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A SUBSERLF THEORY OF PERSONALITY¹

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Abstract: Previous theories of personality which have introduced the concepts of ego states, complexes, subsystems, subpersonalities, and subselves are briefly reviewed. A series of postulates and corollaries are proposed that form the skeleton of a formal theory of personality based on the concept of subselves. Structural, developmental, psychopathological, and psychotherapeutic implications are discussed.

Many of the major theorists of personality have proposed that the mind is made up of many subselves. For example, Eric Berne (1961) talked of ego states, Carl Jung (Proffoff, 1973) of complexes, Abraham Maslow (1970) of syndromes, and Andras Angyal (1965) of subsystems. However, despite this agreement on the usefulness of the concept of the subself, very little theoretical discussion has appeared using this concept. The present chapter explores the past use of the concept and proposes postulates and corollaries for a formal subself theory of the mind.

Other scholars interested in this topic have taken a cognitive approach to the multiple self (e.g., Higgins et al., 1985) or focused on scales to measure aspects of self-complexity (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996). The present paper, however, is grounded in the major theories of personality which are usually ignored by these other approaches.

Multiple Selves in the Major Theories of Personality**Carl Jung**

Jung's term for the totality of psychological processes was the psyche. Jung proposed that complexes exist within the psyche, autonomous partial systems that

¹ From Lester, D. (2017). A subself theory of personality. In V. Zeigler-Hill & T. K. Shackelford (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of personality and individual differences*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

are organizations of psychic contents. Complexes are subsystems of the whole. (The complexes in the collective unconscious are called archetypes.) In particular, Jung identified several complexes that he felt were of particular use for a discussion of human behavior.

The ego consists of our conscious psychic contents and contains percepts, memories, thoughts, desires, and feelings. The persona is a subsystem within the ego and is the self that we present to others, the mask we wear in daily intercourse with others. It involves the roles we play in our lives. The shadow consists of those psychic contents in the personal (and to a lesser extent the collective) unconscious that is in opposition to the contents of the ego. These contents are less developed and less differentiated than the contents of the ego, but their presence is made apparent to the ego whenever the boundaries between the systems break down and the contents from the shadow intrude into the ego.

In addition, the subsystem in the collective unconscious that is in opposition to the persona subsystem of the ego is called the anima in males and the animus in females. By modern standards, Jung erred here in identifying the core of human behavior in terms of the sexual stereotypes of his day. Jung described males as “masculine” and females as “feminine,” in what today would be considered a gender-biased fashion. For example, Jung described the unconscious animus of females as rational and discriminating, showing that Jung believed females to have an irrational and emotional conscious ego. Today, there is no need to accept all of Jung’s ideas wholesale. The anima and animus can be conceptualized more appropriately as the subsystems of the shadow that are in opposition to the persona, and their content can vary depending upon the psychic contents of the particular persona.

Eric Berne

Whereas psychoanalytic theory usually uses the terms id, ego, and superego to characterize particular wishes, Eric Berne (1961) used the concept of ego states. An ego state is a coherent system of feelings and behavior patterns. Complete ego states can be retained in the memory permanently. The defense mechanisms can operate upon complete ego states, and, for example, ego states can be repressed as a whole. Ego states from earlier years remain preserved in a latent state, with the potential to be resurrected (recathected in Berne’s terminology).

The parent ego state is a judgmental ego state, but in an imitative way (primarily, of course, by imitating the person’s parents). It seeks to enforce

borrowed standards. The parent ego state parallels the superego in psychoanalytic theory. The adult ego state is concerned with transforming stimuli into information and then processing that information. It corresponds to the ego in psychoanalytic theory. The child ego state reacts impulsively, using prelogical thinking and poorly differentiated and distorted perception. It corresponds to the id in psychoanalytic theory. However, although this simple correspondence is worth noting, the id, ego, and superego are sets of wishes, while the child, adult, and parent are integrated and coherent ego states. People are always in some ego state, and they shift from one to another (a process which Angyal (1965) called setting and shifting set).

Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow (1970), an important influence in the development of humanistic psychology, urged a holistic approach to the study of personality. Behavior, he argued, is as an expression or creation of the whole personality, which in turn is the result of everything that has ever happened to it. Personality is composed of syndromes, that is, structured, organized, and integrated complexes of diverse specificities (behavior, thoughts, impulses, perceptions, and so on) that have a common unity. The total personality and the syndromes tend to be well organized, and they resist change, instead seeking to reestablish themselves after forced changes and to change as a whole because of tendencies to seek internal consistency. Behavior is an expression of the whole integrated personality (and thus, an expression of all of the personality syndromes).

Other Proposals for Multiple Selves

Decision Theorists

In discussing the phenomenon of self-deception, some decision theorists have proposed a model of the mind like “the older medieval city, with relatively autonomous neighborhoods, linked by small lanes that change their names half way across their paths, a city that is a very loose confederation of neighborhoods of quite different kinds, each with its distinctive internal organization....” (Rorty, 1985, p. 116). Elster (1985) proposed what may be a fitting analogy – the mind as a computer with different programs (software) being loaded and taking control at different times, to which might be added a further analogy for subsubelves, that is, different routines of the software being called up, for example, the crosstabs routine of SPSSX.

Mair (1977), a psychologist, proposed viewing the mind as a community of selves. The expressions “to be of two minds” about an issue and “to do battle with ourselves” suggest that we sometimes talk and act as if we were two people rather than one. Mair suggested that it is useful in psychotherapy to encourage people to conceptualize their minds in this way, with some selves which may be persistent while others are transient, some isolated while others work as a team, some who appear on many occasions while others appear only rarely, and some of which are powerful while others are submissive.

James Ogilvy

Ogilvy (1977), a philosopher, described the mind as a multiplicity of selves with a decentralized organization. This multiplicity of selves, a pluralized pantheon of selves, as opposed to a single monotheistic ego, leads to freedom. He saw the least free person as one who has a single, highly predictable personality, a predictability which, in his view, signifies lack of freedom. Each self is a source of differing interpretations of the world, based on differing interpretive schemes. The person is the result of mediation among this collection of relatively autonomous subselves. The goal is to prevent one of these subselves from taking over control as a single administrator or having them in a hierarchical organization. Ogilvy viewed the subselves as working together, much as in a group, to devise a final product (behavior). Individual differences result from the different evolution of the multiple selves and their differing organizations.

John Rowan

Rowan (1990) surveyed the many theorists who have used the concept of subselves or variants of it. Rowan’s preference is for the term subpersonality, and he defines it as “a semi-permanent and semiautonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person” (p. 8). Rowan noted that, on the one hand, it is necessary to reify subpersonalities, but, on the other hand, we must remember that we are not talking about things but about processes that are fluid and in change. In discussing the origin of subpersonalities, Rowan (1990) suggested that roles could bring out accompanying subpersonalities. Internal conflicts, in which two or more sides argue within us, also can lead to the formation of subpersonalities. Our bodies can participate in these conflicts and act antagonistically to our minds. Thus, the body – and even parts of the body – can also be regarded as subpersonalities. Identification with heroes or heroines can sometimes lead to the person taking on the identity of the hero. Subpersonalities can also derive from the Freudian personal unconscious and the Jungian collective unconscious.

Shapiro and Elliott

Shapiro and Elliott (1976) noted that we often talk to ourselves. Inner dialogues take place as conversations between various subselves, different parts of our self, with different distinct personal characteristics. Shapiro attempted to listen for evidence of conflict in his patients during therapy and then tried to separate the different parts of the person involved in this conflict. Shapiro saw his role as that of coach or facilitator in helping the subselves emerge and training the patient to deal with them in constructive ways. It is critical that none of the subselves be rejected. Each must be understood and integrated back into the self-organization. Shapiro tried to identify or develop a mediator for the subselves. He called it a chairman of the board or some term best suited for the particular patient. The goal is to transfer energy and power to this mediator (c.f., the ego in psychoanalysis and the adult ego state in transactional analysis). Subself therapy differs from other forms of therapy such as transactional analysis because it permits the patient to identify and label the subselves, rather than fitting them into a set of subselves predetermined by the theorist.

Shapiro felt that the optimal number of subselves was between four and nine. Too many subselves result in a fragmented or chaotic self and are a form of psychological disturbance. Five kinds of subselves are found in most people: (i) a nurturing parent subself; (ii) an evaluative parent subself; (iii) a central organizing subself; (iv) a good, socialized, adapted child subself; and (v) a natural child subself (a creative, nonconforming, rebellious, spontaneous, and playful subself). Subselves can be introjected subselves, especially those that result from identification with a parent.

These subselves can interact in a drama (or life script), as a family, as an organization or task group, or as a discussion group. It is important for the psychological health of the client for the subselves to get along with one another. An internal civil war or great conflict and tension can lead to psychological disturbance. The group of subselves should be democratic, with a minimal amount of partisanship, favoritism, and moralistic judgments. The energy of the subselves should also be rechanneled away from fighting into constructive problem-solving under the leadership of a chairman. In addition, an observer should be developed to act as a consultant to the group of subselves.

Shapiro identified several different types of psychopathology: (i) too many subselves, leading to inner chaos; (ii) too great an inner conflict, especially where

the chairman has little power; and (iii) negative emotions (such as sadness and depression) are often caused by one subself attacking the child, often without the patient's awareness.

