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The Self and Learning : The Development of the Self (Continuation)

In our previous paper (*Self and Society* Vol.III No.5) we mentioned that participants in the Self-Exploration Group (SEG), verified much that can be labelled humanistic psychology, in their self-disclosures. In this paper we will attempt to summarise the self-disclosures of the participants related to self development, and integrate this summary with relevant theories expounded by humanistic psychologists.

SEG participants, at least those who revealed radical changes of self, tended to view the development of self as a process which can fluctuate between two poles; self-actualisation and self-alienation. While participants in the SEGs typically perceived a necessity to confront their own self-alienation as a prerequisite to self-actualisation or self-liberation, much of their disclosures about how they came to be alienated from themselves resulted from intensive retrospection on past experiences. Thus what we present is necessarily about the past, and consequently the language we use and the language of the self-disclosures on which our analysis in based, is a language of the 'there and then' rather than a language of the 'here and now.'

Self-Alienation–Self-actualisation

The self which the person develops is crucial to the meaning he will derive from and attribute to his experiences. The nature of the self developed by any one person reflects the nature of his social environment especially in his early years, yet is not totally conditioned by this social environment. The person has the inherent capacity to determine his own being and actions. The self he develops is to a large extent dependent upon his inherent capacity for self-determination, and the extent to which he exercises this capacity in relation to socializing influences.

At birth the baby is at one with the world. He gradually differentiates himself from others and from his physical environment. 'A portion of the individual's *experience* becomes differentiated and *symbolized* in an *awareness* of being *awareness* of functioning. Such awareness may be described as *self-experience.'1.*

The initial and early self-experience is based on a person's own organismic acts and satisfactions derived from these acts. If we assume, as Rogers does, that the person has an inherent tendency toward actualizing his organism, this tendency manifests itself in the first weeks of life.

If we also assume that it is in this self-experience, in these experiences which the person quite naturally, or organismically values, that lies the person's potential meaning, then organismic or spontaneous acts emanating from organismic

self-awareness are by definition, acts through which a person actualizes his organism. The assumption that a person's greatest potential meaning rests in his awareness of his organismic functioning is basic to Gestalt Therapy which has become a popular vehicle for the achievement of deeper personal meaning.2. Furthermore, this assumption approximates White's view that the person experiences a biologically (organismic) based satisfaction through his efforts to achieve mastery over his environment.3.

However, the person can and does actualize himself other than through organismic experiences. Self-actualization is essentially a process of discovering meaning and attributing meaning to one's experience, and is evidenced through being more oneself, and becoming more in and through experience. The degree of meaning we are able to attribute to our experiences is dependent upon several factors, one of which is the criteria we value for what constitutes meaning. When our criteria for meaning is modified so that they differ from the criteria inherent, and experienced in organismic functioning, we automatically reduce the possibility of experiencing full meaning, and must be content with a lower degree of meaning, thereby impeding the process of self-actualization.

When we refer to different criteria of meaning, we are referring to a different self or different selves. A self-structure is that which embodies a set of related meanings. When we experience the world through a self which is far removed from our organismic self, it can be said that we are alienated from our organismic self. The new self we have developed is external to, or outside our organismic self, or disembodied,4. and can be labelled outer-self as opposed to our organismic self which can now be labelled inner-self. When we experience the world through our outer self we cannot hope to attribute as full a meaning to our experience as contrasted with an experience through the iner self. We are impeding our own self-actualization.

Self-actualization is impeded by the person when he acts and experiences through an outer-self structure, and when the person learns and develops an outer-self structure. Persons can come to *experience the world* to some degree and in varying amounts of time through an outer self system. In addition persons can *experience themselves* to some degree as an outer self or as an alien self. Laing observes:

> *A child of two is already a moral mover and moral talker and moral experiencer. He already moves the 'right' way, makes the 'right' noises, and he knows what he should feel and what he should not feel . . . As he is taught to move in specific ways out of the whole range of possible movements, so he is taught to experience out of the whole range of possible experience.5.*

One of the ways in which we experience self-enhancement is through experiencing positive self-regard from persons we value (significant others). Rogers believes that we all share a need to experience positive regard. It is possible that we learn to develop this need in the process of gratifying more basic physiological needs, during early infancy when we are totally dependent upon others. To provide the necessary means whereby these needs can be satisfied. On the other hand the need for positive regard could be a development of what appears to be an infant's inherent need for the protection, physical contact and warmth, necessary for his survival.

