

REFERENCE POINTS ON SELF-OBSERVATION

Ioan Enache¹

¹Association of Integrative Research, Counselling and Psychotherapy, Timisoara; Curative Pedagogic Centre of Simeria, Romania

Corresponding author: Ioan Enache, enaioan62ie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Processes of self-consciousness and self-observation are considered to be specific characteristics of a human being, and their way of manifesting have always been analysed by philosophers, psychologists, researchers and practitioners. Even from ancient times, people have been looking for ways to achieve a higher comprehensive level regarding their Self and to become more aware of what they are thinking, feeling and manifesting, in order to help them improve their life. The hypothesis of this study implies the fact that self-observation is an inherent factor in the process of personal development and also extremely important in becoming a psychotherapist. The objective of this paper is to present some of the main components of self-reflection, as well as their role and effect on interpersonal relationships. From a psychotherapeutic point of view, the aspects of self-reflection are actually some of the therapist's qualities that need to be developed and practiced through professional training.

KEYWORDS: Self, empathy, mindfulness, eco-system, ego-system.

1. INTRODUCTION. SELF-OBSERVATION AND THE SELF

Self-awareness methods have long been a primary focus of studies in the field of psychology. Although none of these theories is particularly representative for discovering one's personality at a deeper level; these underline the potential of introspection and self-observation in order to improve self-knowledge. The most important role of the process of introspection is that the Ego represents the best source of information about a person (Pronin et al, 2002). However, there is ambiguous empirical evidence in favour of self-reflection as a way to self-knowledge.

A question arising from the information written above is whether an individual can learn more about his personality through self-reflection. In some cases, the answer is positive. For example, a study made by Sedikides (2007), found that people who have the opportunity of making an introspection assess themselves less positively than those who do not self-analyse, this leading to the idea that introspection can reduce the degree of subjectivity, at least for those people who tend to improve their perception of

themselves (Sedikides, 2007, as cited in Forgas et al, 2009). Another discovery is related to the fact that cognitive acquisition may lead the individual to develop an increased self-awareness. These studies were similar to other research showing that the results regarding self-adjustment resources indicate positive descriptions of oneself (Paulhus and Levitt, 1987). As a consequence, it can be stated that introspection, together with working to achieve one's full potential and making cognitive acquisitions can lead to positive views about oneself.

Other studies, however, speak about the fact that self-analysing one's feelings can prevent him from having an objective opinion because the situation itself implicitly demonstrates a degree of subjectivity, leading to the idea that self-reflection alone may not be enough for increasing self-knowledge (Forgas et al, 2009). In spite of that, Pronin sustains that introspection can be useful when individuals focus more on detailed aspects of their Self, paying attention also on the pitfalls and prejudices associated with it (Pronin, 2002). Many of published works indicate that one of the main obstacles standing in the way of a proper self-reflection is that people tend to focus more on their thoughts and feelings, rather than on behaviour. Another issue related to the process of self-observation refers again to subjectivity regarding the process of reading and interpreting the messages provided by an individual's body, given the difficulty of analysing oneself from another's perspective. Consequently, even if a person tries very hard to observe every characteristic of one's physical appearance, there will always be certain features that are impossible to notice (Pronin, 2002).

This is the reason why Vazire speaks about a different perspective regarding a more direct and objective method that can be used in the process of self-observation. His writings include the idea of the individuals watching some videos of themselves as part of the self-analysing process, this aiming to prove that seeing one's behaviour from the outside can lead to a better understanding of oneself because

this method offers the chance of an outer perspective and not just an inner view. One of the obtained results when applying this technique is the improvement of an individual's awareness regarding his own thoughts, feelings, personality traits or characteristics and also the unique way these affect one's external manifestation which composes and shapes a stable behaviour. Besides this personal analysis of the Self, another thing that matters is the impression an individual makes on others, especially on people who are part of his immediate environment. Despite these promising findings, the author mentions that in most cases people are not capable of having an objective view or do not know how to remove the subjective components in order to obtain a less biased analysis, and even if they do find a viable method to do so, studies have proven that their effectiveness lasts no more than a few days due to the dynamics of the individual's mind, actions and environment (Vazire, 2010).

