

# Harry Stack Sullivan's Self-System

**Rebekah Leimgruber-Lopez**

## Abstract

The following article includes Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory and more specifically, his use of the "self-system." This theory is mainly built out of the social context of human experiences, however congenital factors are not denied. The social element of human growth starts with a central state of interpersonal affiliation in infancy and endures throughout adulthood. Interpersonal connections are the significant requirements for standard human progression. Furthermore, destructive exhibitions can be explained by deviance, psychopathology, and immaturity.

One individual who projected a model of the social component and interaction between culture and personality development was Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949). Born in Norwich, New York, he was schooled at Smyrna Union School and continued his higher education at Cornell University. Before working as a psychiatrist, Sullivan was a physician experienced in internal medicine and surgery. He earned his MD in 1917 from the Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery. Sullivan expanded upon Sigmund Freud's theories and drew his own attention towards interpersonal relationships. He believed that the intrapsychic factor of personality could not be perceived directly except through interpersonal connections. These exchanges can take place in fantasy or reality. His emphasis on the importance of interpersonal interactions and his claims that every person has as many personalities as he has interpersonal associations seems to anticipate the diverse insights and differentiation of social psychology (Muuss, 1996).

This theory is mainly built out of the social context of human experiences, however congenital or organic factors of the brain are not denied. The social element of

**Rebekah Leimgruber-Lopez is a student in the M. A. Counseling program at NAU-Yuma.** Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rebekah Leimgruber-Lopez at [rl153@nau.edu](mailto:rl153@nau.edu).

human growth starts with a central state of interpersonal affiliation in infancy and endures throughout adulthood. Interpersonal connections are the significant requirements for standard human progression. Furthermore, destructive exhibitions can be explained by deviance, psychopathology, and immaturity. The individual learns to act in certain ways and adjust his conduct due to socialization and not from biological imperatives (Muuss, 1996).

More important than that of sexual needs is the fulfillment of interpersonal needs. What we are and how we progress is influenced by our relationships with other people. Moreover, the effects of interpersonal contacts can be positive and negative. The rewards of interpersonal exchanges are determined upon constructive feedback. Knowing that others consider us attractive and worthwhile and value us provides a feeling of security. On the other hand, relationships are weakened when they generate a large amount of worry, more so in the first years of life. Social affiliations are mutual in nature whereby, an adolescent who already has a low amount of self-esteem and feels insufficient tends to discard welcoming gestures by others and remains skeptical (Muuss, 1996).

Our sense of self is formed by the way in which those who motivate us most in our lives- treat us and see us. The self is a communal self, shaped by others and by this the self develops into the initiator of social relationships. This is called the self-system. It is an individual's gathering of perceptions about themselves. The self-system arranges life involvements within its persona. The self-system fights off anxiety-known as a feeling of uneasiness and worry- as well as learns cultural standards and becomes a filter through which experiences are integrated in or omitted from consciousness (Muuss, 1996).

One key purpose of the self-system is to provide contentment and diminish the anxiety related with the experiences of dissatisfaction that go along with the socialization procedure. Sullivan (2011) explained that anxiety appears not only as awareness of itself but also in the experience of some complex emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and guilt. The self-system tries to prevent alterations after

stability has been established because changes can be distressing and intimidating to the person's security.

Sullivan (2011) described techniques that provide tools for people in order to reduce anxiety, such as selective inattention. Individuals use this technique to focus their mind away from stressful situations such that a child begins to ignore or reject anxiety that could produce uncomfortable feelings from their mother's worry about child rearing. It can also hinder an individual's capacity to learn novel but difficult concepts, to live more efficiently with others around them, and to effort different methods when needed. Sullivan stresses that the self-system experiences substantial changes despite its conflict, markedly in the young stages of life.

Sullivan (2011) sees personality as an energy structure whose main purpose is to diffuse strain. Strains erupt from basic needs such as sleep, food, shelter, but they can result from interpersonal situations. This pattern of tension alteration creates a motivation for growth. Just think, if tension was never visible in our lives we would never feel the need to achieve or even meet our basic needs. However, anxiety is considered a tension due to the fact that it impacts the reduction of other needs and the accomplishment of feeling satisfied. For instance, anxiety can be caused when we are trying to meet the desires of someone. This fear is normally attended with loss of recollection and vitality, and the incapability to focus inhibits performance.

Lastly, we seek security. In my opinion, this is true, especially in pursuing security from our parents. Our parents are depended on by their offspring and are seen as their security. Again, a risk to an individual's safety produces tension. Anxieties advance out of interpersonal relationships, and they also continue as the most prevalent energy in the human cycle (Sullivan, 2011).

#### References

- Muuss, R. (1996). *Theories of Adolescence*. Sixth Edition. United States: McGraw Hill.
- Sullivan, H. (1948, 2011). Towards a psychiatry of peoples. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 21(2), 193-210. doi:10.1037/a0023917