“Understanding the Self: 
Similarities and differences between Freudian, Object-Relations and Social 
Constructionism theories”

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of psychodynamics and their relevance to the concept of the self and examines similarities and differences between Freudian, Object Relations and Social Constructionism theories of the self. The author proposes that a unitary self is dominant in the psychoanalytic position, whereas a Social Constructionism perspective suggests the existence of a distributed self as individuals have different identities. Considering that some historical changes had an impact on the post-Freudian theories of the self, the author suggests that a unique theoretical construct of the self is not plausible, but rather a gradual and evolutionary transformation of the self might be possible.

Introduction

The origin of psychodynamics lies in neurology, psychiatry, paediatric and clinical science. The importance of early years of life for the development of the self is experienced by all human beings and it involves how, when and to what end we construct our internal representations of the external world and the creation of selfhood. Our internal world and psychic realities are our selves, the self is influenced by other people and much of the self is constructed from our internal representations of other people, relationships, aspects of people and the way we relate to us and to each other. The structure and content of the self develops during early infancy and childhood through interactions with our parental figures. In our internal world our psychic reality is the only reality that exists, which can lead us to a sense of
omnipotence, idealisations and denials. The external world and its internal representations and unconscious memories are entangled in our subjective life-experience and the way we act in the real world.

There are different levels of analysis involved in the psychological development of the self like intra-personal: cognitive processes (memory, categorisation, thinking, and feelings), motivational processes (need for control and self-esteem; interpersonal: self-presentation (nature of relationship, social interactions) as well as an understanding of society thorough cultural processes. As individuals have different subjective life-experiences. These life-experiences are influenced by our unconscious process of our internal world in which we make sense of the external reality followed by a symbolic representation of the external world.

Biology, feelings, motivation and psychological defences are some of the aspects through which we develop our unconscious and conscious representations of an external reality. Biology: the mind and the body together in which we develop a subjective experience of having a body. Our feelings and thoughts concerning body sensations and emotions is what we experience unconsciously including anxiety, anger, fantasies and sexual desires we project toward a psychoanalyst (the recipient of our anger, frustrations and projections). Motivation of human behaviour is directed towards a feeling of having control, which requires irrationality, a distorted perception of the external world related to us. We develop psychological defences to maintain our inner reality. We construct our life to defend ourselves and avoid anxiety, which can lead to feelings of disintegration, which threatens the sense of a unitary self.
Discussion

Although Freud (1921) avoided the term “self”, the concept itself is implicit in his structure theory of the ego while he ignored the existence of a conscious self. Freud viewed the structure of the ego as the result of an “identification” with a loved person. In Freud’s view the formation of the self is seen as an impersonal process based on the transformation of the “id” (the repository of instincts in particular sexual drives). He described the ego (the reality principle) and the superego (the standards and ethical values) as if they were people (the child and his parents). The superego arises from the identification with the father, taken as a model, who is punitive, loving and protective toward the ego. Freud attributed the development of the superego to the threat of punishment from the father but he never made a clear distinction between the ego and the self. His theory of the “I” (ego) can be though as a theory of the self-expressing itself through identifications with others, thus the ego is thought of as the centre of the person. In Freud’s view, the child is overwhelmed by his sexual desires acting as the primary motivator force in relating to others and forming relationships with external objects.

Freud viewed the ego (the self) as dominated by the id (the pleasure principle), which introjects into itself what is though to be good, and projecting outward (into the other person) what it judges to be bad. Freud believed that the self is idealised and that by projecting outward what it is thought to be bad the self becomes a “pleasure ego” making itself an object of love. For the pleasure-ego the external world is thought of pleasurable parts as well as bad and extraneous parts. The self is originally an “idealised self”, whereas the bad self is hated.
Freud traced the origins of idealisation to primary narcissism in which the “ego ideal” becomes the repository of this primordial narcissism. Freud believed that one loves oneself as the self approaches the perfection of the “ego ideal”. Love is contingent on perfection, but since perfection of the self is not possible, individuals seek to complete themselves by finding themselves into the beloved other. What Freud actually understood was that the ambiguity between the objectified “I” and the experiencing “I” was impossible to solve. Thus the main idea of the self is that of individuals who structure their own lives in a defensive way in order to protect a sense of wholeness. It is evident, in Freud’s description of the psychic structure of the self, that there is an unconscious misidentification with the other person (i.e. a parental figure). In other words, individuals behave as if they were the other person without awareness of their behaviour. Freud also believed that when an object has been internalised and identified with the self, the individual misidentifies with that person, thus becoming the other person.