Psychological health involves having an effective chairman, who can observe, coordinate and execute decisions, and promote basic harmony among the subselves. However, Shapiro notes that integrating the subselves is not enough. We have various subselves, but we are not them. We are greater than the sum of the parts. We have to disidentify with our subselves eventually and transcend them. We have to achieve a higher level of awareness – a spiritual harmony that is beyond the psychological harmony.

A Formal Theory of the Plural Self

In the following sections, a series of postulates about subselves will be proposed, together with references to other theorists who have suggested the ideas. In addition, some of the postulates will have accompanying corollaries. First, the question of what is a subself must be answered. Any of the definitions provided by those theorists of personality who utilize such a concept will suffice, but for present purposes, we can define a subself as a coherent system of thoughts, desires and emotions

Is a Multiple Self Universal?

Postulate 1: Not every individual has a multiple self.

Frick (1993) suggested that only neurotics have multiple selves, not mature and integrated people. He proposed that the level of integration parallels the level of self-awareness, and subselves are associated with low or distorted levels of awareness. Despite Frick's negative view of the concept of subselves, his views lead to the proposition that not everyone may have a mind made up of multiple selves. This raises the question, therefore, of what are the differences between those whose mind can be conceptualized as a multiple self and those whose mind can be conceptualized as a unified self, an issue open to empirical investigation in the future.

Executive Control

Postulate 2: At any point in time, one subself is in control of the mind. It may be said to have executive power.

The notion that one subself is in control of the mind at any point in time was proposed by Eric Berne (1961) in his description of ego states. A good analogy here is a computer in which different programs are in operation at each point in time, such as Excel, SPSS, or Microsoft Word. The subself that has executive power may be called the executive subself.

Corollary 2a: When one subself has executive power, the other subselves are said to be suspended.

The concept of suspension of systems of constructs was fully described by George Kelly (1955) in his theory of personal constructs. Berne (1961) called this process decommissioning.

Corollary 2b: When one subself has executive power, some of the other subselves may be monitoring what is being processed by the executive subself, but others may not. Empirical investigation of the individual is necessary to determine which subselves are monitoring and which are not.

The extreme of this situation is in multiple personality where the different subselves may have amnesia for what transpires when other subselves have executive power. On the other hand, in descriptions of the “hidden observer” in hypnosis (Hilgard, 1986), the belief is that one subself monitors what is going on when other subselves have executive power. It is, therefore, possible that some suspended subselves may monitor what transpires in the executive subself while other subselves may not.

Corollary 2c: Some subselves collaborate in groups or teams, while others may be isolates; some appear in many situations, while others may appear on only rare special occasions; some are domineering while others are submissive.

These dimensions on which subselves may be construed have been suggested by Mair (1977) and others.

Corollary 2d: A subself may have executive power for anywhere from seconds to hours or even longer periods of time.

In the majority of situations, each subself has executive power for a reasonable period, perhaps extending for hours. If subselves are associated with

roles, a person may teach a class (in a professorial role) for 2 h and then drive home to a family where he or she switches into a spouse role. On the other hand, when people have internal dialogues within themselves, debating whether to take some action, each subself has executive power for the time it takes to argue one side of the argument.

Corollary 2e: Selfhood is whichever subself has executive power at the time.

The issue of who “I” am has long been debated by psychologists interested in the notion of selfhood. In the present theory, selfhood is perceived by the individual to be whichever subself has executive power at the time.

Corollary 2f: Subselves may form coalitions within the larger group. These coalitions may improve or impair the functioning of the mind.

In groups and in families, coalitions may form between smaller subsets of the whole, such as children versus the parents in family systems. The same process may occur with subselves. This can be good if the coalitions assist a weak subself to assert itself, but bad if a group of subselves forces other subselves into submission.

Corollary 2g: The existence of subselves accounts for the occasional inconsistency in the behavior of individuals.

Mischel (1968) argued that the occasional inconsistency of behavior provided strong support for a contextual or situational theory of human behavior (as opposed to intrapsychic explanations). The existence of subselves weakens Mischel’s arguments by viewing some apparent inconsistencies as the result of different subselves having executive power in the different situations.

Subselves as a Small Group

Postulate 3: The subselves function in a manner similar to a small group of individuals.

Lester (2010) suggested the usefulness of viewing the various subselves in the mind as a small group. In group dynamics research, intragroup conflict is typically seen as counterproductive, expending energy on activities unrelated to the group purpose. For example, in Cattell’s (1948) group syntality theory, the energy expended on establishing and maintaining cohesion and harmony in the group is

called maintenance synergy, while that used to achieve the goals of the group is called effective synergy. The more energy that goes into maintenance, the less available for achieving goals.

Shapiro and Elliott (1976) demonstrated the usefulness in psychotherapy of creating new subselves in clients designed to reduce this intragroup conflict. For example, it is useful to have a subself with the function of “recording secretary” for information storage, another with the function of “mediator,” and sometimes a “chairman of the board” with the power to help resolve conflict between the subselves. In addition, occasional subselves may outlive their usefulness and should be encouraged to “retire” or no longer try to influence the individual’s mind. Lester (2010) noted that small groups with a hierarchical structure are often more productive, but their members are less satisfied. On the other hand, some structure is often useful. The goal is perhaps to have a dominant subself, but not one that is overly dominating.

Research on group dynamics indicates that increasing the size of the group eventually increases the chances that a dominant member will emerge and force conformity from the other group members. Thus, there is a limit to the size of a group for effective functioning. In writing on subselves, Rowan (1990) and Shapiro and Elliott (1976) have suggested that from 4 to 10 subselves is ideal. Two empirical studies have been reported on this issue. Rowan (1990) asked the clients in a group he led to list their subselves. The mean was 6.5 with a range of 0–18. Lester (2010) asked a sample of undergraduate students to list their subselves and found a mean of 3.5 with a range of 2–6. The number of subselves reported in Lester’s study was not associated with age, but the women reported more subselves than did the men (with means of 3.8 vs. 2.5). The number of subselves reported was also associated with neuroticism and extraversion scores, with extraverted neurotics reported the most subselves, with a mean of 4.6. In another study, students who were unable to report subselves scored lower on a test of self-monitoring (Lester, 2010).

Research on group dynamics also indicates that egalitarian small groups typically produce more and better solutions to problems than individuals, but that they take longer to reach decision and are more likely to make risky decisions. Perhaps these same principles might apply to people with many subselves. For example, it has been proposed by Andras Angyal (1965), Eric Berne (1961), and Carl Jung (Progoff, 1973) that subselves that are excluded from ever assuming control of the mind exert pressure on the dominant (and domineering) subself,

often intruding upon (and even invading) the dominant subself, leading to psychological disturbance. These ideas can be summarized in several corollaries:

Corollary 3a: In some productive organizations of subselves, one subself acts as a leader, analogous to the conductor of an orchestra, coordinating the contributions of the other subselves.

Corollary 3b: Egalitarian groups of subselves typically result in greater satisfaction for the individual.

Corollary 3c: The individual's subselves can reorganize themselves in new ways as they develop.

Corollary 3d: Groups of subselves are best limited to at least four and no more than ten.

Can a Multiple Self be Healthy?

Postulate 4: Having a unified self or a multiple self has no bearing on the individual's psychological health.

Some theorists (such as Gergen, 1971) propose that greater pluralism is associated with greater psychological well-being, while others (such as Rogers, 1959) propose that greater unity is associated with greater psychological well-being.

Corollary 4a: It can be healthy for one subself to maintain overall control of the group of subselves while allowing each subself to have executive power from time to time or delegating duties to other subselves. It may be pathological when this "chairman of the board" is impaired in its role, for this may lead to conflict, struggles, and even war between the subselves, rendering the person's mind chaotic.

Conflict between subselves can be avoided by having good communication between them, validating the existence and function of each subself, and by strengthening the "chairman of the board."

Rationality and Plural Subselves

Postulate 5: Multiple selves may lead to more rational decisions than a unified self.

Moldoveanu and Stevenson (2001) explored the implications of a plural (versus a single) self for the economic theory of humans as rational agents. They portrayed the multiple self as an “ever-changing, possibly internally conflicting entity” (p. 295), and they argued that “Split-self – or schizoid approaches recognize the internally incoherent nature of selfhood...” (p. 318). The idea of an “economic man” implies a self-interested, rational, and temporally stable individual, and classical economic theory conceptualizes humans as rational decision-makers. The possibility of multiple selves might pose grave problems for classical economic theory.

However, not all conceptions of the multiple self would result in irrational decision-making. Indeed, some models, such as that of Shapiro and Elliott (1976) discussed above, in which subselves such as “recording secretary” and “mediator” exist, might lead to greater rationality in decision-making. We have seen above also that decisions made by a small group may be better decisions than those made by a single individual, and we have noted that a parallel situation may be true for a mind made up of many subselves rather than a single unified self. Lester (2010) argued, therefore, that a multiple self may fit the concept of economic man better than a unified self.

Future Subselves

Postulate 6: Individuals can seek to create new subselves for the future.