When referring to the "Self" concept, authors usually do not see it as a singular indivisible cognitive component, but as a complex structure composed of three essential parts: the individual Self, the relational Self and the collective Self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

First of all, the individual Self is composed of a person's specific characteristics, like personality traits, objectives and plans for the future, interests and preferences, actions which describe a certain behaviour, all of these emphasising the person's uniqueness which is not influenced by being part of a relationship or membership. Second, the relational Self refers to the individual's interpersonal relationships, especially to the roles and other related aspects, also demonstrating the importance of attachment in one's life. Third, the collective Self includes features associated with the fact of belonging to a group, these features being also related to the relationship with other members inside the group as well as with the intergroup, where borders are impenetrable from the outside groups (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

Given the fact that many individuals strive to achieve the goals they have set regarding their own personal development, each of these components of the Self is important for them in the process of self-knowledge, offering a description of the same unique person from three different, yet related, perspectives. Another aspect to consider when speaking about these components refers to their relatively dynamic characteristic explained by the fact that if the external circumstances change, so does the internal meaning or significance.

2. DERIVED COMPONENTS OF SELF-OBSERVATION

The need of having the ability of introspection and comprehension of one's internal processes has been highlighted by the old Buddhist tradition, as well as by the ancient Greek philosophy. The Buddhist spiritual path has always had the aim of leading to a complete liberation from suffering, but achieving this ideal goal requires mastering the internal processes and their influence on the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions. Because of its complexity, this path requires essential qualities like patience, dedication, perseverance, openness, creativity, kindness, calmness, acceptance, compassion and forgiveness, these being achieved over the extent of time and after a lot of practice. From this point of view, it is important to understand that all things in this Universe are dynamic, and therefore temporary, this leading to the conclusion that any kind of attachment to an object that can change its characteristics or disappear, consequently creates distress. The answer that everyone is looking for, the key to happiness, can be found only by self-evaluation which makes the individual more aware and more able to free himself of the illusory object attachment. This self-awareness is often associated with an attitude of mindfulness, a term used to describe how to perceive and act "in the here and now" revealing a higher level of consciousness.

William James is among the first scientists to raise the question of self-observation in modern psychology, writing about the distinction of personal experience and the internal observer (1890). Wundt considers introspection as a narrow research method, limited by consciousness and distorted because of the attachment between subject and object, therefore not being suitable for validation as a scientific method (James, 1980, as cited in Falkenström et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the internal perception is thought to be more objective and connected to the underlayer of the individual's unique experience, but at the same time similar to the external perception, which makes it more suitable to use for scientific research especially regarding subjects who have had a special training and who can self-validate their own cognitions. Sigmund Freud is generally seen as the first Western scholar who has systematically applied self-observation in order to generate self-awareness and self-knowledge. Thus, in "The Interpretation of Dreams", even if Freud has concentrated on interpreting his own dreams, he has offered a useful technical model for next generations of psychoanalysts to promote a self-observation as a suitable method for their patients or even for

themselves. On the same context, Etchegoyen (1991) notes that the term “insight” has been rarely used by Freud himself because it is not a German word, being used more frequently by other English-speaking analysts in Europe and America. However, its actual use is in accordance with Freud's own theories. In the first topographical model, the goal of psychoanalysis was defined as “making the unconscious conscious”, idiom which clearly indicates the importance of the insight in psychotherapy. Later when the structural model is introduced, the purpose of the analytic treatment is redefined by the famous statement “where the Id was, there the Ego shall be” (Freud, 1933). Freud is not the only one interested in the importance of internal perception, his followers like Ferenczi, have also avoided using the word “Einsicht” (ie “insight”), preferring “Selbstbeobachtung” instead, which translates in English as “self-reflection” or “self-observation” (Falkenström et al., 2007).

An article written by Sterba (1934) describes how the patients following the psychoanalytic treatment are expected to develop a therapeutic Ego rupture, resulting in one side of the Self based on experience and another side based on observation. This separation is improved by identifying with the therapist's analysis function, the article not only pointing out the importance of acquiring self-related knowledge, but also establishing the capability to observe the Self. In the early phases of psychoanalysis, the ability to observe the Self has been considered an essential criterion for starting the therapeutic process, while in his article, Sterba emphasizes the possibility that this self-observation capability may actually develop during therapy, being seen as a result of the working alliance.