The Object Relations school of thought derives from Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. The word “object” derives from Freud’s idea of the target, or object of the instinct. The “self” develops out of a context of relationships and is made up of internal relationships between different aspects of the self. The human being is social and our need for contact with other is of primary concern. Object Relations theorists like M. Klein (1959) but unlike Freud, described the self as a rudimentary ego already
existing from birth. In Klein’s date an integrated ego (the self) is the result of a mental process called projective identification in which the ego of the inborn infant moves from a “schizoid position” (split off of the ego in good and bad parts) to a “depressive position” (the integration of good and bad parts of the self into a unitary and mature self). According to Klein, the child’s ego protects himself by using the defence mechanisms of “splitting” (good parts of the object are separated from bad parts). Klein believed that object relations begin very early in life.

Other Object Relations theorists like Winnicott (1960) emphasised the existence of a polarity between a false and a true self. Winnicott argued that at the beginning of life the baby experiences the self as a whole entity undetached from his mother. This is what Freud called primary narcissism (self love) as opposed to object of love. Winnicott (1965) believed that the infant’s self becomes a personal self through the protective care of the “good-enough mother”, which leads to the formation of a “true self” consisting of spontaneity, a bodily self with the assurance of the continuity of being. A “false self” would emerge when the mother cannot give the baby all protection he needs, thus the false self would respond compliantly to others in order to protect the true self from non-acceptance and exploitation. Both Klein and Winnicott developed a concept of a divided and unconscious self, who may suggest that one portion of the self is unknown to the other portion of the self.

The concept of a divided self is also evident in Fairbairn’s theory of the self. Fairbairn’ (1990) theory contains a multiplicity of non-communicating selves: the
central ego, the internal “saboteur”, the rejecting object, the exiting object and so forth. In Fairbairn’s view these unintegrated aspects of the self remain unconscious.

The “central ego” (the whole and intact ego), is originally in full relationship with the mother. The central ego replicates (the self) earlier traumatic object relationships. According to Fairbairn, the individual represses his affects and impulses as intolerable and bad internalised objects, thus generating a conscious experience. The aspects of the tolerable part of the relationship with the mother is what Fairbairn called the “ideal object” connected to the “central ego” (the main part of the self). The ideal object is the way we would like others to appear to us. Thus, the central ego or ideal object is set-up in the inner relationship that we salvage from a bad experience.

Fairbairn also described the central ego as a container of two distinct elements: (1) the libidinal ego/exiting object (need) emerging from repression and from an intense dependency on the other person; (2) the anti-libidinal ego/rejecting object (anger), the aspect of the self, which is too hostile for us to acknowledge and it emerges from repression.

Fairbairn’s theory of the self rejected Freud’s instinct theory and it argued instead that the self is energised by internal relations with exiting and persecutory objects. Fairbairn viewed the structure of the self as a record of traumatic experiences representing an internalisation of relationships, whereas in Freud’s view these structures represented a mosaic of lost objects.

We must also allow the fact that what is internalised into the self may also contains elements of the parent’s unconscious attitudes regarding the child. The self may be
formed through the parents’ unconscious attitudes toward themselves and their own internalised parental objects. Thus, the child is the passive recipient of the parents’ unconscious projections. By contrast social constructionist theorists had a completely different approach to the development of the self.

The social constructionism theory described the self as a social phenomenon where a person’s definition of self is influenced and constrained by social roles, social power and social status. The self is thought of as an “identity” arising from experiences specific to us. Perhaps the best description of the self as “identity” is found in McCall and Simmon’s (1966) discussion on individuals’ motives seeking role-support. A role support is a primary confirmation of the specific content of one’s idealised imagination of the self. Since individuals are universally motivated to seek role-support, they tend to present identities that are consistent with that kind of self in order to maximise the likelihood of receiving role support. These identities inevitably would affect the self and by observing these identities that individuals project into an external world reflects an expression of the self. Social Constructionism theorists argued that the relationship between the social context and the person couldn’t be separated.

Bruner (1990), a social constructionism theorist, argued that the self must be seen as a “distributed self”, which is constantly changing. In his view the experience of being a person is that we initiate events and actions (agency). According to Bruner, the kind of person we are or we want to become is rooted in the social practices which allow us to assimilate the way of thinking from the social context in which we live.
Aspects of the social world like cultural values, beliefs, discourse and language influence our ways of thinking about ourselves. Thus, language contains words that convey cultural and social meanings that shape the child’s cognitive development, which occurs through the internalisation of dialogues (Vygotsky, 1962).

