the least-palatable aspects of
child rearing: the bodily demands, the effluvia, children’s will to power, not to mention the challenges of getting them to obey, to abide by the social contract, as well as to say please and thank you and to eat their vegetables. The nanny may sometimes be expected to lead the child out of a state of nature and narcissism, when this is the hardest thing for parents themselves to do. Without sufficient thought and reflection by the parent, an inexperienced or unqualified caregiver can be drafted into functioning as a kind of wished-for “enforcer” for an ambitious or idealized agenda. It then becomes the nanny’s unspoken role to pick up the more disagreeable facets of parenting. Children are frequently noncompliant, rarely “easy,” as one might have fantasized. Outside of the day-to-day fray, children may seem more like little angels, especially when one has relegated the more unpleasant aspects of child care to another person. For some parents who have trouble acknowledging their own and their children’s human limitations, the nanny can become the one who is held accountable for the “failures,” while the “successes” can feel like the mother’s domain.

Freud suggested that the nanny was an unconscious stand-in for the more superior mother imago. As has been demonstrated in some of the above examples, the obverse seems to be closer to clinically observed phenomena. The nanny’s position of being in between child and parent puts her at risk for being consigned to hostile and disavowed self and object representations. If a mother has trouble facing the fact that she needs respite, she may imbue the woman she hires to fill in for herself with warded-off projections culled from hateful and hated aspects of herself and of her child.

A nanny’s presence certainly means that a mother needs help and confirms the truth that it is indeed difficult to work and parent at the same time. The task of raising children can be tedious, taxing, exhausting, and can exert a regressive pull upon adult caretakers. Though most parents intuitively know or come to recognize the psychological reality of the above propositions, it is easy to lose sight of them. If a parent is not mindful, the nanny can become the placeholder for the mother’s split-off and intolerable fantasies of herself and her child. Perhaps for this reason, there may be internal pressure to deny or render invisible the very individual one has sought out to pick up the emotional slack or to be there when one is not. The nanny thus tends to lurk in an undefined space between mother and child. The less this space is acknowledged, the more the nanny is at risk for becoming an invisible scrim for split-off mental contents that actually go with the territory of parenting but are painful to face.
A mother may harbor contempt for a child who cannot be a perfect self-object. Alternatively, she may disparage herself for being unable to magically transform her child into someone less emotionally demanding or may despise herself for needing to get away from the unremitting and emotionally taxing reality of early childhood. The very presence of the nanny or child-care worker may at an unconscious level symbolize a variety of things parents or mothers might prefer to deny about themselves, their child, and their relationship to that child. As Almond notes, “it is much easier to idealize motherhood when someone else is doing the lion’s share of childcare” (2010, p. 5). She goes on to say that a kind of idealized notion of the mother/child bond may have evolved particularly in upper- and upper-middle class families whose socioeconomic status allowed for women of a different class background to be hired. On the one hand, these women are expected to perform significant aspects of a parent’s job, but on the other hand, they are expected to remain background figures, whose presence and necessity can be conveniently overlooked. This relegation of the nanny to second-class or even invisible status can in turn be rationalized by class and power differences between the caretaker and the one who hires her.

Sometimes the lack of recognition of the caregiver can fall under the radar of commonly accepted behavior between classes and even look “normal” within that social context. For example, rather than the nanny being treated as a respected individual in her own right, she may be underpaid or indifferently treated. Families may need to deny their enormous need for assistance by refusing to acknowledge the nanny’s role or her individual humanity. In some upper-middle-class communities, individual items of a young child’s wardrobe might cost more than a nanny’s weekly salary, potentially encoding a message that a nanny’s services could be worth less or financially trumped by material possessions. Another complex element is the nanny’s own life circumstances. Some nannies themselves have children that they must find care for in order to care for others’ children, or may even have left children behind in another country. In the latter situation, a nanny may be grappling with the grief of not being able to see her own children at all. Thus, some mothers and nannies can have intersecting conflicts about leaving children and working, which, if not referenced, can lead to a hall of mirrors involving unresolved guilt about caregiving. Lack of empathy on the part of mothers for their caregivers’ complex reactions to not being present for the rearing of their own children can be a serious problem. An example of this occurred in one family, who, when on vacation with their children, required that the nanny spend full days
in their apartment watering their plants and walking their dogs rather than allow her the opportunity to spend time with her own child.