As Freud has noted towards the end of his rewarding career, self-analysis can be necessary throughout life, not only for avoiding pathology, but also for maintaining a satisfactory life quality. This is due to the fact that new experiences and new phases of development always bring new opportunities of self-actualization, this resulting in a continuous need for self-observation and self-analysis in order to deal with these situations. Regarding the written above, Bion (1962) describes the parental function of “retention” as being imperative for the development of child's capacity to understand the mental states of others. The containment process means that the child receives and translates emotional expressions into meaningful information that are sent back to him. As a consequence, due to the influence of such repeated cycles, the child will internalize this capacity of

translating his first impression into meaningful information (Falkenström et al., 2007).

In 1959, Bion also describes the disastrous consequences on the child's capacity for self-observation, when the infantile retention process has gone wrong. Using esoteric terms, Bion (1970) describes something he has called “Faith in O”. By this, he has meant openness to emotional reality of the moment, remarkably similar to the attitude seen and understood by the term “mindfulness” (Bion, as cited in Falkenström et al., 2007). Several authors have used the term “third position” to describe the state of self-observation as a means for the individual to perceive more complex interactions and patterns. Although this neutral position is a kind of a version indicating the object relations of the Ego, it is seen as the most critical factor in a moment when dysfunctions appear in the therapeutic relationship (rupture of the alliance). In such situations, the first and second positions represent the analyst and the patient's perspectives which are stuck in opposite roles, each of them reinforcing and maintaining the other. This is the typical and most common situation that takes place during alliance ruptures and also interpersonal conflicts. In order to liberate himself from this harmful process, one of the participants must take a mental and interpersonal “step towards the other side” in order to make room for reflection and self-analysis.

These relatively modern approaches indicate more situational aspects of self-observation, while older concepts seem to be clearer personality variables (traits or dimensions). Thus, in psychoanalysis, the therapeutic process is generally based on observation, listening, confrontation, clarification, interpretation and elaboration. This approach has been criticized as unscientific by researchers both inside and outside the field of psychoanalysis, being too dependent on the client's disposition and subjectivity.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-REFLECTION IN THE FIELD OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

According to Crocker and Canevello, the “ego-system” is a motivational self-centered system, where people are primarily concerned about ensuring the fulfillment of their own needs and desires (2012a). The egosystem's significant quality regarding relationships is that people strive to obtain benefits for themselves from their partners. In this system, people are not particularly concerned about the welfare of others. Consequently, when people with egotistical motivation have social relationships, they prioritize their own needs and desires, leaving the

others in the background. They behave in a very self-centred way, focusing only on what the quality of the relationship indicates about them, on how they see themselves through their own eyes and how others evaluate them. Therefore, they aim to maximize gains and minimize losses in their relationships, tending to process the results to such a degree that their personal desires must come first and need to be to their advantage and to the detriment of others (Crocker & Canevello, 2012).

In this system, the others make a difference only if they have the potential to meet or counteract one's own needs and desires. To the extent that others matter, they are regarded as a necessary obstacle to be overcome or as a means to achieve a goal. Therefore, people do not expect others to care too much for their own good, in a voluntary way and without having other hidden intentions. In addition, a particular attitude would be appealing to their relationship partners for them to intervene with third parties to help them achieve the fulfilment of certain needs or desires. Consequently, when people are driven by egotistical motivation, they try to control others through persuasion, negotiation, manipulation or intimidation (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). In interpersonal contexts, they usually have goals related to self-image, they try to convince others they have certain qualities (a necessary attitude in persuasion and manipulation) or that they don't have undesirable qualities so that others would give them what they want.

Given the fact that the events related to egosystem relationships involve the Self, the emotions felt in these relationships tend to imply a high level of arousal. Acceptance and validation from relationship partners cause self-conscious emotions such as pride, and boost self-esteem, while the rejection of criticism causes shame or humiliation. Moreover, basic emotions such as anger, fear, sadness and happiness refer only to self. Consequently, the person in the egosystem might feel anger when is treated poorly by a partner, might fear the negative judgment of the partner, might feel sadness following the loss of a partner and might also feel euphoria or joy when obtaining the desired results.

Meanwhile, egosystem relationships tend to cause ambivalent feelings. Because people in this system tend to have an egocentric opinion on relationships, it is assumed that events which are positive for someone can have negative implications for other partners in the relationship, and vice versa. Thus, egosystem relationships inherently bring people in difficult situations because even if they want results for themselves, eventually they will pay the price of

taking advantage of others. As a consequence, egosystem relationships tend to involve feelings of fear, conflict and confusion (Crocker & Canevello, 2012).

