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Main Article:

Self-Identity Theory and Research Methods

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Abstract

This article introduces the focus and methods of clinical psychodynamic research for researchers and professionals from other fields. It draws attention to the notions of “self” and “identity,” two key concepts in psychodynamic sciences. Our different experiences of self are a result of different unconscious generalizations about self becoming dominant at different times, in different social or cultural settings. These generalizations, or self-schemas, are fed by various conscious and unconscious inputs, which may be of personal or social origin. Accordingly, self-schemas need not be consistent with each other. Their overall organization (i.e., self-organization) can vary from being rather fragmented to effectively harmonious. A harmonious level of self-organization manifests in an intuitive sense of self as intending, attending, and expecting according to unified attitudes. A fragmented level of self-organization, on the other hand, manifests in a chaos of selfhood, accompanied by a loss of emotional governance. Naturally, the level of self-organization determines the identity of a person, that is, the person’s conscious or intuitive sense of sameness over time. Psychodynamic researchers are interested in assessing the level of self-organization in a person and supporting the person in achieving higher levels of self-organization, if possible. The article presents different methods used in such research, namely quantitative modeling based on self-report data and analysis of verbal narratives. An awareness of this field can alert other researchers dealing with human beings to the issues of multiple selves and the role of unconscious generalizations in how people feel, think, and behave in different situations.

Index Terms: research education; research experience; research methods; research process; social psychology; cognitive psychology; psychotherapy; identity; psychodynamics; psychological conflict; self; narrative analysis

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1. Notions of Self and Identity

The identity of a person, within a culture, is a topic of concern throughout the humanities, cognitive science, psychology, and psychoanalysis. In psychodynamic sciences the complexity of multiple self-experiences and social presentations in an individual is addressed in terms of layers of *person schematization* (Horowitz, 1991). These person schemas can explain conflicted and perhaps dissociated self-concepts. This article will discuss the theory as related to research methods, emphasizing qualitative analysis of narratives from an individual.

1.1. Unconscious Process of Identity

Identity exists in past, present, and future time frames. I am “the me” that was and my present contains a focus on my becoming even more me in the near future. Or, perhaps, I feel dissociated now from past “me” and my expectations of “what next” may seem conflicted. My identity feelings at 3 a.m. may be more dreamy than my work identity at 3 p.m. In psychodynamic research on variation in self-states, as related to motivation, one considers: (a) social views of the person as well as (b) conscious and (c) unconscious information within that person.

A metaphor of “push-pull-revise” helps us pay attention to the internal complexity of self-identity structure and experience. Unconsciously, enduring self-organization results from generalizations made from past experiences, generalizations that are like making a map, the pattern on the map then pushed out to organize the stream of thought and experience. By the “pushes” out of these generalizations the mind/brain can organize a connectivity between multiple modules. Meanwhile, mind/brain “pulls” in the perceptions and information processing products of all other modules and organizes them. At times, in so doing, it “revises” itself.

Unconscious pictures, inner cognitive working-models, and maps of self are dynamic and complex networks of rich, but sometimes contradictory bits of information. The goal for maturity is to increase harmony between different schematizations. In clinical studies of psychotherapy, we look for improvements in identity, self-esteem, and relationship ability that can be called *self-transformative*. The transformations we study in examining individualized change processes in psychotherapy—the revise part of push-pull-revise—are both realistic and imaginary. Discontinuities, discords, and memory conflicts abound. To deal with such complexity, it is desirable to have a theory of categories that can include configurations of multiple selves within one person. We use these categories to to analyze and structure the contents of narratives.

1.2. Categories of Self: Schemas, Models, and States

The language used is from cognitive science. A *self-schema* refers to unconscious and systematized generalization about self. *Self-representation* refers to a conscious belief or potential conscious expression about “me” that may be symbolized in words, images, or bodily tensions such as posture, gait, muscle tensions, and gestures. Subjective reports

contain self-representations of a moment or a remembered period. Observers can infer the underlying stability or unstable fluctuations of self-schemas.

Each individual has multiple self-schemas, unconsciously coded in a repertoire, and units of this repertoire can be activated in the pull part of the metaphor of push-pull-revise (Horowitz, 1998). A *self-state* is a condition organized by the activation of a particular self-schema and may include conscious identity experiences related to the attributes of that schema. *Self-organization* is the overall assembly of self-schemas. *Identity* is a conscious or intuitive sense of sameness over time.