Given that there are frequently cultural, educational, socioeconomic, and power differences between mother and nanny and that a child’s welfare could be at stake without clear mutual expectations, a child’s physical and emotional safety should be agreed upon as the top priority at all times. A mother should create clear guidelines for this, and the nanny should be able to sign off on them. The existence of devices such as the “Nanny Cam” (intended to spy on nannies) suggests an almost absurd contradiction. If one has hired someone to care for one’s child, how could one mistrust her so much that she needs to be spied upon? Has relying upon the basics of “mother’s intuition” become so outdated that technology must be purchased in order to affirm (or disconfirm) that one’s child is safe? Though it is inevitable in the world we live in that there will be differences of all sorts between oneself and one’s nanny, surely it is not “rocket science” to figure out whether an adult who is necessarily in loco parentis is at least capable of keeping our baby alive and well. Another patient who lived in the suburbs did not know that her very young nanny was driving her children hundreds of miles each month to visit her own friends in distant towns, until she started to notice the gas gauge. This mother had observed many “soft signs” of the nanny’s immaturity and irresponsibility but chose to disregard them because she was so busy that she felt she could not “afford” to commence the process of trying to find someone else. It should be noted that this woman had had a psychotic mother who had never received psychiatric treatment due to an unspoken pact of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” This vignette highlights how the surface difficulty in choosing an adequate caregiver may have more to do with the deeper problem of the mother’s own dynamic conflicts than it has to do with the scarcity of adults who know how to keep a child safe. If we cannot imagine what is happening with our children and their caregivers in our absence (such that we need to have hidden cameras to confirm what we already fear), our absence becomes not only physical but psychological as well.

Dynamic conflicts within a mother may also play out in the arena of arranging an appropriate fee schedule. As the culture of nannies is often comprised of women of color and almost always of women from a different socioeconomic class, latent racist and elitist attitudes may be revealed in a familial atmosphere of entitlement or in fees that are substandard. A mother’s low self-esteem may also show itself in her overt or subtle devaluation of the nanny in this way. In addition, if the nanny’s financial and socioeconomic status is unstable and the mother is aware of this aspect of her personal life, this may be leveraged (either
consciously or unconsciously) to abuse the power differential between them. Retaliation by the nanny may come at the expense of the children's care. The significance of a mutually reinforcing system of support between nanny and mother is critical in this delicate arrangement. This cycle of mutual but realistic support can only be beneficial to the child.

In their book, Cancelmo and Bandini (1999) conclude that the most successful child-care partnerships are ones in which there is good communication and mutual respect, which can only come in the context of insight and self-reflection about the complexity of the nanny's role.

I will now turn to the children's classic *Mary Poppins* as an extended metaphor upon which to ground the previous clinical observations, since it seems that this fanciful and long-lasting cultural artifact may provide some insight into the place of nannies and caregivers in our minds and in our work. The book is quirky and unusual, readily striking a symbolically meaningful chord for the psychoanalytically informed reader, as well as for the parents and children who have enjoyed the book for generations. *Mary Poppins* provides a fascinating lens through which to contemplate the role of the nanny. This eponymous nanny's iconic status may have been enhanced by her “Disneyification,” but there is no question that the figure of this dour and mysterious character has gained a foothold in the popular imagination because of qualities that have made her name synonymous with the nannying enterprise in general. It was not for nothing that Walt Disney chose this particular book for a movie that went on to be wildly successful.

Though the Disney version of *Mary Poppins* gave lip service to the idea that Mary Poppins was a kind of formidable force in the Banks family, those who recall the film can scarcely distinguish Julie Andrews’s pseudostrict Mary Poppins from her more saccharine portrayal of Maria von Trapp. For some, these film roles may even tend to run together in recollection. The “real” Mary Poppins, as portrayed in the original book, was quite another story. In fact, the author, P. L. Travers (aka Helen Goff) was quite dismayed by the commercialization of her legendary heroine (Flanagan, 2005). In creating the character of Mary Poppins, Travers inadvertently came up with an almost universal imago that somehow “clicked” in the popular imagination. The Disney version, though it surely took hold, does not do justice to the more enigmatic character portrayed in the original work. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about the literary Mary Poppins. She is taciturn, strict, mysterious, and extraordinarily compelling to the parents and children alike in the Banks family.