It can be stated that this type of egotistical behaviour is not completely selfish. Sometimes people sacrifice themselves or offer something to their partner. The important question is "why do they do this?". In this system, actually people do offer things and also do sacrifices, but the process is similar to a subsequent investment made to obtain something in return. They might expect their partners to do the same just like the situation when people say "I love you" to get the same words back. Or they can offer something to prevent their partner from leaving, to induce feelings of gratitude to their partner, to become indispensable to him, or can store more favours they will later use when they feel the relationship breaking down and therefore losing all the benefits.

In the egosystem, there might be a situation where people offer something but do not want their partner to do the same as they may prefer to hold a superior position in order to be seen as the good person in the relationship. Paradoxically, the egotistical motivation manifested in close relationships does not necessarily include enhanced benefits for the individual, in part because his partners seem to become aware of the selfish purposes (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Generally, the motivation of the egosystem can cause individuals to take on short-term interests in their relationships, thus seeming to not think about the long term consequences of their behaviours that are related to relationship sustainability.

On the other hand, there is also the ecosystem, the "environment" where people care about the prosperity and welfare of others in a supposedly selfless way (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Therefore, people trust that their own needs will be met in cooperation with their social environment, not as a result of an exchange of benefits or an investment, but because others care about their welfare. Consequently, they do not need to manipulate, to persuade or convince others to help them satisfy their needs and desires. At the same time, they recognize that fulfilling their own desires at the expense of others has inevitable costs in the system that eventually they will pay. Therefore they seek for ways of fulfilling their needs while collaborating with others or ways that do not harm others.

People tend to cooperate with others and to visualize the wanted results as a win-win situation, assuming that the success of one person should not diminish the benefits of others. Only because some people care about others, the process of giving something does

not necessarily have to imply a big cost in return. In this system, people feel they are a resource in relationships because they see themselves as a starting point in and also responsible for creating relationships that are good for themselves as well as for others (Crocker & Canevello, 2012).

Therefore, when people are driven by the ecosystem motivation, they take into account the needs and desires of others, and also the impact of their decisions and behaviours on individuals in the relationship. In interpersonal contexts, they usually have compassionate goals and focus on constructive support of others. Ecosystem relationships usually evoke feelings of calmness and tranquility because in the ecosystem people care about others and not just about themselves, they do not let themselves be driven by their Ego, they do not see the events and self-involvement as a measure between the value of their act and their own value. Their primary concern is not how the events in the relationship affect the fulfilment of their own needs and desires, and therefore in the ecosystem people are less likely to experience self-centred emotions such as pride, shame or humiliation.

Moreover, because people care about the welfare of others, basic emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness and happiness are more likely to be related to others. In the ecosystem, people might feel anger when a relationship partner is treated unfairly, causing fear of him being hurt, sorrow for his eventual loss, and happiness when the partner succeeds. Because people in this system tend to have a selfless view on the relationship, positive events for themselves are not alleged to having negative implications for relationship partners and vice versa. Thus, ecosystem relationships lead individuals to align with others and to prefer to cooperate than to see them as competitors.

However, people are not completely altruistic in an ecosystem, they do not show constant self-sacrifice and do not offer everything to their relationship partners. The sustainable alternative to selfishness is not the absolute altruism, but the contribution to the good of others using attitudes that are beneficial for others and for themselves. Altruism is not sustainable over time because it is bad for the Self and therefore bad for the ecosystem. It can be added that the manifested altruism or self-sacrifice often serves for selfish reasons, such as demonstrating someone's generosity, earning respect or admiration, or making others feel indebted. In turn, an excessive concern for others in relationships is often driven by the desire to boost self-esteem or by keeping others by demonstrating they are indispensable.

