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Dialogical Model of Human Self and the Society

Introduction. “I” and “ME”

The question “Why I am I” and “Why am I the way I am” was one of the first questions rising in the mind of homo-sapiens, which later resulted in the origin of a whole variety of religious and philosophical teachings. Nowadays, people keep asking such questions, while relying on the explanations coming either from the religious sources, or from the current scientific theories.

From the very birth of Psychology, the researchers were concerned with finding out what the human’s Self is, and what actually forms it. Most of the modern scientists of Psychology accept the dialogic nature of the human self in various ways. One of the early theories about Self put forward by Mead (1934) already differentiated between “I” and “Me”. Mead describes both “I” and “Me” as the sources of values and attitudes. The values of “Me” are those that belong to the group, while as “Me” “...is essentially a member of a social group and represents, therefore, the value of the group, that sort of experience which the group makes possible” (Mead 214).

The definitions of Mead were later accepted by such researchers as Hermans, Bruner, and Boesh, while as the theory of the duality of human personality was further developed. According to the commonly used approach, the values of “I” are found in the “*immediate attitude*” of a person towards something. This creates the picture of the Self, as a result of unceasing interaction between “Me”, the external aspect of the personality aimed at the social processes and “I”, the internal aspect of a human being, expressing predominantly current impressions, attitudes and

feelings as a reaction to the conditions of the external environment at the present moment (Boesh).

Nature of the Dialogical Self and Creation of Meaning

The recent research on the psychology of the Self affirms that the human beings are constantly involved in the process of creating, confirming, and reflecting the perception of their personality and their ideas about their Selves. The existence of “Me” requires the reiterating process of its dialogue with “I” and with the external environment, the society. Thus, the meaning of the inner self is achieved through communication with a society, expressed in a dialogic manner, where “I” and “Me” are involved, and the society plays the role of the external source of novelty.

Hubert J.M. Hermans (1999) depicts this kind of dialogical movement in terms of a model consisting of three main steps:

- (a) “positioning”, the step on which the self takes a certain position;
- (b) “counter-positioning”, where the voice of a real or imaginary other speaks from a position, opposite to the one chosen in (a);
- (c) “repositioning”, where the self reformulates its original position (Hermans 73).

According to Hermans, Self-innovation is achieved if the successive steps are associated with increasingly higher levels of novelty. Self-innovation may imply the creation of meaning in terms of making conclusion, intellectual assumption, which in consequence will result in the change of behavior of the individual.

Constructing the dialogical self brings together two cardinal ideas, dialogue and self, integrating them into a single construct (Ho). Self-reflection turns out to be a vital quality of a human personality. This process involves the phenomena known as the “internal dialogue or “self-directed dialogue” (a mental process directed to oneself, involving only one person, acting as

both “speaker” and “listener”) and the “external dialogue”, or “other-directed dialogue”, which is *interpersonal, referring to dialogue that the self engages with other(s)- with the self still being the point of reference* (Ho).

Such researchers and popular writers, as Castaneda, Leary, Lilly, who dedicated their works to studying the altered states of consciousness propose, that one of the functions of the “internal dialogue” is not only to create and modify the meaning. Researchers state that unceasing cyclic manner of the stream of consciousness also fixes and maintains the meaning attached to the outer environment (Lilly, *Center of Cyclone*). When the internal dialogue is stopped, the person may lose the meaning, or semantics, that is usually attached to social patterns of behavior, and even the meaning defining the subjects of the outer environment (Castaneda, *Tales of Power*). The writers also underline the notion that the main forms that actually forms human personality is the society (Lilly, *Programming and Meta-programming in the Human Biocomputer*).

Meaning received from Society

One of the first impulses towards studying the nature of society’s influence on the human Self happened in the beginning of the twentieth century, marked by the studies of cognition by Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the importance of socio-cultural environment, social interaction, and instruction (Vygotsky). Vygotsky viewed development of meaning generally as the product of culture and the society’s work inside the person. He believed that social interaction with “knowledgeable others”, e.g., intelligent adults, increases the child’s potential development level and that this process becomes most efficient, when the step of confirming of existing knowledge is followed by the second step, adding new information (Vygotsky). Thus, the meanings received by the Self from the socio-cultural environment reinforce and complement each other, while creating chains and nets.

Another important aspect of culture is language, which is considered one of the main instruments in socialization and creating a meaning, as it provides a tool for the person in constructing a culturally grounded sense of self in relation to other (Boesh).

Society, Culture, and the Dialogic Nature of the Self

In any way, one has to accept the great significance of the society's role in the formation of Dialogic Self – as far, as it can be a reason of such psychological construction of a human being and its main catalyst. It is believed that self-reflection is conducted due to communication with others (even if imaginary others), reflecting the social values and thinking patterns.

Hubert Hermans (2001) in his work on personal and cultural positioning extends the relationship of individual and the culture to the concept of mutual inclusiveness, according to which the Self is “culture inclusive”, and the culture is “self-inclusive”. Hermans writes that the *“Self and culture are conceived of in terms of a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationship can develop”* (243). Consequently, Culture and Self do not just influence each other, but contain and reflect each other. In this regard, the society can be viewed as a complex structure containing the core features of the Selves of its representatives, and the Self can be viewed as a little model of the whole external social environment.

Hermans claims that there is a number of positions which “I” can take, representing certain attitudes resulting in the courses of action and presents this concept in his model of Moving Positions (252). The movement process of an “I” through the imaginary space from one position to another, accompanied by self-negotiations, self-contradictions, and self-integrations finally produces a meaning. The outer environment is divided by Hermans into “External”, containing the “knowledgeable others” and “important others” – people of the prime significance for the individual, and “Outside” – the society with its values and culture as whole. The number of

positions a person can take is limited, and generally dictated by the cultural peculiarities.

When two persons interact in communication process, some of the positions in “internal”, “external”, and “outside” intersect, which is reflected in finding the common interests, sharing certain views, having knowledge about each other’s character etc. People, belonging to different cultures have less possibility for their “I” positions to intersect in big areas, so that the opportunity of misunderstanding increases significantly. The difference in the possible “I” positions also creates the interest for the cultural differences.

Culture Membership: Confirming the Meaning

As it becomes clear, culture plays an important role in determining the nature of a Self. Out of the dialogical models representing the Self and the Culture one can conclude that when individuals get engaged in particular cultural contexts, their psychologies become shaped accordingly. Consequently, psychological systems develop within the frames provided by cultural contexts and social situations. Psychological systems then start the dialogic activity by developing in ways that are culturally resonant (Markus 279). This process makes the person a member in a certain group or culture.

In many ways, especially in the Western society, being a culturally appropriate person, an “insider”, requires positive feeling about oneself, or the positive self-esteem. Self-esteem is created and maintained by dense networks sustaining informal and formal communication practices, distribution of awards and honors, etc. The Self of a person, especially its social aspect, “Me”, strives for self-confirmation, the source of which is in the “external” and “outside” zones, according to the Herrmans’ model (Herrmans 257).

At the collective level, different communities have clearly different pathways for the self, as it ought to develop. There are social forces that form a person’s presentation of the self, as it is

expressed in everyday activity. Every culture influences the development of the self in a unique way, so that the movement of self towards specific pathways is valued and encouraged by the community.(John Lilly, *Programming and Metaprogramming*, 1968) According to J. Bruner (1990), societies provide channels of expression for and restriction upon the range of manifested behaviors, especially if they carry social significance (Bruner Chp.2).

Society and the Self: Two ways traffic

However, the dialogue of the society and the Self is not limited to social influence and conditioning alone. The Self also influences the society, for example, by the means of creativity, if it goes about changing the social contexts. The Self also contributes to the confirmation and preservation of the social contexts (Markus, Kitayama 281). In this way, the meaning that was first created by the society in the person is later projected back onto society. People from the same culture maintain sharing the common meaning through adoption of certain rules, communication, language, gaining “self-esteem” in a particular way, etc. This makes culture and social values relative and having sense only if the sharing of the common meaning of the society’s members occurs.

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