Several scholars have introduced the concept of possible selves (Hooker & Kaus, 1992). Although their concept appears to be similar to the present focus on subselves, it is not. Hooker and Kaus’s concept of possible selves refers to goals and fears for the future. Hooker and Kaus (1992) instruct their subjects to think about “the kinds of experiences that are in store for us and the kinds of people we might possibly become...what we hope we will be like” (p. 395), and they give an example of “one of my own [possible selves] is to win the lottery and become a millionaire” (p. 305).

Despite this difference between their concept and the present theory, their discussion raises the possibilities that people might indeed seek to create new subselves as defined in the present theory. For example, with regard to roles (one possible form of subselves), an individual might plan to have a child and become a

parent, thereby creating a new role. When depressed people enter psychotherapy to change their lives, their behavior can be construed as seeking to create a new happy subself for the future. In this last example, the reality is that the depressed subself will not disappear or be destroyed, but rather that it will take over the mind for less and less time in the future, in the same way that Angyal (1965) proposed that the biopositive system principle organizes the mind for longer periods of time as clients progress through therapy, while the bionegative system principle organizes the mind less often.

Do Subselves Come in Pairs?

Postulate 7: The subselves in some individuals are complemented by subselves differing on critical dimensions.

Boulding (1968), in writing about the subsystems of society, noted that each system tends to create the need for an opposing system that balances it and that typically these two subsystems share similar characteristics. A forceful pro-choice movement for abortion leads to the development of a forceful pro-life antiabortion movement, and vice versa. Racketeering employers and racketeering unions go together.

This might occur in subselves. Carl Jung felt that each complex in the conscious mind was balanced by a complementary complex in the unconscious mind with opposed traits (Progoff, 1973). For example, if the conscious complex is extraverted and prone to use intuition, then the unconscious complex will be introverted and prone to use sensing. Jung saw complexes and subcomplexes balanced in extraversion-introversion, thinking-feeling, and sensing-intuition. Freeing this idea from the polarity of conscious/unconscious, it can be proposed that any subself will tend to encourage the development of another subself with complementary characteristics. An example here is the description of the “top dog” and “bottom dog” by Perls et al. (1951) in their description of Gestalt therapy – the righteous, nagging, and threatening self versus the self that promises to change if only it could.

Corollary 7a: Some subselves may occur in pairs with complementary attributes, whereas other subselves may occur in pairs with similar attributes. It is an empirical question as to whether individuals have such pairs, the genesis of these pairs, and why some complement each other while others do not.

Corollary 7b: A common polarity in pairs of subselves is the top-dog/bottom-dog dichotomy proposed in Gestalt therapy.

Integration

Postulate 8: The individual eventually tries to integrate the subselves.

If the mind is conceptualized as made up of several subselves, the issue arises as to how the mind might be integrated. It might be that the process of integration (seen by Carl Jung as the task of the second half of life) involves breaking down the boundaries between the subselves and integrating them into a single unified self. Alternatively, it might be that the different subselves are fully developed and coexist in harmony with one another as Berne (1961) and Shapiro and Elliott (976) have suggested. Other forms of integration include time sharing (where each subself has control of the mind on some occasions), cooperation, absorption (where one subself absorbs another), fusion or merging, and finally synthesis.

Corollary 8a: The integration of subselves is a task for the second half of life.

Corollary 8b: One form of integration is peaceful and harmonious coexistence, cooperation, and collaboration between the subselves.

Corollary 8c: One form of integration is the fusion or merging of the separate subselves into a single unified self.

Corollary 8d: It is an empirical issue as to which individuals choose each path of integration and what determines this choice.

The Varieties of Subselves

There are many possible schemes for categorizing a person's subselves. There have been many proposals for the types of subselves that might exist. Some theorists have suggested that there is a core self (Kelly, 1955) and what has been called a social self, pseudo-self, false self, or, preferably, façade self (Laing, 1969).

Postulate 9: There are several possibilities for subselves that are common to all individuals.

Corollary 9a: One common set of subselves consists of one or more core selves and one or more façade selves.

Corollary 9b: Another common set of subselves is the top-dog/bottom-dog subselves proposed in Corollary 7a.

Corollary 9c: There are probably regressive subselves in most, if not all, individuals which are the subselves that they had at an earlier stage in life.

Corollary 9d: There are probably subselves formed by the introjection of the desires and thoughts of powerful others (in particular, parental figures) and imitation of their personality and behavioral styles.

Corollary 9e: Subselves may be defined in terms of social group membership or personal attributes, and, in some people, there may be mixed types.

Subself Theory and Dissociation

Postulate 10: Some subselves may be in a dissociated state about which the other selves have delusional, minimal, or no knowledge.

There are many phenomena which lend themselves to a subself explanation.

- At one extreme is multiple personality in which the individual has two or more personalities (often known as alters), each of which may have amnesia about events occurring to the individual while in another personality. The different “personalities” of the person with multiple personality may be conceptualized as “subselves.”
- In possession, a person – sometimes in a trance state – is “possessed” by a deceased spirit. This spirit may be exorcized by a shaman, and the individual may or may not remember the possession experience (Lester, 2010). It is possible that the “spirit” which apparently possesses the individual is one of his or her subselves which have taken over control of the mind (In an analogous manner, the “it” that comes over us and makes us behave in socially unacceptable ways was construed by Freud as originating in the individual’s own id and may be construed as a subself.).
- Mediums who communicate with the dead often have a spirit guide (also known as a control) who passes on messages from deceased individuals

intended for those who have come to the medium for such messages (Lester, 2010). Occasional mediums are “possessed” by the deceased spirit and speak as if they “are” the deceased person. Such controls may be subselves of the mediums which they do not recognize as such.

- People sometimes claim to remember previous lives as another person which is seen as evidence for reincarnation (Lester, 2010). These memories may occur spontaneously or under hypnosis. It is difficult to distinguish cases of reincarnation from cases of possession. However, both may be situations where subselves take over the control of the mind temporarily.
- Schizophrenics often have auditory hallucinations in which they hear voices. Typically, the schizophrenics attribute these voices to some external agency, but the voices most likely originate in their own minds and may be conceptualized as coming from other subselves.

It is clear that the phenomena mentioned in points (1) through (5) fall on a continuum of distancing or dissociation. In multiple personality, there is amnesia for the events occurring in other personalities, and amnesia is often present in possession experiences. In memories of past lives and the spirit controls of mediums, there is no amnesia, but rather the subject locates the experience as coming from an external source (e.g., a previous life or the spirit world). The same is true for the auditory hallucinations of individuals with schizophrenia which the patient typically views as coming from “other realms.”

In contrast, healthy people usually experience their different subselves consciously and acknowledge them as part of the self. They may label these subselves as roles (e.g., employee, parent, spouse), by mood (e.g., the depressed self, the happy self), or in some idiosyncratic way. When they “talk to themselves,” they recognize that both “voices” are their own. When they have conflicting desires, they recognize that the opposed desires are all their own.

Interestingly, those who believe in the phenomena described here often use the other phenomena to explain them. For example, multiple personality and reincarnation may be explained as an example of possession. The auditory hallucinations of individuals with schizophrenia may be viewed as communications from deceased individuals dwelling in the spirit world. However, the model of the mind as composed of subselves, with varying amounts of dissociation, remains the most parsimonious explanation of all of these phenomena. It explains the phenomena without recourse to explanations (such as

reincarnation or a spirit world) which many scientists reject as unproven, and it does so using a holistic conceptualization of the human mind which has a long history in psychological thought.

Corollary 10a: The concept of dissociated subselves can explain such phenomena as multiple personality, possession, mediumship, reincarnation, and auditory hallucinations.

Psychological Disturbance

The theory of subselves proposed here leads to many types of psychological disturbance.

Postulate 11: There are many forms of psychological disturbance which can arise from the conceptualization of the mind as consisting of many subselves.

Corollary 11a: Psychological disturbance can arise from symptoms of pressure, intrusion, and invasion between subselves.

This description of psychological disturbance was proposed most cogently by Angyal (1965). In symptoms of pressure, one subself tries to assume executive power while another subself is in control. This can result in mild symptoms such as insomnia, heightened anxiety, restlessness, and fatigue. In symptoms of intrusion (called contamination by Berne), while one subself has executive power, other subselves affect occasional behaviors. The tone of voice or other nonverbal qualities of the behavior may be controlled by a suspended subself. Slips of the tongue, obsessive thoughts, hallucinations, and delusions are other manifestations of symptoms of intrusion. Jung considered neurosis to be the result of intrusions. In symptoms of invasion, subselves invade one another, and the behavior of the individual becomes chaotic as different behaviors are controlled by different subselves. It is a state of being at war with oneself, and Jung saw the psychoses as the manifestation of symptoms of invasion.

Corollary 11b: Psychological disturbance can arise when one subself has executive power exclusively.

When one subself governs exclusively, the other subselves are deprived permanently of executive power, and this creates an imbalance among the subselves. The ideal situation is for each subself to be recognized, accepted, and permitted expression and to have executive power from time to time.

Corollary 11c: Psychological disturbance can arise when the individual has difficulty setting and shifting set (changing which subself has executive power) appropriately in a situation.