Self-schemas include scripts, future intentions and expectations about self-realization, and core values. These self-schemas function as cognitive maps; simplifying details into attitudes about relationships. Schemas, like other maps, can add past information to current information processing. The use of enduring person schemas in preconscious processing can lead to high-speed formation of potential action plans. Person schemas such as *role relationship models* enhance a person's ability to respond quickly to threats and social opportunities, but may introduce systematic and even motivated errors of appraisal (Horowitz, 1998).

Each person has a repertoire of self-schemas that are dormant in memory storages; any one or more of these self-schemas can be activated to organize other aspects of information processing. Active self-schemas influence a person's current sense of identity. Alternative self-schemas, when activated, can shift the person's state of mind. Such a shift alters psychological self-state and social self-presentation (Stern, 1985).

To recapitulate: Identity experiences are organized by active self-schematizations. Self-organization, the totality of one's self-concepts and self-schematizations, is not necessarily an integrated and coherent organization. People vary in how well they harmonize these parts and how well they have learned realistic and conceptual self-reflective skills for dealing with contradictions between parts of self.

2. Research Focus and Methods

2.1. Focus: Levels of Self-Organization

In clinical psychodynamic research we are interested in assessing the level of self-organization in a person and supporting the person in achieving higher levels of self-organization, if possible. For example, if organizing a configuration of parental self-schemas is lacking, the person might experience different identities as states shift. They might feel in one state like an all-good parent and in another like an all-bad parent, or feel like a self-righteous child punisher. Emotional regulation might be impoverished and impulsive maladaptive actions are more likely to occur.

People shift from one recurrent state of mind to another as various aspects of their repertoire become more and less dominant as organizers of information processing and making plans for actions. The more a person has developed supraordinate self-schemas, linking multiple subordinate schemas, the more that person will experience a continuity

of identity. A person with self-reflective awareness of continuity in identity has enhanced self-acceptance and a greater ability to tolerate ambivalent emotional states that might otherwise occasion a lapse in identity coherence. A person at a high level of coherence might know they were sometimes angry and sometimes not angry, but they were always loving and caring to a child in their parental role.

While multiple self-schemas can explain otherwise mysterious but recurrent shifts in state of mind and pattern of social behavior, the level of integration across self-schemas explains some global issues of emotional regulation. People differ in the degree to which they have developed high, integrated, levels of self-organization. The more a person has harmonized conflicted elements into configurations of person schemas, the more that person can accept contradictions, external demands, and frustrations. State transitions will be smooth rather than accompanied with explosive shifts in mood. Response to frustrations will be softened and although the person will still have intense negative affects, they are less likely to be experienced as alarming and out of control.

Table 1 shows levels of self-organization observed in people. The lowest level is “fragmented,” indicating very weak coherence among self-schemas and similarly weak correspondence between self-schemas and the external social reality. The highest level is “harmonious,” representing a developed state of self-organization and experiences of an integrated selfhood.

At the top level of self-organization, people have complex and relatively harmonious schematizations of self. They can be observed to generally understand and tolerate frustrations and to master threats and fears. They can be seen to solve moral dilemmas using a hierarchy of values. When they have negative moods, they accept and contain them. Their narratives indicate that they often suffer guilt inappropriately or blame others irrationally. They know that another person is separate and like them, experiences wishes, fears, emotional reactions, and conflicts. They use a well-modulated combination of action and restraint. Individuals at the top level of self-organization usually maintain commitments even under stress; they are trustworthy; their sense of “I” and “we” is continuous over long periods; and their self-esteem sustains them through periods of rejection, deprivation, and conflict. This kind of person examines pros and cons and can contemplate alternative ways of handling social conflicts. The person makes apt choices and is able to accept personal error with appropriate remorse, while maintaining a good level of self-esteem.

Most people are not at this top level of self-organization. Dissociation of selves and projections of bad self-attributes onto others occurs to an irrational degree. Finding methods to assess such levels is, however, not easy. Various proxies such as self-reports and descriptions of relevant signs for observer judgments need to be specified.