Again, the important question rising here is the reason why people sacrifice themselves or offer something to their partners. In the ecosystem, people give things and do sacrifices freely, being confident that their own needs will be met in cooperation with others. Although sometimes their desires can be fulfilled by their partner, they can also be satisfied in collaboration with other people in the interpersonal ecosystem. Giving does not represent a loan or an investment to get something in return from others because in the ecosystem, people do not give to cause others to do the same, as in commerce, or to keep their partner. Paradoxically, the ecosystem motivation has been found to provide increased benefits for oneself, one of the reasons being the direct benefits received and also the fact that partners seem to feel the good intentions, and as a result this makes them more predictable to offer something themselves (Crocker & Canevello, 2012).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The needs and desires of other people are just as important and valid as the needs and desires of the self. This does not mean that individuals in the ecosystem treat everyone equally, feel responsible for meeting the needs of all others, or necessarily consume significant amounts of effort, money and time to ensure that the needs of others are met. At the same time, the ecosystem does not necessarily have to lead to the idea that every member is driven by absolute selfishness or egocentrism.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, information provided in previous chapters are extremely significant. A good therapist who does not show empathy, does not have the ability of self-reflection or does not know how to stimulate the development and personal growth of his client, both in the therapeutic process and as a resource following the therapy. The way of relating to ego- and ecosystems is also a direct result of self-observation.

Over the past two decades, the principles of self-observation and locating the Self in relation to the internal and external environment have become extremely influential in Western psychology, especially as a form of stress reduction. Accordingly, the stress reduction program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn's (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, as cited in Aich, 2013) has been the first treatment using the Buddhist principles in Western terms. This therapy program remains quite close to its Buddhist roots (although it has sublimated religious and moral aspects). It consists of eight weeks of training in the process of "mindfulness" and is considered useful for solving

various problems, such as anxiety, chronic pain, sleep disorders, fatigue, etc.

As it is stated in this paper, the concept of self-observation has influenced many modern developments in clinical psychology, particularly in psychodynamic therapies. Since the nineties, new therapeutic methodologies have been developed that do not match with earlier theorems speaking about changing the individual's behaviour and thinking, but instead they are focused equally on accepting "what is". These methodologies have also defined the optimal result of treatment as psychological flexibility. In this context, psychological flexibility can be defined as the ability to not be automatically driven by mental states, but to be able to respect, accept and choose the behaviour according to the internal values. This makes behavioural theories more similar to modern psychoanalytic theories than to the classic behavioural therapy.

Drawing a conclusion, together with creating the need of a generalized awareness of the Self, a therapeutic benefit for the client can be his improved capability to see his own existence and the interaction with others from another point of view. The positivity of these visions is a product of a successful therapy. Personal development and individual psychotherapy can always be considered as means of self-knowledge for a future psychotherapist.

REFERENCES

- Aich, T.K.** (2013) Buddha philosophy and western psychology, *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, Jan; 55(Suppl 2): S165–S170. doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.105517
- Appelbaum, S.A.** (1973) *The Anatomy of Change: A Menninger Foundation Report on Testing the Effects of Psychotherapy*, Plenum Press, New York
- Crocker, J., & Canevello, A.** (2012) Consequences of self-image and compassionate goals, in P.G. Devine & A. Plant (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol 45 (pp. 229-277). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Falkenstrom, F., Grant, J., Broberg, J., Sandell, R.** (2007) Self-analysis and post-termination improvement after psychoanalysis and long-term psychotherapy, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 55 (2): 629-674
- Farber, B.A.** (1985) The genesis, development and implication of psychological mindedness in psychotherapists, *Psychotherapy*, 22, 170-177
- Forgas, J.P., Baumeister, R.F., Tice, D.M.** (2009), Psychology of Self-Regulation: Cognitive, Affective and Motivational Processes, *Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology*
- Freud, S.** (1991) *Interpretarea viselor*, Tg. Jiu, Editura Măiastra
- Etchegoyen, H.R.** (1991) *The Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, London: Karnac Books
- McCallum, M., & Piper, W.E.** (1996) Psychological mindedness. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 59(1), 48-64
- Paulhus, D.L., Graf, P., Van Selst M.** (1989), Attentional load increases the positivity of self-presentation, *Soc. Cogn.*, 7, 389-400
- Paulhus D.L., Levitt, K.** (1987), Desirable responding triggered by affect: automatic egotism?, *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.*, 52, 245-259
- Pronin, E., Lin, D.Y., Ross, L.** (2002), The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 369-381
- Safran, J.D., Muran, J.C., Eubanks-Carter, C.** (2011) Repairing alliance ruptures, In J.C. Norcross (Ed.), *Psychotherapy relationship that work*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Sedikides, C., Brewer, M.B.** (2001) *Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self*, Psychology Press, USA
- Sifneos, P.E.** (1996) Alexithymia. Past and present. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 153(7), 137-141
- Vazire, S.** (2010) Who knows what about a person? The self–other knowledge asymmetry (SOKA) model, *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.*, 98, 281-300