It should seem, however, that when we experience ourselves as 'real' (organismically), and experience positive regard from significant others, that self-actualization is facilitated. When we experience ourselves as 'real' and do not experience positive regard from significant others, our need to experience this positive regard may be such that we learn to act in such a way (a way alien to our organismic self) which will bring about the experience of positive regard from significant others. An alien act is performed perhaps out of the anxiety or frustration we experience in not experiencing the positive regard of significant others. The infant is particularly vulnerable since he is dependent on others to satisfy basic physiological needs. Thus an infant may come to express his need for food by making pleasant noises, even though he is experiencing discomfort and perhaps pain. Through this example it is possible to see how an infant may learn to devalue his inner self and may learn to begin to develop an outer self, which will please his significant others, which in turn, is a pre-requisite to satisfying basic needs. He could begin to learn that his own needs are of less importance than the way in which he expresses his needs; that regardless of what he is himself experiencing, it is more important that he presents himself to others in ways which the others value.

Let us suppose that the baby is fed every four hours. In this case he may learn to repress his needs because he comes to realize that he will eventually be fed, anyway; and, or, there is little value in experimenting with noises and gestures because he will eventually receive food regardless of his own action. This could lead him to devalue his own actions and become passive.

In Rogers' formulations, self-alienation can be seen to begin when *'self-experiences* of the individual are discriminated by significant others as being more or less worthy of *positive regard.'6.*

Rogers comments:

> *Some behaviors are regarded positively which are not actually experienced organismically as satisfying. Other behaviors are regarded negatively which are not actually experienced as unsatisfying. It is when he behaves in accordance with these interjected (internalized) values that he may be said to have acquired conditions of worth. He cannot regard himself positively, as having worth, unless he lives in terms of these conditions.'7.*

It can be seen that a devaluing of the inner self is the first stage in the self-alienation of the person. When positive regard from significant others is not forthcoming in organismic action, the person *may* devalue his own organismic valuing process and develop a need for self-regard. He begins to develop a self, incongruent with his inner self, in order to receive positive regard from significant others. At times his own organismic valuing process may be congruent with the regard from significant others, and this is likely to enhance, and reinforce his own organismic valuing process. When he acts in such a way so as to receive positive regard from others yet perhaps contradicting or denying his own self-experience, he is acting from a false-self base and is developing his alien self.

Weiss comments:

> *Schilder also states that the 'amount of interest an individual receives in his early childhood is of great importance.' This view is confirmed by my clinical experience, which shows that the most severe forms of self-alienation occur in patients whose early relationships were characterized either by lack of physical and emotional closeness, the fatal effects of which Spitz has convincingly demonstrated, or by symbiotic relationships fostered by anxious or over-powering mothers who deprive the child of the chance of growing up as an individual, and particularly by open or hidden over-expectations of compulsively ambitious parents who condition their love and make 'shoulds' of performance or behavior a prerequisite for full acceptance of the child.8.*

Although Weiss is describing the 'more severe forms of self-alienation,' it would perhaps be more accurate to consider self-alienation as a matter of degree. The more our experience of ourselves is destroyed by others the more we learn to alienate ourselves from our own experience.

> *If we are stripped of experience, we are stripped of our deeds; and if our deeds are, so to speak, taken out of our hands like toys from the hands of children, we are bereft of our humanity . . . Men can and do destroy the humanity of other man.9.*

When our own authentic actions are not valued by others, and when the attributions we make about our own experience are disconfirmed by significant others, not only do we gradually learn to develop a self which will be valued and confirmed, but we also learn ways of avoiding anxiety and conflict. The more effectively we learn to avoid anxiety and conflict, typically through our defense mechanisms, the more we become divorced from our own experience, our own feelings and our own agency.

> *The alienated patient is not born alienated, nor does he choose alienation. Lacking genuine acceptance, love, and concern for his individuality in childhood, he experiences basic anxiety. Early he begins to move away from his self, which seems not good enough to be loved. He moves away from what he is, what he feels, what he wants. If one is not loved for what one is, one can at least be safe–safe perhaps by being very strong and being admired or feared for it, or by learning not to feel, not to want, not to care. Therefore, one has to free oneself from any need for others, which means first their love and affection, and, later on, in many instances, sex. Why feel, why want, if there is no response? So the person puts all his efforts into becoming what he* should *be. Later, he idealizes his self-effacement as goodness, his aggression as strength, his withdrawal as freedom. Instead of developing in the direction of increasing freedom, self-expression, and self-realization, he moves toward safety, self-elimination, and self-idealization.10.*

The second stage in the self-alienation process, can be seen when, having internalized conditions of worth into his outer-self structure, the person experiences the actions of

significant others as contradicting his internalized conditions of worth. He may, in these circumstances, adapt and modify his conditions of worth, or he may, if he experiences a strong need for self-regard, feel threatened and experience anxiety. At this point he will begin to develop defense mechanisms to protect his outer self system, and these mechanisms become part of his outer self system.

In addition to learning another self, the person finds that he is learning adaptability. Perhaps through identifying with certain others he has learned to become like these others. He learns to play at man, father, son, husband, consumer etc. Just as defense mechanisms become internalized to the extent that they may pervade much of a person's actions, likewise persons may learn to 'become' the various roles they assume.

Incongruence between self and experience, and inconsistencies in behaviour develop as the person perceives some experiences as contrary to his conditions of worth. He tends to exclude these experiences from his self-structure, either distorting his perception of these experiences or denying them to his awareness. Behaviours which reflect these experiences are also unrecognized or perceived to be incongruent with the self. Experiences which are perceived to be incongruent with the internalized conditions of worth are perceived as threatening. To safeguard his own self-structure from threat the person develops defense mechanisms.

> *The general consequences of the process of* defense, *aside from its preservation of the above inconsistencies, are a rigidity of sPR-10-M, perception,* due to the necessity of distorting *perceptions,* an inaccurate perception *of reality, due to distortion and omission of data.*

The process of self-development which we have hinted at is generally described as the process of socialization, and the socialization of the child into his culture is, of course, a frequently stated aim of the schooling process.

Becker comments on the process of socialization.

> *The process of socialization is characterized by one fundamental and recurring fact: the child's natural urge to move freely forward, manipulate, experiement and exercise his own assimilative powers is continually blocked. He is prevented from completing many of his own most eager and engrossing acts, acts of an excited infant in a world of wonders. Some of the time this blockage is for his own good, for his own safety and for his own practice in learning self-control and mastery. But much of the time this interference takes place because of the parents' fears, because of their own discomfort . . . The result is that the child has to earn his sense of support* passively, *by renouncing action and the satisfaction of* making his own closure *on action . . . This is how the fragmentation of the child's self takes place, how he becomes de-centred. As his action is stopped he literally doubles up on himself and can no longer continue the forward momentum of energy by completing an* external *act. The energy then must find its outlet in the process of* adapting to the parent *and to his commands–and no longer in the child's own spontaneous act. This is how the child incorporates the image of*

the parent and the parent's displeasures, and makes them slavishly and uncritically his own. The only way he can keep moving is to make a compromise that allows him some kind of action, even though it is not his own.12.

Continued next month.

References

1. **Carl Rogers** (1959), 'A Theory of Personality', in Theodore Millon (1967), (Editor), *Theories of Psychopathology,* Philadelphia: Saunders, 263.

2. See **F. S. Perls, R. Hefferline & P. Goodman** (1951), *Gestalt Therapy,* New York: Julian Press.

3. **R. W. White** (1959), 'Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence,' *Psychological Review,* 68: 297-333.

4. **R. D. Laing** (1960) for a full discussion of the disembodied self.

5. **Laing** (1967), 59-60.

6. **Rogers** (1959), 264.

7. *Ibid., 265*

8. **Frederick A. Weiss** (1961), 'Self-Alienation: Dynamics and Therapy', in Josephson and Josephson (1962) 465.

9. **Laing** (1967), 29.

10. **Weiss** (1961), 466.

11. **Rogers** (1959), 267.

12. **Ernest Becker** (1971), *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* (Second Edition), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 67-8.

13. **H. C. Kelman** (1961), 'Three Processes of Social Influences', in Marie Jahoda and Neil Warren (1966), (Editors), *Attitudes,* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 153.

14. *Ibid., 152.*

15. **Antony Storr** (1960), 84.

16. *Ibid., 76.*