A person may show a stubborn resistance to shifting subselves when a shift is warranted, as when the role in which the individual is operating changes (e.g., from worker to parent), or when the individual shifts sets opportunistically and inappropriately (e.g., when a psychotherapist commits a boundary violation and becomes sexually intimate with a client).

Corollary 11d: Psychological disturbance can arise when the content of the subselves is pathological.

There may be psychopathology because the content of one or more subselves is pathological. A serial murderer may, for example, have several subselves with firm boundaries (and so no symptoms of intrusion or invasion) and be able to set and shift set appropriately and yet may enjoy torturing and killing others. Berne (1961) gave the example of a happy concentration camp guard as illustrating this type of psychopathology. Angyal (1965) in his theory of personality proposed a bionegative system principle (consisting of the pattern of vicarious living and the pattern of noncommitment) which also is an example of content psychopathology.

Corollary 11e: The healthiest individuals may have one subself that is in charge of the set of subselves.

Frick (1993) suggested that a superordinate subself is required for healthy functioning – as some have phrased it, someone to conduct the orchestra. There may also be a core subself than can and should assume leadership.

Corollary 11f: Some subselves may cease to be useful as the individual matures and may need to become less influential in determining the individual's life.

Corollary 11g: Subselves that may be unhelpful for some tasks and impair performance and development may be useful in other situations.

Excellent examples of this can be found in Eric Berne's ego states in which each ego state (child, adult, and parent) is appropriate in some situations.

Corollary 11h: The possibility of attributing negatively valued aspects (thoughts, desires, emotions, or behaviors) of oneself to one or more subselves may enable the individual to maintain high self-esteem since the negative aspects of one subself do not color the other subselves.

Developmental Considerations

There is a long tradition in psychology of viewing development as a progression from a state of relative undifferentiation to a state of greater differentiation and hierarchical integration, leading eventually, in the second half of life, to integration. There are two major issues here. How are subselves formed and what determines whether they become part of the plural self?

Postulate 12: Subselves may be formed as a result of early experiences.

Many subselves are formed early in life, remain with us throughout life, become more or less salient over time, but also change. Subselves can be created by experience. Relevant formative processes include the processes described by psychoanalysis (with its emphasis on early experiences, especially traumatic experiences), the impact that the conditions of worth have on the development of a child's façade self as described by Carl Rogers and Andras Angyal ("the pattern of vicarious living"), and parents who are inconsistent as described by Andras Angyal ("the pattern of noncommitment").

Postulate 13: Subselves may be formed by the encountering of possible subselves exemplified by other people.

Kelly (1955) in his theory of personal constructs introduced the concept of threat – the possibility of an imminent change in the individual's core constructs. Encountering someone who presents an alternative lifestyle can be a threat – "I should behave as that person does." In some situations, other people act toward the individual as if he or she should behave in a certain way – and it is tempting to adopt that subself in order to cope with the situation.

Postulate 14: Subselves are selected to become more or less permanent members of the plural self depending on their usefulness in helping the individual succeed.

This success may be healthy (a humanistic perspective) or may help the individual persist in maladaptive behaviors (as in the view of Gestalt therapy).

Postulate 15: Individuals form fewer possible selves as they age. Aging narrows the possibilities for the individual as he or she moves toward completing their specific system principle.

Angyal saw individuals as eventually having too little time left in their lives for changing their specific system principle, and, as a consequence, they have less freedom of choice.

Subselves and Psychotherapy

Postulate 16: The concept of subselves is useful for psychotherapy and counseling.

The hypothetical existence of subselves has a long history or use in psychotherapy (e.g., Shapiro & Elliott, 1976). Transactional analysis (Berne 1961) is based on the existence of ego states. Transactional analysis begins with a structural analysis in which the clients are introduced to the concept of ego states and helped identify which ego state they are in at any time. Intrusions (called contamination in transactional analysis) are identified and eliminated. Psychotherapy then moves to a transactional analysis, in which transactions between individuals are examined for such issues as whether they are complementary or crossed and overt or covert (as in “games”).

Corollary 16a: One useful tactic in psychotherapy is to have the client identify and provide names for their subselves.

Naming the subselves helps clients recognize, explore, describe, discuss, and understand these aspects of themselves.

Corollary 16b: Some subselves are more useful in the psychotherapeutic process than others.

The usefulness of particular subselves at particular stages of the psychotherapeutic process is illustrated by crisis intervention. For example, in dealing with a client in crisis, it is helpful to get the client’s adult ego state (using transactional analysis terminology) in control. If the crisis counselor speaks from a parent ego state, this will encourage the client’s child ego state to take over as

executive and increase the client's feelings of helplessness. Asking nonthreatening questions designed to elicit information facilitates the client's Adult ego state assuming executive power and calming the client down.

Corollary 16c: It is important in psychotherapy to know the relationships among a client's network of subselves, that is, the alliances and coalitions that exist and how they change from time to time and situation to situations.

Corollary 16d: Some subselves may become enmeshed, and the psychotherapist must help the client create sufficiently impermeable boundaries. Alternatively, some subselves may become disengaged, and the task then is to recognize them and encourage them to express themselves.

Corollaries 16c and 16d come from ideas common in family therapy, in particular, families in which each family member is far too involved in the personal concerns of the other family members and families in which coalitions form as the members take sides in family disputes.

Criticisms

Several writers have noted that the criteria for identifying a subself must be specified. What are the attributes and parameters of a subself? Katzko (2003) criticized those writing about subselves (or some other comparable term) for not specifying what the term means. He noted that the term can have a dictionary definition, which he saw as the connotative usage, "the relation between a term and a concept" (p. 85). Katzko noted that the term can also refer to some phenomenon, what he saw as the denotative usage, and, in this case, it "points" to a real-world object.

Katzko further criticized the terminology. He dislikes describing the "self" as made up of "subselves," which he contrasts with "an atom is made up of subatoms" (p. 94), an idea that physicists would abhor. Several theorists have avoided this by using terms such as "mind" or "psyche" rather than "self" and by using terms such as ego states or complexes instead of subselves.

Finally, Katzko stressed the importance of distinguishing between a multiplicity of subselves and multiple aspects of one single self. A multiplicity of subselves "implies an aggregate of several independent entities, all of which are members of a single class" (p. 95). Eric Berne's (1961) proposal of three ego states or Lester's (2010) proposal of treating the subselves as analogous to several people

working together in a group setting (neither example cited by Katzko) clearly fits into the multiplicity of subselves concept.

Discussion

The notion that individuals have a unified, whole self may be an illusion which is particularly strong in the Western world. This illusion of wholeness may be created by defense mechanisms, the psychological processes of condensation, displacement, transference, and identification, which “create an illusory sense of wholeness and personal continuity out of what are actually inconsistent self-experiences” (Ewing, 1990, p. 266). However, cultural anthropologists, making what psychologists would call clinical observations of indigenous peoples in their natural settings, are aware of the varieties of subselves that appear in different contexts or social settings and do not consider this to be an illusion.

Baumeister (1998) has stated: “The multiplicity of selfhood is a metaphor. The unity of selfhood is a defining fact” (p. 682). Since Baumeister presented no facts to back up his assertion, it could just as appropriately be asserted that the unity of the self is a metaphor while the multiplicity of the self is a fact. Postulate 1 of the present theory has granted that some people have a single self while others have a multiple self. It is not crucial, but it is of some importance, that psychological theories match people’s experience. Although the present author is convinced of his continued existence as a single individual, he is also quite sure that he has different, subjectively experienced subselves.

There are many sources from which additional propositions and corollaries about subselves might be identified. Role theory provides such concepts as a role set (a collection of roles), formal and informal roles (such as “professor” and “scapegoat” in the family system), role conflict and role strain, role distance in which the individual resists the role and purposely gives inauthentic performances, and the degree to which individuals see themselves as defined primarily through one of the roles they play. It may be important, however, to clarify the distinctions between (or relationships among) the concepts of subselves, identities, and roles. Other sources of propositions and corollaries may come from analogies with group dynamics and family therapy. It is hoped that this formal presentation of a subself theory of the mind will stimulate analysis and development of the theory.

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A TWO-SELF THEORY OF SUICIDE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING SUICIDAL CLIENTS²

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Abstract: Building upon the ideas of Brian Mishara's two tendency model of suicide and Bijou Yang Lester's two component model of decision making, a two-self model of suicide is present, involving a suicidal self and a nonsuicidal self interacting with each other. A series of postulates and corollaries are presented, along with implications for counseling.

Mishara (1996) proposed the existence of two basic tendencies that vary over time: (i) a suicidal tendency D and (ii) a life tendency L. It could be, of course, that these two tendencies are merely opposite ends of a single dimension, but Mishara opted to view them as two separate tendencies.³ These two tendencies can influence each other through a process of mutual inhibition, and this inhibition can be weak, moderate or strong. There are many experiences that can influence D, the suicidal tendency, such as loss of a partner or a diagnosis of a terminal disease, and there are also many experiences that can affect L, the life tendency, such as falling in love or achieving a goal.