The Social Constructionism’s view of the self describes the growing child as an “emergent self” that is not completely developed at the beginning, but through interactions with the social context. Different relationships with others will develop and lead to multiple selves (the relational self). Burr (1995), a social constructionist, argued that what really constitutes a personality (the self) in a person is not within people but between them. This means that we create rather than discover ourselves. Social Constructionists argued that “true” and “false” self are inappropriate ways of thinking about ourselves; instead we have a number of selves that are equally real. For instance, Mead (1934) described human communication and role taking, (viewing oneself from the perspective of another person, and, ultimately, from the perspective of society as a whole) as essential to the development of the self. According to Mead, we first see ourselves and experience a “self” when we see ourselves from the perspective of others. In Mead’s view, the newborn baby initially is not a self. The baby begins to experience himself as an object only when it recognises that he is an object to the parents. Only through the responses of the parents the child experiences
a sense of the self. Thus, in adult life, we continue to experience ourselves indirectly by taking the attitudes of other people and of a “generalised other” toward ourselves. The generalised other reflects the child ability of organising the attitudes and perspectives of people within the whole social group. What Mead (1964) considered important is the dialogue between the “I” (spontaneous self) and the “Me” (internalised attitudes of others). For Mead, the self is a truly creature of society and it can develop only from the reactions of others.

According to social constructionists, we develop strong emotional bonds with those who satisfy our vital needs and they become our first significant others. As we mature, our needs become more diversified and our circle of contacts broadens, thus we acquire a growing number of significant others. Also, as the development of the self continues, we become aware of certain similarities between what others expect of us and how they react to us. This amalgam of perceived generalised expectations and reactions constitutes the generalised other. It is through the generalised other that we discover who we are and what is expected of us.

However, what it appears to emerge from the social constructionism and psychoanalytic school are two quite distant concepts of the “self”. The psychoanalytic approach considers the “self” as an unconscious phenomenon which underlies the subjective experience of a person and that its unconscious development occurs early in life. Kleinians, instead, believed that external objects are people representing the external reality, which is internalised by the child. Thus a distinction emerges between “other people” (objects) and the subjects (the experiencing “I”). These internal
objects and object relations seem to provide the seeds of selfhood. The Social Constructionism approach is quite similar, to a certain extent, to the psychoanalytic view of the self with respect to the incorporation of dialogues via some kind of identification with another person. This is found in the developmental theories of Mead and Vigotsky.

It appears that the psychoanalytic approach places more emphasis on pre-verbal and non-verbal modes of communications in which language is thought of as an impoverished medium failing to make up for the loss of early kinds of communications. It also emphasises emotions as an early form of thinking. By contrast, social constructionists argued how language is created throughout life by developing meanings and bringing the external reality (social context) into the internal world of a person, thus becoming a constituent of the self.

While the psychoanalytic school is concerned with how, when and what end we create our internal representations of the external world, social constructionists do not make any clear assumptions of the external world whether is “printed” in pre-existing individuals. Furthermore, the emphasis on the individual and his psychic reality is very prominent in the psychoanalytic approach, whereas the self, according to social constructionists, is the results of interactions and dialogues taking place in social settings through interactions with others.

It is evident that a unitary self is almost dominant in the psychoanalytic position, whereas the distributed self suggests that individuals have different identities (selves)
The object relations position focuses on the strength of the relations between the self and the others moving away from the Freudian’s defensive position of the self. Object relations theorists consider the self as compatible with the social constructionist position.

Mead and Vygotsky described the self as the results of interactions between the child and other people. The child together with the “other” (parents) creates the self through language, play and taking the role of others. Mead also described the developing self in three stages: (1) the preparatory stage in which the baby motivation is based on biological drives and instincts; (2) the play stage in which the baby begin to try out the attitudes of others (role-play); (3) the game stage in which the baby organises several roles in relation to themselves. Mead’s main argument is that language plays and games act as a starting point for the development of the self. By contrast, in Vigotsky’s view, children are first social before becoming individuals and their cognitive development depends on the internalisation of dialogues encountered in the external reality.

According to the Object Relations perspective, seeking relations is the main motivator of the child to relate to others (a growth of the self); whereas, the psychoanalytic position considers the sexual drive as the main motivator of the infantile “id” which interferes with the “ego” (the self).
Conclusions

What it appears to emerge from this discussion is the existence of different models of the self: which represents the idea that a unique theoretical construct of the self is not possible, but rather a gradual transformation of the self might be acceptable in theoretical terms. It may be plausible to consider that some historical changes influenced the post-Freudian’s theories of the self.

It is suggested that a selfhood that is affected by the child’s need of relating to others becomes a unitary and true self, which is modified and influenced by society with its cultural norms, dialogues and language. The result would be a social context (society), which may enable a person to internalise the external world and therefore becoming a distributed self.

References:


