

## Constructing Our Selves

Oscar Wilde said, “Be yourself! Everyone else is taken.”

*Oscar, it's complicated!*

- 1) My sense is that the central topic of our workshop over twelve years has been the evolution of the Self, the “I am that I am” self. We’ve studied this evolution phylogenetically, culturally, and epigenetically. We are ready to return to our ontogenetic development, meaning our epigenetic unfolding during childhood. In May we will review childhood development from multiple perspectives in order to try to better understand the creation of discrete self states that are discontinuous in time. One hypothesis is that infant mind states are by definition discontinuous. As the infant grows through co-constructive relational processes, consciousness creates subjective continuity over time and coherence of SELF states.
- 2) Freud, Janet, and Jung started us along this journey of exploration of subjective experience over one hundred years ago. Psychoanalytic theory using Freud’s foundational constructs of drive theory, followed by topographical and then structural theory created the best theory of mind of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exploring the average “neurotic character” with a unitary self regulated by repression was a necessary prologue to current investigations of the most complex of human subjective experiences.
- 3) Last year Ken Kaplan and David Mann renewed our appreciation of Janet and Jung’s work with traumatized patients who manifested “psychic splitting”. For Janet the idea of *disaggregation* captured the phenomenon of dissociation. For Jung the split psyche was composed of *personified autonomous complexes* (Brenner).
- 4) Currently, perspectives from many areas, including phylogenetic and ontogenetic evolution, cognitive and affective neuroscience, and neuro/psychological work creates the notion of the human *SELF* viewed as *object* in *empirical* investigation and as *subject* in all areas of *subjective experience*. Many terms have referred to this SELF, “I” self, ego/S/E/id, mental-time-states, states of mind, self states, relational self. The self states we can now study include BPO, DID, religious experiences, out-of-body experiences, hypnotic trances, and near-death experiences. All these experiences, which were beyond our radar in the last century, are now in the forefront of investigation. And they are all based upon dissociation, meaning a disconnection from a relationship to the other and from time.
- 5) The physiological evolution of the human brain and the psychological evolution of the human *self* are characterized by human *imagination* and the need to make *meaning*. Every generation in the past 50 k years has grown up imitating and then innovating. This is especially so in the last 10 k years when cultural evolution has predominated.
- 6) During the 20th century we created linear, free standing models rooted in Newtonian causality and predictability. In this century we will create models of subjective experience that are co-constructed where every interactive process is linked to others in *dynamic relationships* governed by *complex probabilities*. Nevertheless, in order to capture a process in a moment of time, reductionism is inevitable. And we may find that our therapies, from psychoanalytic free association to EMDR and hypnosis, may reach different areas of emotional and narrative memory using different pathways. We may also realize that traditional psychoanalysis does not reach all areas of the mind (p.822 Brenner, The Dissociative Character).

- 7) In the 1980's Marcel Kinsbourne pronounced the notion of a unitary SELF a myth. We have witnessed the unitary SELF evolving into a *relational* SELF that is composed of developmentally and epistemologically complex self states. If we accept that no dream can ever be conveyed to others in all its mult textured aspects, including narrative, color, texture, visuo-spatial architecture; if we accept the fundamental uniqueness and indescribability of every dream, then we must extend this uniqueness of *conscious subjective experience* to every interaction we have in relationship to *an other* and to *our selves*. We bring different relational SELF states, meaning different valences of emotion, thinking, and being into every relationship. We are too complex to ever know our selves fully in a moment of time and be completely known by *an other*. What counts as knowledge is what is on our mental stage/ conscious mind, and what we can perceive in a moment of time. Psychoanalysis rests on the concept developed in the past century, namely that *an other*, i.e. the analyst can see/feel/know things about us of which we are consciously unaware. However, we are also aware of things in ourselves about which our analyst has but a glimmer. In other words, all *knowledge is partial*. That being said, our developmental goal is certainly maximum coherence and continuity over time of *relational* SELF states.
- 8) *Fantasy/imagination and multiple representations*. In reviewing childhood developmental models, I have been most impressed by Piaget's Concrete-Operational Period, the *five-to-seven-year shift*. At this time autobiographical memory is established. And not only is fantasy/imagination powerfully active but perspective taking evolves into the cognitive and feeling ability to mentally create *multiple representations*. This capacity involves the ability to represent a thing, a person, a situation, a feeling, a memory, a wish *in the present moment* in multiple ways and to switch back and forth between these representations and compare and coordinate them. It is a major TOM shift and includes the ability to recognize a false belief, to read other's intentions and truthfulness, and to effectively deceive others. I wonder if fantasy others or *alters* begin to be created during this phase? Probably as we continue to learn about human subjectivity, we will be able to understand the dynamic unconscious, including the existence of alters, as aspects of autobiographical and implicit memory governed by dissociation.
- 9) Similarly, can we relate the capacity of the preschooler to center his focus only on one thing, one aspect of a situation, and one feeling at a time to the creation of BPO states? Piaget believes that the lack of perspective taking is based on the inability to decenter. Preschoolers are *egocentric* in both thought and feeling. Perspective taking is the ability to see a situation from more than one perspective and compare them. This is "a mentalization capacity" which BPO and narcissistic personality people do not have in intimate situations and which they, hopefully, learn in treatment.