Bijou Yang Lester (Lester, B.Y., 2011), a behavioral economist, was interested in explaining the choices made by individuals. She proposed that choices are determined by a two-process model, in which the individual's behavior is affected by a rational component and an irrational component. She noted that one can behave rationally or irrationally. However, when one behaves rationally, there may be irrational components, and, when one behaves irrationally, there may be rational components. Yang Lester gave the example of credit card use. Carrying a zero balance and getting the cash bonus is rational behavior with a rational component. Carrying a non-zero balance but getting the cash bonus is irrational behavior with a rational component. Having a zero balance but no cash bonus is rational behavior with an irrational component. Carrying a non-zero balance and

² Lester, D. (2021). A two-self theory of suicide and implications for counselling suicidal clients. *Suicidology Online*, 12, 7-11.

³There is a parallel here, of course, with Freud's life and death instincts – Eros and Thanatos.

getting no cash bonus is irrational behavior with an irrational component. Consider an adolescent wrist-cutter. Karl Menninger (1938) would view the wrist-cutting as motivated by an unconscious suicidal impulse. In Yang Lester's model applied to this behavior, the adolescent is behaving rationally by choosing to live, but with an irrational element (self-mutilation).

When individuals plan and stage their suicidal action, they have to make many choices, choices which will affect the likelihood of dying from the method chosen and the likelihood of others intervening and saving the individual (Lester & Stack, 2015). For example, an individual planning suicide using an overdose can choose to take the overdose at home or in a motel away from home, and they can also vary the time of the evening and night when they consume the overdose, decisions that affect the chances of someone intervening to prevent the suicide. Some of these choices may be more rational than others or, in the present context, have rational and irrational components. For example, taking a lethal overdose (rational for dying by suicide) at home when other residents are likely to arrive home soon (irrational for dying by suicide) has both components.

Yang Lester noted that two process models (and, we might add, two tendency models) have some similarity to two-self models of the mind. In these models, there seem to be two (or more) subselves arguing with each other, struggling to make sense of the situation, and arriving at a decision. Lester (2015b) has proposed a subself theory of the mind in which he proposed that the mind is made up of two or more subselves (or subpersonalities). He proposed a theory phrased in terms of a set of 16 formal postulates accompanied by 38 corollaries. He chose this formal form of presentation in order to make the model explicit and empirically testable. Lester did not apply his subself model of the mind to suicide, and the present paper takes some of his postulates and corollaries that seem relevant to a two-self model of suicide and examines their implications for understanding suicide.

There are many theorists who have proposed versions of a subself theory of the mind. For example, Carl Jung (1971) proposed the existence of complexes in the psyche, Eric Berne (1962) proposed ego states, while Abraham Maslow (1970) proposed syndromes.

Therefore, in the following sections, a series of postulates about a two-self theory of suicide will be proposed. In addition, some of the postulates will have

accompanying corollaries.⁴ First, the question of what is a subself must be answered. For present purposes a subself is defined as a coherent system of thoughts, desires and emotions, organized by a system principle. For this theory of suicide, it is assumed that there are two subselves, a suicidal subself and a non-suicidal subself.

Is a Two-Self Mind Universal?

Postulate 1: Not every individual has both a suicidal subself and a nonsuicidal subself.

Although the present theory is a two self-theory, we must acknowledge that some individuals may never have a suicidal self while others may never have had a nonsuicidal self. It should be noted in passing that some theorists assert that we do not have any subselves. As Baumeister (1998, p. 682) stated, “The multiplicity of selfhood is a metaphor. The unit of selfhood is a defining fact.” I believe Baumeister to be wrong in this.

Executive Control

Postulate 2: At any point in time, one subself is in control of the mind. It may be said to have executive power.

Corollary 2a: When one subself has executive power, the other subself is said to be suspended.

Corollary 2b: A subself may appear in many situations, or only on rare special occasions. One subself may be domineering while the others is submissive.

The psychotherapist should endeavor to determine how much of the time the suicidal subself has executive control and whether the suicidal subself is domineering.

Corollary 2c: A subself may have executive power for anywhere from seconds to hours or even longer periods of time.

⁴ The personality theorists who stimulated these ideas are given full credit and cited in Lester (2010, 2015).

In the majority of situations, each subself has executive power for a reasonable period, perhaps extending for hours or days. On the other hand, when people have internal dialogues within themselves, debating whether to take some action, each subself has executive power for the time it takes to argue one side of the argument.

Corollary 2d: Selfhood is whichever subself has executive power at the time.

The issue of who “I” am has long been debated by psychologists interested in the notion of selfhood. In the present theory, selfhood is perceived by the individual to be whichever subself has executive power at the time.

Corollary 2e: The existence of two subselves accounts for the inconsistency in the behavior of individuals.

Postulate 3: Individuals can seek to create new subselves for the future.

Several scholars have introduced the concept of possible selves (Hooker & Kaus, 1992). Although their concept appears to be similar to the present focus on subselves, it is not. Hooker and Kaus’s concept of possible selves refers to goals and fears for the future. Hooker and Kaus instructed their subjects to think about “the kinds of experiences that are in store for us and the kinds of people we might possibly become...what we hope we will be like” (p. 395), and they give an example of “one of my own [possible selves] is to win the lottery and become a millionaire” (p. 305).

Despite this difference between their concept and the present theory, their discussion raises the possibilities that people might indeed seek to create new subselves as defined in the present theory. When depressed people enter psychotherapy to change their lives, their behavior can be construed as seeking to create a new non-depressed(or nonsuicidal) subself for the future. In this example, the reality is that the depressed or suicidal subself will not disappear or be destroyed, but rather that it will take over the mind for less and less time in the future.

Integration

Postulate 3: The individual can try to integrate the subselves.

It may be impossible ever to eliminate one subself. In that case, the issue arises as to how the mind might be integrated. It might be that the process of involves breaking down the boundaries between the two subselves and integrating them into a single unified self. This may not be desirable with a suicidal subself and a nonsuicidal subself. Alternatively, it might be that the two subselves coexist with one another, with the individual acquiring tactics to suspend the suicidal self whenever it assumes (or tries to assume) executive power.

The Sources of Subselves

Postulate 4: The suicidal subself may be a regressive subself developed early in life, formed by the introjection of the desires and thoughts of powerful others (in particular, parental figures) and imitation of their personality and behavioral styles.

In Transactional Analysis (TA), it has been proposed that the suicidal impulse (and in the present theory, the suicidal subself) stems from the parent's early injunctions that the child had never been born and that the child cease to exist (Woollams, et al., 1977). The infant or child can receive a "do not exist" message at any age and in various ways. The infant may be handled stiffly or with distaste. Perhaps a parent actually says, "I wish you'd never been born." The child may perceive such an injunction even when there is no specific injunction. For example, if the birth was a difficult one, and the child hears about this, the child may decide that he or she deserves punishment for hurting the mother.

This injunction can become part of the person's script and, in the present theory, part of the suicidal subself. According to TA, the injunction is received by the child and so becomes part of the Child ego state. In contrast, the nonsuicidal subself is grounded in the Adult ego state. In guidelines for crisis intervention and counseling with suicidal individuals, a TA approach recommends asking questions that will put the patient's Adult ego state in executive control in order to calm the patient and minimize the influence of the Child ego state for the present time.

Postulate 5: The suicidal subself may be formed as a result of early experiences.

The suicidal self may be formed by relevant formative processes including traumatic experiences (such as verbal, physical and sexual abuse) or the conditions of worth as described by Carl Rogers.

A Positive Aspect of Two Subselves

Postulate 6: The possibility of attributing negatively valued aspects (thoughts, desires, emotions, or behaviors) of oneself to the suicidal subself may enable the individual to maintain high self-esteem since the negative aspects of the suicidal subself do not color the nonsuicidal subself.

Enmeshed Subselves

Postulate 7: The twosubselves may become enmeshed, and the psychotherapist must help the client create sufficiently impermeable boundaries so that the nonsuicidal self can withstand pressure from the suicidal self to take over executive power and resist intrusions from the suicidal self into the nonsuicidal self when the nonsuicidal self has executive power.

Implications for Counseling

In a subself model of the human mind, it is critical that the counselor help the client to identify the different subselves. The names given to these subselves need not fit a predetermined set of categories developed by a theorist, and the counselors can let the client label their own subselves as they are identified. Some useful labels for subselves come from the business world, such as chairman of the board and recording secretary. Indeed, the counselor may seek to create new subselves, such as a recording secretary if the client does not have such a subself already, and a mediator, a subself that negotiates between conflicting subselves.

There several systems of counseling that are based on concepts similar to the subself model proposed by Lester. Transactional Analysis (TA) uses the concepts of ego states, but these are limited to three major ego states, Child, Adult and Parent. However, the TA principles can easily be modified for the proposed two subselves proposed in Lester's model, and Orton (1974) has described the use of TA for crisis intervention. Goulding and Goulding (1979) have proposed Redecision Therapy, based on TA which focuses of helping clients reject injunctions from parents and making decisions to change.

Jeffrey Young (Young &Klosko, 1993) introduced schema therapy in which schemas are organized patterns of thoughts and behaviors, akin to subselves. People's behavior (coping styles) is a result of their schemas, and schemas and

coping styles can combine into modes. Psychotherapy involves identifying and examining these schemas, initiating dialogues between competing schemas, and testing their validity. These techniques can be found also in some forms of psychoanalytic therapy. For example, Pizer (1998) discussed the multiply constituted, distributed self, and presented a model for the tolerance of paradox and conflict in this distributed self as a developmental achievement.

For suicidal clients, Firestone (2004, 2005) has illustrated the use of Voice Therapy, a system in which subselves are presented as inner voices that express in words the thoughts and desires of the suicidal self, and she has described how therapy sessions might have proceeded with a young woman (described in Katie's Diary [Lester, 2004]) who died by suicide. Other systems of counseling that utilize a subself model are Polster (1995), Rowan (1990), Schwartz (1995) and Shapiro and Elliott (1976).

In recent years, those counseling suicidal clients have been urged to listen to the pain (psychache [Shneidman, 1996]) experienced by the clients (Pompili, 2018). In attempting this, it may be useful for counselors to recognize that the client may have two (or more) subselves, and to help the client identify and eventually evaluate these subselves.

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SCHEMAS AND SUICIDE⁵

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Abstract: This essay explores the relevance of Schema Therapy to Lester's subself theory of personality and, in particular, to his two-self theory of suicide in which the mind has a life-oriented subself and a suicide-oriented subself.

Schema therapy (Young, et al, 2006) is a relatively new approach to psychotherapy. A *schema* may be defined as an emotional and cognitive pattern, while a *schema mode* is a combination of activated schemas and coping strategies, Edwards (2022) described the process of schema therapy as using a variety of techniques (e.g., psychodrama, chair-work,) to separate out, describe and have clients engage with their schemas. Schema therapists are especially focused on maladaptive schemas, defined by Edwards as “emotionally charged meaning structures learned in early childhood in adverse situations of unmet need, that are often at the root of current problems” (p. 214). Needs must also not be excessively gratified. The satisfaction of needs should be at an optimal level. The core emotional needs are:

- 1 Secure attachment to others (includes safety, stability, nurturance, and acceptance)
- 2 Autonomy, competence, and sense of identity
- 3 Freedom to express valid needs and emotions
- 4 Spontaneity and play
- 5 Realistic limits and self-control, secure borders

“Schemas (in general) incorporate our beliefs about ourselves, the world around us, and the world of others. These beliefs operate in the background of our awareness. However, they have great influence over our sense of self, our expectations about life, and the quality of our relationships.”⁶ There are child schema modes, parent schema modes and healthy adult schema modes. However,

⁵ From Vatan, S., & Lester, D. (2025). Schemas and suicide. *Suicide Studies*, 6(1), 112-115.

⁶ <https://www.attachmentproject.com/blog/early-maladaptive-schemas/>

there are also maladaptive schema modes, and Schema Therapy focuses on early maladaptive schemas.

Young et al. (2003, p. 7) define an early maladaptive schema as:

- “a broad, pervasive theme or pattern
- comprised of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations
- regarding oneself and one’s relationships with others
- developed during childhood or adolescence
- elaborated throughout one’s lifetime and
- dysfunctional to a significant degree” (p. 7).

Early maladaptive schemas that are found in clients can be divided into five domains:

1. Disconnection & rejection
2. Impaired autonomy & performance
3. Impaired limits
4. Other directedness
5. Over-vigilance & inhibition

Each of these domains contains several early maladaptive schemas.

Disconnection and rejection:

Abandonment
 Distrust/abuse
 Emotional deprivation
 Defectiveness/shame
 Social isolation

Impaired autonomy & performance

Dependence/incompetence
 Vulnerability to harm/illness
 Enmeshment/undeveloped self
 Failure

Impaired limits

Entitlement/grandiosity
 Insufficient self-control/self-discipline

Other-directedness

- Subjugation
- Self-sacrifice
- Approval/recognition seeking

Over-vigilance & inhibition

- Negativity/pessimism
- Emotional inhibition
- Unrelenting standards
- Punitiveness

Although all of these early maladaptive schemas may be relevant to suicide several of these themes have been explored for their relevance to suicide. For example, Lester (1997) explored the role of shame in suicide. He gave the example of Admiral Mike Boorda, chief of naval operations, who claimed to have served in combat in Vietnam when he had not done so. On an afternoon in 1996, when a reporter was scheduled to interview him about his claim, he shot himself in the chest (where the combat medal had hung).

The role of negativity and pessimism in suicidal behavior is evidenced by the more than 8,350 citations for the Hopelessness Scale (Beck, et al. 1974) which has been used in scores of studies on suicidal behavior. The presence of childhood sexual and physical abuse in suicidal individuals has been well documented from 1986 to the present time (Briere & Runtz, 1986; Kennedy, et al., 2024).

Schema theory clearly has similarities to earlier models for psychotherapy, such as Gestalt Therapy (Perls, et al., 1951) and Firestone's Voice Therapy (Firestone, 1986). Lester (2010, 2015) has proposed a theory of personality based on the proposition that the human mind is made of several subelves. A subself is a relatively autonomous and organized set of psychological processes in the mind (such as thoughts, emotions and desires) that co-exists with other similar sets. A subself, therefore, overlaps with the construct of a schema.

Just as schema therapy focuses on maladaptive schemas, Lester's Postulate 12 states that subelves may be formed as a result of early experiences, and obviously some of these subelves may be healthy while others may be maladaptive. Postulate 16 suggested that the concept of subelves may be useful for psychotherapy and counseling. Lester (2021) proposed a theory of suicide based on the proposition that most people have two subelves, a life-oriented

subself and a suicide-oriented subself, and he explored how psychotherapy could use the existence of these two subselves to help clients resolve this conflict.

In Transactional Analysis, it has been proposed that the suicidal impulse (and in the Lester's theory, the suicidal subself) stems from the parent's early injunctions that the child should never have been born and that the child should cease to exist (Woollams, et al., 1977). The infant or child can receive a "do not exist" message at any age and in various ways. The infant may be handled stiffly or with distaste. Perhaps a parent actually says, "I wish you'd never been born." The child may perceive such an injunction even when there is no specific injunction. For example, if the birth was a difficult one, and the child hears about this, the child may think unconsciously that he or she deserves punishment for hurting the mother.

Lester argued that it is important in psychotherapy for the psychotherapist to help the client identify his or her subselves. It often helps if the client can assign names to the subselves, and it is useful also for the client to develop new subselves, such as a mediator subself or a recording secretary subself.⁷ The resolution is to have the client integrate the subselves, and integration can entail different options, such as integrating the many subselves into one subself (which is unlikely) or having peaceful co-existence of the many subselves. This applies not only to the mind made up of many subselves but also to the notion of a life-oriented and suicide-oriented pair of subselves.

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POSSESSION AND THE MULTIPLE SELF

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Abstract: This essay reviews current thinking on possession by spirits in order to explore whether Lester's multiple self model for the mind is relevant.

Lester (2015) has proposed a theory of personality (really a theory of the mind) that proposes that our mind has several subselves. He phrased his theory in a set of postulates and corollaries, one of which is this:

Postulate 10: Some subselves may be in a dissociated state about which the other selves have delusional, minimal or no knowledge.

Corollary 10a: The concept of dissociated subselves can explain such phenomena as multiple personality, possession, mediumship, reincarnation and auditory hallucinations.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the research and theories on possession to see if they fit with the proposal that possession is merely a way that one of a set of multiple selves manifests itself.

Possession⁸

The idea that we can be possessed by an agency other than ourselves has a long history. Indeed, the idea has been enshrined in our language,

Why did you do that?

I don't know. It just came over me.

and we sometimes say that, "I wasn't myself."

⁸ Hess (1990) distinguished between spirit possession and spirit infestation (i.e., ghosts).

The idea is also present in psychoanalysis. In the original German, the word **id** was not used, but rather **es (it)**. James Strachey, who made the first translation of Freud's works, was educated at a private school in England where Latin was taught, and still may be, taught. (I had five years of Latin in the 1950s.) Therefore, when Strachey was confronted with Freud's German terms, he switched them to Latin, resulting in the **ego**, the **id**, and the **superego**.⁹

In order to communicate with the spirits of dead family members and friends, some individuals go to mediums. During séances, some mediums go into trances, apparently, and speak as if they were the dead relative or friend. (When I went to one of the most renowned mediums in England, he did not go into a trance, but rather said, "I have a message for you from Elizabeth.") Possession by spirits, typically evil spirits, is common in fiction and movies, and exorcism is required to rid the person of the possessing spirit.

Ward (1980) distinguished between two types of possession. In *ritual possession*, there is a ceremony which operates as a socially sanctioned psychological defense mechanism and has the social function of reinforcing cultural morality and established power. Mediums who become possessed illustrate this type of possession. *Peripheral possession* is a more long-term state in which the individual believes that he or she is unwillingly possessed by intruding spirits and functions as an indirect form of social protest. Ward suggested that peripheral possession constitutes a pathological reaction to individual conflict.

This essay reviews what scholars have written about possession and whether their ideas fit into my multiple self theory of the mind.

