

# Phenomenological Architecture of Self-Awareness: Applications in Education and Transpersonal Psychotherapy

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Once marginalized in the wake of a limited empiricism, the notion of self now enters the center of psychological discourse (Benson, 2001). Its dialogical nature and multivocality necessitates a new paradigm of psychological inquiry (Misra, 2001). Theoretical framework of the self is an important alternative to personality theory (Schweder, 1991). However, the typology of the self does not accommodate all the evidence (Matsumoto, 1999). The depth phenomenological analysis of the self can render data useful for building the more accurate understanding of this foundational component of human experience.

This paper presents the phenomenological structure of the psychological system, which is commonly called “self”, and examines the applications of this knowledge in higher education and transpersonal psychotherapy.

The new method of dialogical explication of the deep structures of self-awareness was developed and used in the 7-year study of the self in the focus groups of participants interested in personal development (n > 35, number of participants over 300). The following questions were posited: how do you know that you are? How do you experience yourself now? What constitutes your experience of yourself? Accounts were analyzed by the modified method of Giorgi (1985, 1997), with the analytic focus on the generalizable organization of experience rather than the psychological content.

Results show that spatiality is the primary organizational principle of the self, which concurs with Benson’s (2001) view of self as a locator. Spatiality, however, not only locates and defines self externally, but is pervasive to the whole internal organization. The components of the self are organized in the “internal space” of introspection as layers around the central experience of the “I am” – consciousness. “I am” in association with sensations, emotions and feelings, images, verbal thoughts, deeper non-verbal understandings, mental states such as torpor or confusion, and “nothing” forms the easily identifiable phenomenological clusters. This level of internal self-organization corresponds with the Eastern psychologies of Vedanta and Kundalini yoga (Berliner, 1990; Sadananda, 1974; Misra, 2001).

Deeper analysis uncovers the inner, essential structural groupings, such as self-concept/self-sense, interiority/exteriority, constancy/changeability (subjectivity/objectivity), selfhood/transcendentality, and body-schema relatedness/unrelatedness. Self-concept/self-sense axis includes the polarity of self-related concepts versus the body-based, spatial sense of one’s own self. Interiority/exteriority includes the polarity of meaning and verbal expression, constancy-changeability relates to the subject (constancy)-object (changeability) relationship within the introspective field. Transcendentality accommodates transpersonal psychological dimensions of experience such as “larger-than-self” or “no self”, and body schema relatedness refers to the psychological phenomena,

which emerge in connection with particular locations within the body schema. These groupings resonate with the phenomenological map of the “cosmic man”, developed by the Islamic philosopher Ibn-al’Arabi (1980).

This research suggests that the “I am”- sense, a constant component of self-awareness, can be easily differentiated from the changing components by the subjects in guided open-eyed introspection. After some initial training, “I am”-sense becomes available for the continuous fixing of voluntary attention. This causes sense of well-being and the increase of higher-order thoughts (HOT) about the self. According to HOT theory of consciousness, the increase of these secondary reflective thoughts corresponds to the human experience of becoming more conscious (Williford, 2002). Since the knowledge about the self is typically remembered better than other types of semantic information (Kelley et al., 2002), the author hypothesized that the sustained focus on I-sense can enhance the understanding of complex concepts. The focusing on “I am” - sense was used as an educational mnemonic technique with graduate students (n =70) in psychology seminars. Students reported that the voluntary focus of attention on the constant aspect of the self in the process of learning leads to the decrease of performance anxiety and to the enhancement of learning.

The focusing on “I am”-sense was also used in therapy with the clients (n= 7) diagnosed as having the “religious or spiritual problem” (DSM – IV category V-code 62.89). This technique helped to neutralize the core feature of the depersonalization, the “virtuality” of the self (Bezzubova, 2002), thus helping to reestablish the normal structure of self-experience.

The phenomenological map of the spatial components of the self resonates with the *in situ* distribution of neuromediators and neuropeptides (Louchakova & Warner, 2003), challenging the belief in the exclusive neurocentricity of consciousness. Research suggests that the positive effects of focusing on the “I am” sense may have the biological basis connected with the changes in the chemistry of the body.

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