As distinguished from nannies in many real-life scenarios, Mary Poppins has status and is treated with awe and respect by all who deal with
her. Her magical capabilities give the story its raison d’être. If we use this children’s classic as a metaphor that takes as its premise the power of the nanny’s position, *Mary Poppins* illuminates much about the dramas of the nursery realm and the importance of those women whose primary role is to oversee it. When Mary Poppins arrives at the home of the Banks family, after the abrupt departure of her predecessor, she is first not even seen as a person but as an amorphous “shape”—a veritable force of nature (fig. 1).

As soon as the shape was inside the gate the wind seemed to catch her up into the air and fling her at the house. It was as though it had flung her first at the gate, waited for her to open it, and then had lifted and thrown her, bag and all, at the front door. The watching children heard a terrific bang, and as she landed the whole house shook (Travers, 1934/1997, p. 6).

Such is the potential impact of the nanny, even before she has crossed the threshold. Of course this makes sense. From a child’s point of view (as well as a mother’s) the nanny’s arrival must be conceived of as a huge event, destined to have some kind of impact on the life of the family, potentially positive or negative. It is unlikely that the hiring of
a new and unknown adult to care for a child is ever neutral. So aside from the question of the personhood, as it were, of the caregiver, one must understand the powerful effect of anyone who steps into the role of the nanny, marking her instantly as a potential repository for splits and projections from mother and child alike.

Interestingly Mary Poppins is always referred to by her full name, in contrast to many real-life employees, whose charges themselves are frequently unaware of their caregivers’ surnames. Travers captured the central paradox of the nanny. She is (or should be) deputized and entrusted to carry out the mission of caring for the safety and welfare of small children, with its attendant complexities and strong emotions. On the other hand, the nanny is not a mother, and in many instances arrives as a mysterious stranger. This alien figure who comes to assist may elicit anxieties associated first and foremost with the unbidden emotions inevitably awakened in parents by their small children's emotional intensity and can easily become the target for problematic attributions.

Mary Poppins flies in on the wind at the very moment when the Banks family has been left by their prior nanny and is clearly at a loss. Mary Poppins is never at a loss, and throughout the book she is depicted as unusually gifted. Almost every chapter involves this nanny’s special and privileged relationship to nature, the sky, to the passage of time, and to animals. Though she hardly comes across as a “baby whisperer,” Mary Poppins seems to possess a deep wisdom about children and their development. She is an unusual character for children’s literature due to her inscrutability and her lack of sentimentality. Her adventures are obscure and surprising. She has a foot in the world of humans and another in the animal kingdom. She can time-travel, fly with the wind, levitate, circumnavigate the globe, and come back in time for tea. She can quite literally add stars to the firmament and makes nothing of it. She is at once modest but also very pleased with herself. She exposes the children she cares for to wonders and excitement but never divulges her secrets. They love Mary Poppins and never cross her. Her verbal communications are kept to a minimum, but her wisdom and understanding of the natural world are unrivaled. Animals, like children, revere Mary Poppins for her privileged ability to communicate with them and contain them. She has a special link to the nonverbal world and can understand the utterances of babies and animals. In her clipped and mysterious style, she seems to have a direct line into the more fundamental and primitive domains of nature, animals, and time. She does not rely only on the spoken word to communicate her thoughts, nor does spoken language alone seem sufficient to express what she understands about the world of children and their inner workings.
In one chapter, Mary Poppins is given a nocturnal celebration by all the animals in the zoo who celebrate her birthday. Led by the most-fearsome and phallic-looking creatures in the zoo—the lion and the giant snake—all the zoo’s inhabitants encircle Mary Poppins to celebrate her special powers and fame (fig. 2).

Birds and animals were now swaying together, closely encircling Mary Poppins, who was rocking lightly from side to side. Backwards and forwards went the swaying crowd, keeping time together, swaying like the pendulum of a clock. Even the trees were bending and lifting gently, and the moon seemed to be rocking in the sky as a ship rocks on the sea (Travers, 1934/1997, p. 175).

Though the Banks children are duly obedient, they also are delighted by the new addition to their family and the aura of magical competence and adventure that Mary Poppins always exudes. Their fascination and
awe are exemplified in the passage in which she unpacks what seems to be an empty carpetbag, which is the consummate symbol of her ineffable allure and self-sufficiency. She came prepared.

“Why,” said Jane “there’s nothing in it!”

“What do you mean—nothing?” demanded Mary Poppins, drawing herself up and looking as though she had been insulted. “Nothing in it, did you say?”

And with that she took out from the empty bag a starched white apron and tied it round her waist. Next she unpacked a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a toothbrush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding armchair and a box of throat lozenges (p. 11).

Mary Poppins’s famous medicine was also contained in the carpetbag. It was unclear what exactly the medicine was for, but in the passage, we see that it had different tastes for each one who had it, thus confirming the nanny’s role as the overseer of the transitional domain of reality and fantasy that young children typically inhabit. The nanny, by her very placement in the nursery, becomes the one who might have to discern children’s needs intuitively. To one child, this medicine tasted as if it were “strawberry ice,” though it became “lime-juice cordial” for another, and for the babies of the family clearly tasted of “milk” (p. 12). A crimson fluid that could bring to mind blood or the essence of life, this medicine was at once mysterious and tailor-made to suit each child’s developmental level and to mesh with his or her personal fantasy life. Mary Poppins came equipped to provide her charges with what they needed, even when they did not know they needed it! By insisting that the children swallow a medicine that can transform itself in accord with the swallower’s needs and preferences, Mary Poppins seems to demonstrate her fundamental comprehension of her own transitional status, as well as her potential to be a transferential object. Though she seems to know a tremendous amount about caring for children and has unwavering confidence in her own abilities, Mary Poppins communicates little of her knowledge directly. Like an analyst aware of being a portal for transference both positive and negative, she is comfortable being a blank screen (fig. 3). “Nobody ever knew what Mary Poppins felt . . . for Mary Poppins never told anybody anything” (p. 15).

Characteristically, Mary Poppins conveyed a deep and yet matter-of-fact understanding of the nonverbal realm of early childhood, as demonstrated by her capacity to understand and converse with babies, sunbeams, birds, and animals, clearly at home in the animistic landscape of early childhood. As one of her youngest charges, a baby named John, says in conversation with the bird sitting on his windowsill:
Fig. 3. Mary Poppins has confidence in herself.

“Grown-ups . . . don’t understand a single thing we say. But, worse than that, they don’t understand what other things say. [They] see[m] not to know that the Starling . . . speaks exactly the same language as we do. Of course, one doesn’t expect Mother and Father to know about it— they don’t know anything, though they are such darlings . . .” “They did once,” said Mary Poppins . . . “And what the trees say and the language of the sunlight and the stars—of course they did! Once,” said Mary Poppins (pp. 140–41).

She explains that all adults suffer with amnesia with regard to their childhood affinities with the natural world. Mary Poppins is not one of those regular adults. She retains her original connection to early development and nature.

“There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one [says the bird sitting on the window]—except, of course, Her,” and he jerked his head over his shoulder at Mary Poppins.

“But why can she remember . . .?” asked John.

“A-a-a-a-h! She’s different. She’s the Great Exception” (p. 142).

If the iconic literary nanny is the only adult in the household that retains that primal connection, we start to have a sense of why the nanny role could be such a profound and thus a threatening one. The person
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who spends all day with children optimally should be one whose skills include an intuitive understanding of development and nonverbal communication. Would that all nannies, not to mention parents, could draw upon that elusive link to the nonverbal domain of early childhood. Children are, after all, our former secret selves, but “childhood amnesia” causes us to forget; they are representatives of the inevitable passage of time and the fluctuations of human development, always close to the body, the impulses, and nature. We resist knowing about the nanny when we resist our identification with this primordial aspect of childhood.

Mary Poppins is proudly the keeper of that privileged realm and its secrets. In fact any adult who is deputized to spend all day with a primary mission to care for children cannot help but be privy to the inner sanctum of childhood. Despite her deceptively poker-faced reserve, Mary Poppins is plugged into what children think and need. Oddly, parents do not always recognize the importance of hiring someone who is adept and comfortable with children to care for their children. This does not necessarily mean that they must find a caregiver who is educated or has been to nanny school (as is often the case in present-day England). A nanny should be chosen for her common-sense connection to and identification with the world of childhood. How strange that parents do not always know how to find the right person and may make bad choices based on their own histories of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment. Without experience, skill, intuition, as well as the vital factor of parental support, a nanny will not function optimally and the children in her care will languish. As has been argued, this is not always the nanny’s fault. Women without training, sometimes even those about whom parents know almost nothing, are consigned without preparation to enter what should be an almost sacred domain that requires much sensitivity. What’s more, aside from the baseline vulnerability that is implicit in the status of being a child, children who are left with unfamiliar adults can be all the more vulnerable.

Though Mary Poppins is a total stranger who flies in on the wind, at another level she has a designated place in society. Given that the setting is Edwardian England, there was less cultural guilt and ambivalence about a mother needing help, and the nanny was often a respected and sometimes formidable presence in a household. On the other hand, the concept of what any stranger might mean for children is one for all parents to consider. Stranger anxiety goes hand in hand with the development of object constancy and is a harbinger of the emergence of attachment. As we have seen from the famous Ainsworth Strange Situation paradigm, secure babies will be more inclined to trust the “stranger” as long as the stranger has the mother’s seal of approval; this capacity to
Fig. 4. The children appreciate being deeply understood.

trust presumably reflects qualities that the mother has already instantiated in her child. Mary Poppins is not exactly warm, but she “gets it” about children’s minds; as those of us who work with children know, almost all children appreciate being deeply understood (fig. 4).

Children welcome having their primitive impulses contained, and Mary Poppins was a master at the art of such containment. When one of her charges, Michael, wakes up on “the wrong side of the bed,” reveling in a wish to be naughty, no one but Mary Poppins can handle him. When Michael aggressively antagonizes and pushes Ellen, the housemaid, telling her that he “meant to,” Ellen responds, “you’re a very bad heathen boy, and I’ll tell your Ma, so I will” (p. 83). When he kicks the cook (fig. 5) and is chastened by his mother and made to feel guilty, Michael responds, “But I’m not sorry. I’m glad” (p. 83). The child goes on a tear, partly emboldened by the adults’ psychologically unsophisticated approach to his aggression. “The hot, heavy feeling inside him made him do the most awful things, and as soon as he’d done them he felt extraordinarily pleased . . .” (p. 83). He enjoys his badness and is angry at the adults who are pious in the face of his ruthlessness.

Mary Poppins does not tolerate his unbridled aggression and quickly puts him in his place, but she also distracts him by directing him to a magical compass, which then guides them on a trip around the world.
She takes them first to the North Pole, where they meet up with a polar bear who hugs Mary Poppins as an old friend; then she takes him to a jungle where a macaw asks her to sit on its eggs: “If you can look after all those creatures [the children] . . . you can keep two small eggs warm” (p. 92). Next she takes him to a giant panda’s habitat, where she is again greeted familiarly: “Oh, it’s you, my dear girl” (pp. 93–94). Finally they meet up with a mother dolphin, who also welcomes her as a trusted friend: “Well, of all people, it’s Mary Poppins!” (p. 95). Mary Poppins has an inimitable ability to contain the wild things in children’s minds and is as unafraid of them as she is of these undomesticated animals. She is completely at home with all living things and the trusted confidante and valued visitor of creatures seemingly fearsome and terrifying. She stands up to them, holds her own, and knows just what to do, just as she does with Michael’s aggression. Adults who are comfortable with children’s aggression and know how to handle it are adults with whom children feel safe. A nanny (or a parent) who takes a child’s aggression personally or moralistically may only amplify the outburst. A nanny who would be offended by a child saying “go away, you are not my mother” would be like the analyst who does not understand that she will be the receptacle for her patients’ projections. One of Mary Poppins’ great strengths is that she does not take projections too seriously, finding them “all in a day’s work.” She has a separate self and good self-esteem, thus is not undone by Michael’s impossible behavior. Children’s ruthlessness goes with the territory of child rearing but many adults are
uneasy with it. They either intimidate children or are intimidated by them. Mary Poppins does neither. She does not need to, since she has the compass and knows which way the wind is blowing!

When we do not recognize the significance of fine-tuning situations of hired care, we fail to see what children need to grow. As we know from Selma Fraiberg, Edna Edelson, and Vivian Shapiro’s classic paper “Ghosts in the Nursery” (1976), intergenerational “ghosts” tend to haunt the endeavor of child rearing when parents have not fully understood how easily small children can arouse powerful affects within them and reawaken their own past. Without adequate support, parents can become very undone, even in the most privileged of circumstances, since children inevitably evoke powerful emotions. A nanny can afford a parent freedom, share expertise, and provide relief to overwhelmed, inexperienced, or overworked parents. On the other hand, a nanny can represent aspects of the parent or the child that are difficult to contend with. Furthermore, she may herself have her own ghosts or limitations that can make her prone to falling prey to projections and misattributions from parent and child alike.