Possession has been conceptualized as parallel (similar to) multiple personality disorder in the Western world (Kenny, 1981; Castillo, 1994b) and as schizophrenia (Azaunce, 1995). There are scholars some who do not accept the existence of possession. For example, Rashed (2020) saw the assumption of spirit possession as a way that the individual and the culture moves the interpretation of the individual's abnormal behavior from disturbed behavior over which he or she has no control to one of intentionality, albeit motivated by a spirit that has taken over his or her mind. He also sees a similarity between possession and dissociative identify disorder.

⁹ As Lester (2019) has pointed out, those three terms are better used as adjectives rather than nouns: an id wish or desire, a superego wish, etc.

Cavanna, et al. (2010) presented four cases of spirit possession in Haiti that were clearly the cultural interpretation of epileptic seizures. A typical case was the following.

A young Haitian woman aged 19 was brought to our attention by her family following a long-standing history of attacks characterized by a sudden feeling of unexplained fear followed by loss of consciousness and generalized convulsions. Family members who witnessed a number of these attacks reported feeling the presence of evil entities during the episodes. They consulted an influential *mambo*, who interpreted these deeply upsetting attacks as possession by the local *loa* of thunder, called *Agaou*. Repeated interictal EEGs and one EEG carried out in the postictal phase confirmed the diagnosis of complex partial seizures with a left temporal focus. After initiation of antiepileptic medication (carbamazepine), the frequency of the seizures decreased by about 40%. (p. 90)

There are, of course, no data on what the percentage of those claiming spirit possession (or to whom spirit possession is attributed) might have epilepsy.

On the other hand, some scholars do accept the existence of possession. For example, Leo (2025) seems to believe that possession can occur. He views it as a dissociative state experienced in an altered state of consciousness. Leo thought that trance-induced possessions can be induced by chanting, prayers and dancing, as in many religious rituals. The bad spirits must be exorcized (removed) while the good spirits must be adorized, that is, accepted and engaged with by the individual. Although Leo provides an immense list of references, nowhere in his paper does he present a case study of a possessed individual.

Let us look at some examples of possession provided by scholars.

Spirit Possession in the Turkmen Culture

Saki and Ahmadi (2022) have explored the cultural belief in spirit possession and fairy possession in the Turkmen culture in Iran which can be alleviated by healers called *Porkhan* in a ritual known as *Porkhani*. After migrating to Iran from Central Asia, the Iranian Turkmen converted to Islam, and their beliefs now incorporate shamanism and Islam.

Saki and Ahmadi construe possession as a psychotic disorder which is explained in the culture as possession of the individual by forces of evil. Healing

cannot be taught or learned. It is inherited from one's ancestors, and many Porkhan have themselves experienced mental illness. Members of the culture believe in both good and evil spirits, and the evil spirits can cause trouble sleeping and eating, as well as symptoms of psychosis, like hallucination and delirium or severe psychomotor arousal. The Porkhan are thought to have supernatural abilities and are inspired to cure those with mental problems.

Saki and Ahmadi note that:” Spirit possession commonly refers to the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she. These forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien....Being possessed by demons or evil spirits is one of the oldest ways of accounting for bodily and mental disorders.” (p. 571)

When someone in this culture falls ill, it is believed that a *jinni* or evil spirit has possessed their soul. The Porkhan has to drive away the evil spirits by appealing to good spirits and releasing the soul from these evil forces. The healing ritual involves music, use of a bonfire, the Porkhan spinning while holding a long rope that is hung from the ceiling, and the participation of the individual's family and community.

It is clear that Saki and Ahmadi do not believe that the individual has been possessed by an evil spirit but, apparently, the individual does although he or she may show no signs of possession, only symptoms of psychiatric disorder.

The role of culture is clear in the different ways in which possession manifests in different cultures. For example, Lambek (1988), reported that, in Mayotte, the southernmost island of the Comoro Archipelago, located in the Mozambique Channel, between Madagascar and Tanzania, that spirits are frequently passed on from generation to generation and, therefore, associated, although not exclusively, with particular families. Each culture has its own version of spirit possession.

Mass Spirit Possession

Wedel (2012) described instances of mass spirit possession (*grisi siknis*) among the Miskitu of Nicaragua. They occurred as violent large-scale events involving many people of all ages which coincided with recent developments in Miskitu society marked by conflicts, contradictions and tense social relations.

The problem, which is locally said to be caused by sorcery, often takes an epidemic form and frequently recurs in schools, especially boarding schools, and poor remote villages or disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the regional capital Puerto Cabezas (also known as Bilwi). The afflicted first experience anxiety, irritation, anger, headaches and dizziness. This is followed by severe convulsions and loss of consciousness. Sufferers may also experience a harsh, localized pain or frightening visions of spirits trying to abduct them, threatening them with blood and knives. During *grisi siknis* attacks, the afflicted often rip their own clothes and hair, hurt themselves and try to bite those who hold them down. Behaviours can be quite violent; victims may grab a machete and run around together, threatening and frightening other people. They may also run into the bush or throw themselves into a river or the sea. On some occasions, metal nails, insects, stones, coins and candles are said to have been magically introduced into the bodies of the sufferers through acts of sorcery. These objects have to be removed as part of the healing process. After each episode, of which there may be several in close succession, the afflicted will usually not remember anything. (pp. 303-304)

This description has similarities to the behavior labeled as *running amok*, originally described in Malaysia but later found in other countries. Wedel hypothesized that socio-economic, environmental, cultural, as well as personal factors, all play their part, as well as the transition from childhood to adulthood, strong emotional behavior learned in childhood, a firm belief in spirits and sorcery, conflicts and contradictions concerning old and new values, and feelings of intense fear and anxiety surrounding *grisi siknis*.

Empirical Research

Al-Adawi, et al (2008) studied individuals in Oman showing spirit possession that was intermittent dissociation (long term that might wax and wane) or transitory dissociation (short duration often after stressful events). On cognitive tests, those with transitory possession had higher scores for verbal fluency and lower scores for a trail making test, as well as different scores on the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (for example, lower scores for perseverative errors). Al-Adawi, et al. concluded that those with intermittent possession showed impairment in many indices of executive functioning.

Ward and Beaubrun (1981) compared regular members of a West Indian Pentecostal congregation (mostly women aged 30-40) who were subject to spirit possession and those who were not. Those who were spirit possessed scored

significantly higher in both neuroticism and on the hysteria scale of the MMPI, but did not differ in extraversion. Ward and Beaubrun suggested that spirit possession was a neurotic disorder. Ward and Beaubrun (1980) presented four cases of possession (in three women and one man) in Trinidad and concluded that they had hysterical tendencies combined with neurotic depression. They noted that the spirit possession had two advantages for the women: direct escape from a conflict situation and lessening guilt for their behavior by being able to blame the spirit.

Trauma

Sharp (1990), commenting on spirit possession in young girls in Madagascar who had to move in order to attend a school (who had, therefore, been dispossessed) noted that possession expressed the chaos that they experienced in their daily lives.

Hecker, et al. (2015) located 917 cases of possession in 21 research articles from 14 low and middle income countries. Of these cases, 44% were male, with an age range of 9 to 74 (means ranging from 23 to 38). The entity possessing the people included evil spirits (jinn), goddesses and deities, animals, black shapes, deceased relatives and human ancestors. The trauma experienced included war-related experiences, sexual and physical abuse in childhood, the death of relatives, and the murder of close friends in adulthood. These were reported by “more than 50% “ of the individuals. Hecker, et al. concluded that PTSD was a common cause of the experience of possession.

Hecker, et al. (2016) interviewed 73 individuals referred by traditional healers who had experience of possession in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The most common explanation was that another person had sent the spirit, mostly a family member or a neighbor, out of jealousy or conflict over resources. Other explanations were the person’s misbehavior or bad luck. The most common symptoms of possession were replacement of inner self (85%), strange dreams (79%), influenced thoughts (76%), behavior that was controlled by the spirit (74%), loss of memory (74%), fainting/feeling dizzy (45%), somatic complaints (33%), aggressive behavior (23%), anger (8%), and suicidal ideation (6%).

Lifetime spirit possession was associated with PTSD symptom severity, feelings of shame and guilt, depressive symptoms, somatic complaints, and psychotic symptoms. Spirit possession during the preceding four weeks was

associated with PTSD symptom severity, impairment of psychosocial functioning, and psychotic symptom severity.

van Duijl, et al. (2010) compared Ugandans with spirit possession with non-possessed Ugandans. Those possessed reported more severe psychoform dissociation¹⁰ and somatoform dissociation¹¹ and more potentially traumatizing events.

van Duijl, et al. (2014) interviewed 119 patients with spirit possession referred by traditional healers in Uganda. “During healing sessions, possessing agents were summoned to identify themselves and underlying problems were addressed. Often-mentioned explanations were the following: neglect of rituals and of responsibilities towards relatives and inheritance, the call to become a healer, witchcraft, grief, and land conflicts (pp. 1-2).

Schaffler, et al. (2016) studied spirit possession practitioners in the Dominican Republic who do and do not experience spirit possession themselves. They found that those who experiencing spirit possession reported greater somatoform dissociation, more problems with sleep, and more previous exposure to mortal danger such as assaults, accidents or diseases. The two groups did not differ in other types of trauma.

Thakur and Pirta (2009) compared those reporting possession and controls in a rural region of India. Those reporting possession scored lower on a measure of general well-being and higher for neuroticism.