Table 1. *States of Self-Organization*

Level	Description
<i>Harmonious</i>	People at this level have an intuitive sense of self as intending, attending, and expecting according to unified attitudes, past, present, and future (intentionality). When experiencing conflicts and negative moods, they own these as “of the self.” They think in terms of realistic pros and cons and employ rational actions and restraints. Emotional governance is at its best. Such people in almost every state of mind view others as separate people with their own intentions, expectations, and emotional reactions. In the mind, perspectives on relationships approximate social realities of the present moment.
<i>Mildly conflicted</i>	People with this degree of coherence have an intuitive sense of self that may contain contradictions of intentions, expectations, and values. Maladaptive relationship behaviors may have approach-avoidance conflicts concerning issues of control, sexuality, and power. Irrational views of a relationship may stand in the way of developing close and genuine connections. However, their self-knowledge is such that state transitions as between positive and negative relational emotionality are usually smooth and remembered.
<i>Vulnerable</i>	In these states, people shift between intense divergent emotions, for example, feeling grandiose then deflated. Sudden shifts may occur but are usually noted in self-appraisals and reflective discourse. Illusions about extraordinary personal traits may cover over illusions of failure. Emotional governance is reduced. Rage may erupt at others who are perceived as insulting to the self. In more extreme states, these people may view others as tools of self, or they may externalize blame onto others.
<i>Disturbed</i>	In these states, people organize mental life using various self-schemas that break with reality. Rage in the air is seen as being the fault of another person. The self may be confused with others in terms of who did or felt what. Within self, thoughts may be confused with memories or plans for real action. State transitions can be explosive, and what occurred in a just former state of mind may be as if forgotten. The result can be a social rupture.
<i>Fragmented</i>	In these states, a massive chaos of selfhood can occur. People may regard the self and other as merged. Parts of the bodily self may be disowned. This is very painful and can give rise to poorly regulated suicidal or homicidal urges. For that reason, explosive shifts into such states are dangerous. The result may be stigmatization and rejection of the person in this state.

2.2. Methods: Self-Report Questionnaire

Various easy-to-collect self-report measures have been used in quantitative models to demonstrate the link between perceptions of self and personal effectiveness. These self-report measures are not sufficient to reveal the complex contents of conflicts in identity-related beliefs. For example, Higgins (1987) developed a model that could predict emotional vulnerability stemming from contradictions between different manifestations of self: (a) an “actual” self, (b) an “ideal” self of personal values, (c) an “ought-to-be”

self that one felt a duty to be because of others, and (d) a “can-do” self. In empirical studies, Higgins found that a large discrepancy between an actual and ideal self was related to symptoms of depression. An actual and ought-to-be discrepancy was related to symptoms of anxiety (Avants, Margolin, & Singer, 1993; Strauman & Higgins, 1987). Kihlstrom and Cantor (1984) found different configurations of selves with different relationships: self-schemas of being with a mother were different from self-schemas associated with ties to a father. Some configurations may be specific to certain types of relationships, such as leader-follower, husband-wife, and parent-child (Hart, Stinson, Field, Ewert, & Horowitz, 1995).

Several investigators found that consistency of authenticity of self-feelings in different states predicted both physical and psychological well being (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). People who manifest consistency in reported traits of self had higher levels of reported self-esteem (Diehl, Jacobs, & Hastings, 2006). In other research, my colleagues and I used a short 5-item self-report measure that takes just a minute or two to complete and that can be used as a repeatable measure since the time span is the last week (Horowitz, Sonneborn, Sugahara, & Maercker, 1996). This Sense of Self-Regard Questionnaire (SSRQ) has been found predictive of health or distress over time in two studies—one of HIV infected men and the other of widows coping with loss.

The SSRQ was filled out by 53 HIV seropositive gay men, who were then assessed in blood tests for CD4+ cell counts (a measure of immune functioning) at the same time and again two years later. Greater self-regard at baseline was significantly and positively correlated with higher CD4+ counts 29 months later, and this association was strongest among persons with less social concealment of their gay identity (Ulrich, Lutgendorf, Stapleton, & Horowitz, 2004). Concealment of gay identity can be stressful because of a discord in self-state and social self-presentation, leading to experiences of identity disturbance.

The SSRQ in the second of these studies predicted subsequent symptoms of distress in widows. Widows filled out a battery of scales including the SSRQ six months after the death of their spouse. The scores on the SSRQ at six months were inversely correlated with their symptom level scores on the Beck Depression Inventory at 14 months (Horowitz, Sonneborn, Sugahara, & Maercker, 1996).

2.3. Methods: Narrative Analysis

The problems of self leading to disturbances are however, best explored through narrative analysis, which can also show how problems can be resolved. My work on assessing conflict among and changes in self-schemas via narrative analysis will illustrate these benefits.

Relationship conflicts are a key focus in psychodynamic research (Horowitz, 1991; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990). Frank discourse, as in the context of interviews or psychotherapy, can be transcribed and analyzed for content. Analysis of narratives can

proceed in steps that progressively reduce the complexity of information to recurrent patterns.

The specific views of self, and another, are identified by highlighting, or annotating sections of transcripts. Categories of self-attribution can be defined by noting repetitions. Summarizing these is a form of qualitative analysis. Counting repetitions using other judges can then lead to quantitative analyses.

Transaction sequences are identified and may involve a reordering of spoken sequences. Imagined elements (“I thought I had become a ghost”) are designated as such to differentiate them from features found in stories about what really happened in the past (“I was waking from a coma in the hospital”).

It may help to use a mapping sentence: “subject” does toward “object,” “object” does toward “subject.” The sentence used for paraphrasing can be amplified for roles: *I, who am like this and that, did thus and so, to my husband, who is like this and that, and he responded by doing thus and so, and I then felt like this.* The latter “and then I” can reveal acts of self-appraisal leading to shame and guilt or pride and self-esteem.

One can take discourse and paraphrase it by such formats in order to clarify the key descriptions either of self, other, or of a “we.” This locates repetitions, which are then summarized. In work by my colleagues and I, a format for summarization has been useful. We called the self-other model a role relationship model (RRM) (Hart et al., 1995; Horowitz, 1988, 1991, 1998, 2005; Horowitz & Eells, 1993). We summarized desired, dreaded, and compromise or defensive RRM versions into a configuration (RRMC). These contained multiple selves—one self schema described in each of the RRM of an RRMC. Details are summarized in Horowitz and Eells (2006). Once contents have been identified, the variable from narrative analyses that would relate to self-organizational coherence is a new judgment involving the level of discord and contradiction between self-schematizations and the presence or relative absence of supraordinate self-attitudes that could smooth out and contain discords and contradictions.

Such narrative analyses provide contents that are the particular attributions of self-schemas and the particular attitudes used in the self-judgments that can demolish self-esteem. RRM and RRMC formats can be used to depict desired and dreaded or “defensively safe” roles and repeated practices within a social group. Of interest, such methods often draw out values and value conflicts, which are frequently important in identity growth phenomena. These have possible cultural, ethnic, and ethnographic extensions.

Self-schemas may be in harmony or in conflict with beliefs of ethnic peers (Agar, 1986). An individual rejecting a social role of unquestioning obeisance to a parent, for example, might expect criticism from all others in the social group, even if there are others who also do not hold that belief. Values within self-organization can be assessed as self-critic schemas and these act within the theater of the mind as if they were different forms of deities, spirits, or pluralities of “we” as in “my people” (Shweder, 1991). All of these forms of social schemas are utilized in intuitive self-reflections and self-evaluations. The

attitudes involved and applied to self-states can strengthen or weaken an individual's conscious sense of identity. Such complexities can be examined in intensive narrative analyses that can also show change in harmony or discord within self over time.

Example. Wish Fear Dilemma

Here is an example of using a mapping sentence to paraphrase what is said. The narrator (female) is describing experiencing a new intimate relationship with Sidney (male). This is the kind of relationship she had for well over a decade with a previous spouse (James, male), who died suddenly over a year ago.

I went for a weekend with Sidney and it started out to be happy and exciting for me. Just when I wanted to enjoy how good I looked for the first time in a long time and what a fine man Sidney really is, I suddenly thought of James. I felt, I don't know why, it seems so irrational, very, very badly, like I was a cheater.

The paraphrase begins with the "I, who am," format like this: "I who am a cheater, felt badly about James." By implication, one might add that she views James as accusing her of cheating. The paraphrase also has: "I, who am a good-looking woman, was happy and excited with Sidney, who is a fine man."

One paraphrase can go into a desired RRM, the other paraphrase into a dreaded RRM. An approach-avoidance dilemma results in the cycle or sequence. It could be paraphrased as:

(Whenever) I, who am a good looking woman, wanted to feel happy and excited with Sidney, who is a fine man, I, who was a wife to James, felt badly that I am cheating on James (who is in my unconscious mind yet alive although I know consciously that he is dead).

As a result of activating this role relationship model of loving Sidney and so (as she imagines) hurting James, she enters a guilty-feeling state of mind. The roles of Sidney and James in this kind of "wish fear dilemma" are also reversible. She feels guilty toward Sidney if she retains her identity as faithful with and intimate to only James. In this way a recurring identity and roles of relationship conflict can be clarified. The narrative analysis could go on to explicate social values within this subject as rules for right conduct, in this case, her community's view on whether or not fidelity to a marriage is permanent even beyond spousal death.

3. Discussion

Quantitative studies indicate the importance of identity and self-esteem related dimensions on both psychological and physical well-being, and these undoubtedly affect social coherence issues as well. Understanding self-identity in relation to culture requires qualitative studies, and these rest on a long history of narrative analysis. Psychodynamic research indicates some ways of bringing categories that can include often unconscious attitudes and conflicts into the framework of narrative analyses.

We who see science as a sober and objective search for the truth also recognize that subjectivity can be both an obstacle and a help: we should include analysis of our own subjectivity for its assets and liabilities. The liability is bias. Bias can operate in the categories used to organize narrative analyses, even though categories for judgments by those who examine the narratives improve the chances for objectivity and relative truth.

In the type of narrative analysis discussed in this article, subjectivity is sometimes a help. The method of configurational analysis and role relationship models promotes paraphrasing of what the speaker of the narrative meant. It includes intuitive recognition of patterns of omission, and may fill in some of the missing information with inferences that look through defensive avoidances to infer what was probably avoided. This controlled subjectivity of the analyst may either enrich or endanger validity. The danger can be reduced by looking for reliability in inferences. This is done by independent reviews of the same narratives, using the same categories, but blind to the reports of another team.

For example, two teams can read and infer the patterns of contents in a defined set of narratives. A third team does not infer patterns but rather is charged with examining the reports of the two teams for degrees of agreement and disagreement. This can even add a quantitative component, a type of reliability rating. This can also lead to qualitative re-examination of differences in contents reported by the two teams.

4. Conclusions

Psychodynamic studies provide categories of self-attributes, other person's roles, and transactional as well as emotional scenarios. These categories can be used as a systematic format for analyzing and structuring contents detected in or paraphrased from a transcribed interview. Psychodynamic studies emphasize focus on conflict within the mind, and this method allows for an objective approach to specifying conflicts within parts of the self. This method can be used elsewhere, in other scholarly disciplines to locate conflicts between sets of meaning.

The word *identity* itself refers to continuity in a sense of self within a person, and the word also refers to how that person is socially regarded. The cultures in question may say whether that regard is positive or negative, making the person feel pride or shame. An approach that can describe identity conflicts may be valuable in contemporary cultural studies. The reason is that continuity is not as traditional as it once was because change is rampant. An individual's roles are now subject to a high degree of plasticity because of the modern high rate of alterations in economy, belonging, and ecology. Cultures clash socially, and within the individual mind.

The suitably complex theory of identify and self-organizational structure presented here may also be useful in conducting multi-cultural studies where identity change and self-role alternatives are an active part of historical transition from tradition to modernity. Research practitioners may find the mapping sentence approach useful as a way to

condense narratives for an analytic review. The condensation to key variables allows for an objective analysis of what themes are indeed repetitive.

For example, philosophers might examine narrative for value conflicts due to rapid changes in moral and spiritual stances. Such scholars could use a mapping sentence such as this: *I, who am (attributes), should behave towards others, who are (attributes), according to (rules of right or wrong action) and the consequences will be (what follows)*. That which is inserted in the parentheses would be expected to be multiple patterns, conflicted ones, not unitary ones. In that way common dilemmas could be highlighted and understood.

Cultural historians and anthropologists, as well as other scholars in the humanities might use this approach to unpack their own complex tangles of variables about identity and role. The narratives could be distilled down into self-concepts and role concepts, as well as scenarios for accepted and unaccepted actions. The splits and dissociations that characterize so much of modern life could be objectively laid out for a given time, place, and group.

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