A nanny whose self-esteem is too vulnerable or who is not supported in her role may not be able to withstand children’s ambivalence. A mother who is insecure may not be able to tolerate her child’s attachment to her nanny. When a mother leaves, the person who is her substitute must be able to contain aggression, understand development, promote a child’s need to play, and comprehend the provisional nature of her role. Unlike the father, the nanny represents the child, the mother, and the absence of the mother. This is a lot to ask of any one individual, but the role of the nanny will necessarily channel the aura of “the extended family space.” If that space is split and divided, the nanny will be vulnerable to representing those splits. Like the Banks family, we must understand how important it is to know when we need help and not underestimate the impact of anyone that we bring into a family. If not mindful, we can court disaster if those proximal to our children cannot take proper care of them, while we can enhance their life experience when we engage those who can.

The nanny is a screen, a scrim, a placeholder, but a real person as well. Like the analyst who is entrusted with safeguarding the analysand’s mind such that there is a balance between regression and growth, the nanny has an additional “real” mission. She must keep the child safe and keep the home fires burning. Mary Poppins makes the children feel safe because she can contain their aggression, balance frustration and gratification, while remaining unflappable and powerful. Because she is not the mother, a nanny, like Mary, should ideally be less prone.
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to the kind of hyperarousal that parents often fall prey to. The author of Mary Poppins knew whereof she wrote, since her actual mother was not an adequate caretaker.

The biographical data on the author of Mary Poppins, P. L. Travers, born Helen Goff, provides an interesting perspective on her interest in substitute care. She was Australian, never had children, and never had a nanny herself. She was in fact the child of a mentally ill mother and a father who died when she was seven. Her mother ran out of the home on a windy night (note the weather conditions of Mary Poppins’s surprise entrance), threatening suicide but not succeeding. This mother was subsequently institutionalized, and Goff/Travers was put into the care of a matter-of-fact but ultimately much more competent aunt (Flanagan, 2005). One might assume that whatever this aunt may have been like, her lack of mental illness, her overall presence, and her attention to the daily needs of the children she had been left to look after made her a better substitute in reality than a mentally ill parent. A fascinating side note, however, is that the book is not dedicated to the aunt who functioned something like a nanny in Travers’s own history; it is in fact dedicated to her mother. It is conceivable that Travers could preserve some good feeling about her absent parent precisely because she was able to obtain some crucial emotional support from someone else who was not her mother.

Perhaps there are clues here to the staying power of Travers’s odd literary portrait of a nanny. Children are powerful, vulnerable, time-consuming, messy, magical, and tied to the eternal cycles of life. All of these qualities obviously elicit very strong feelings in the adults who care for them. It is incumbent upon parents to understand that children’s needs can be best served when the adults around them are competent and emotionally attuned. In order for an adult to care for a child, he or she must care for herself or himself and also “get” the power of their position, as well as “get” the power of the child. Such an individual should, like a good parent, be attentive to phases and stages of development, as well as be sensitive to the inevitable currents of attachment, separation, and individuation. The nanny may in fact leave the home where she has been employed, but as long as her presence always carried the imprimatur of love and care, her departure is not in fact the same as the mother’s. Even Mary Poppins’s name could be interpreted as a pun on the concept that it may be a nanny’s role to “pop in” but not necessarily to stay forever. Like a parent, ultimately, a nanny can be an agent of individuation. Further, a nanny who can come and go and will eventually leave in good standing can also signify the trajectory of a healthy separate self (fig. 6).
Fig. 6. Good-bye, Mary Poppins.

Fig. 7. Gone with the wind.
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The nanny’s fate is not unlike that of the analyst whose true role maps out healthy developmental unfolding. Mary Poppins embodies much that is prescriptive about the way a nanny can function in a family: as the mother’s emissary, as the child’s protector (not overidentified with either but equidistant between the two), but also as herself, her own separate and inimitable person. She arrives when she is needed and leaves when her job is done (fig. 7). These are the essential ingredients of Mary Poppins’s magic medicine and the timeless contents of her carpetbag of tricks.

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