War Trauma

Bedet and Sremac (2024) have written about the child soldiers forced to participate in the war in Uganda. Roughly 60,000 children from northern Uganda were abducted by the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) during its war against the Ugandan government between 1986 and 2006.

¹⁰ Psychoform dissociation symptoms are psychological experiences of disconnection, such as amnesia, depersonalization (feeling detached from oneself), derealization (feeling that one's surroundings are not real), and a fragmented sense of identity.

¹¹ Somatoform dissociation symptoms are physical symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, or shortness of breath, that cause significant distress and disruption in daily life, often accompanied by excessive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to the symptoms.

In the pre-colonial religion in Uganda, there were multiple Gods or spirits, some good and some bad. Spirit possession is possible and common among those impacted by trauma, such as being forced to fight as a child in a war. Bedet and Sremac adopted the definition of possession proposed by Neuner, et al. (2012) of an “altered states of consciousness that involve experiences of being under control of a powerful entity, such as a god, a demon, a devil or a ghost” (p. 548). Spirit possession helps the former child soldiers cope with and navigate the post-conflict world, allowing them to reflect on, articulate and communicate their thoughts and emotions.

Bedet and Sremac noted that the returning children frequently experience anxiety and fear as they recall what happened to them. They also know that they behaved as child soldiers in ways that do not meet the values and norms of the society to which they have returned. It is common to view them as having been possessed by bad spirits. This gives the returning adolescent a way of making sense of their experiences.

The Acholi have a ritual called *nyono tong gweno* (stepping onto an egg), which is carried out to cleanse and welcome someone who has been away for a period of time. At the entrance to the community, the returning child steps onto an egg and the dirt that he or she has goes into the egg. Then a goat is killed for the community to eat. In this way, possession by the bad spirits is eliminated.

Nowhere do Bedet and Sremac give evidence that the adolescents accept that they were possessed by spirits and that they are now free of them. Their presentation gives the sense that possession is just a convenient excuse provided to the adolescents.

Neuner, et al. (2012) studied a random sample of individuals aged 12-25 in a war-torn region of Uganda. Spirit possession (*cen*) was more often reported by those abducted as children and forced to fight in the war. Possession was associated with sex (more often in men), less education, extreme poverty, sexual trauma, being forced to kill, abduction and extent of trauma.

Seltzer

Seltzer (1983) presented three cases of possession among the Inuit in Canada. He noted several commonalities in the cases (p. 55).

1. Early deprivation or rejection leading to ego fragility, and predisposition to decompensation.
2. Intrapsychic conflicts related to sexuality, aggression, dependency and future role.
3. The mechanisms of dissociation and projection as defenses against depression.
4. Externalization and anthropomorphization [sic] of psychic conflict.
5. An attempt at conflict resolution through a culturally significant experience, creating both attention and alienation.
6. Ambivalence and resistance to the spirit intrusion lending impetus to conflict resolution.
7. The value of modified therapy combining traditional and modern approaches.

Suwanlert

Suwanlert (1976) studied female cases of spirit possession in Thailand in which the spirit refused to leave the person (*phi bobs*). In these cases, Suwanlert noted hysterical personality, anxiety and depression and psychotic symptoms (hallucinations, delusions, persecutory ideation and auditory hallucinations) in many of these women. The psychotic symptoms were not stable, and Suwanlert thought that the women were not schizophrenic. Comparing those whose spirits refused to leave and those with regular spirit possession, Suwanlert found no differences in clinical and cultural factors, onset, nature of possession, conflicts, or psychotic symptoms.

Cases

It was frustrating not to find cases in the more recent articles. These tended to have elaborate interpretations of what might account for spirit possession without ever testing their proposals on actual cases. The most recent report of a case was in 2019.

Ang and Montiel

Ang and Montiel (2019) interviewed people in Philippines who had experienced spirit possession or who had treated these individuals, both mental health professional and folk healers. Here is one report of a case.

Having spent most of her growing years in a large town, Marie did not believe in stories about spirits or elementals (e.g., nuno, engkanto). One night, she fell ill after urinating beside a large tree which her cousins warned her about. Since then, she would see a man by her window every night. Her fever resolved after a medical consult; however, she found herself tied up every morning and without memory of the previous night. Her family revealed that she would start becoming uncontrollable and aggressive at sundown. Marie briefly stayed in the convent. She was sent home after she attacked a nun. She also recalled going with the man and eating the food he offered her. He persuaded her to stay with him. She returned to her family to say goodbye and found that she had not awoken for two days. Marie's episodes began every night and ended every morning. Her ordeal lasted for a month. (p. 744)

Marie's tendency to become aggressive and her lack of memory for recent events were seen as indicative of an evil spirit controlling her mind and body. Although changes in the body can include skin color, eye color, weight, voice and form, Ang and Montiel did not tell us whether any of these changes occurred in Marie. Marie fought by enduring the rituals that the folk healer performed on her which could include praying over, casting out, exorcism, and binding.

Those interviewed gave five representations of spirit possession.

- Spirit possession as *sinakluban* (an evil spirit)
- Spirit possession as a vulnerability in the individual (psychological or spiritual)
- Spirit possession as a disease
- Spirit possession as *kulam* (sorcery)
- Spirit possession as being chosen

Cardena and Schaffler

Cardena and Schaffler (2018) presented the case of Marcos, a 20-year-old-adult in the Dominican Republic who was abandoned by his parents and physically abused as a child. When he was eight, he lost consciousness, and this subsequently happened many times to him. He would sometimes become temporarily blind, and he found it difficult to eat. He was abused by his peers at school but, eventually, an aunt who believed in *vodou* became his protector. It was decided by his aunt and grandmother that his symptoms resulted from incomplete possession and spiritual

punishment because the spirits could not fully enter and make use of his body. He was, therefore taken to meet other *vodou* healers and participated in their rituals. This continued through his teenage years with many episodes of losing consciousness and trying to harness the spirits that possessed him until, by age twenty, he was able to function as a healer for others.

Cardeña and Schaffler saw Marcos as having a dissociative disorder, although he was never evaluated by medical or psychiatric specialists. They speculated that Marcos may have had a genetic predisposition to the disorder, and note that the protection given by his aunt and, eventually by his grandmother, resulted in his resiliency. They saw Marcos as being strong in the personality trait of self-transcendence, and some of his experiences and capabilities are consistent with models of a permeable self. Strathern (1988) described a mode of personhood that proposes persons as relational and composed of divisible components and coined the term *dividual*. In cases of spirit possession, *dividual* aspects of the self may account for the connections of a person with other social and even spiritual entities (Pype 2011).

Ahmad and Dein

Ahmad and Dein (2016) presented a case in which possession was used as an explanation of a crime, resulting in a judgment of diminished responsibility for the crime.

One night during May 2009 in Leicester, UK, 18-year-old Lorraine Mbulawa attacked her mother with a kitchen knife as she lay sleeping (“Mercy for Witchcraft Girl,” 2011). Sisbsisiwe Mbulawa sustained serious injuries to her face and neck and her daughter was subsequently arrested and charged with attempted murder. (p. 674)

The defendant, raised until recently in Zimbabwe, was found to have no psychiatric disorder, but the psychiatrist thought that she was at risk for future episodes. She believed that she was possessed by the spirit of her dead grandmother. Her family members described her as intelligent, confident and poised. The charged was reduced to unlawful wounding and she received a 12-month suspended sentence. She had an emotional reunion with her who had recovered from the attack.

Ahmad and Dein discuss at length the extent to which cultural norms and beliefs should be taken into account in legal proceedings in England, but they tell

us little about Lorraine Mbulawa. However, I found online that the sequel was reported in British newspapers.¹² In 2019, Lorraine (aged 27) was married to Jesus Matos Sanchez (aged 31) and living in the house where she attacked her mother ten years earlier. Jesus killed Lorraine by strangling her and then died by suicide. His suicide note said that she had attacked him in a “frenzied zombie attack.” Supposedly, Jesus thought that his wife was having an affair, but the police investigation found that the man possibly involved denied having an affair with Lorraine. The pathologist found no evidence on the bodies of a frenzied attack but said that one may have occurred. Witnesses said that the marriage was strained. The two were sleeping apart, and Lorraine was concerned about financial matters and her husband’s mental state. The police had not examined their cell phones (a result of a six-month backlog in the laboratory!). The coroner said there was not enough evidence to support conclusions of unlawful killing or lawful self-defense.

Al-Krenawi and Graham

Al-Krenawi and Graham (1997) presented the case of a male Bedouin psychiatric patient who experienced possession.

A male Bedouin psychiatric patient was initially misdiagnosed and treated as a paranoid schizophrenic. The modern mental health care system correctly understood the "form" of the patient's symptoms, auditory and visual hallucinations. It did not however at first appreciate their "content", or cultural significance. The patient had unresolved anger toward his family which was manifested in an angry exchange with his mother. This exchange created guilt and the belief that the patient had sinned against God and was possessed by demons. A psychiatric social worker was able to reconcile the patient with his mother and to incorporate a traditional Bedouin healer, the Dervish, to exorcise the patient. The patient was cured by the Dervish, re-diagnosed as a neurotic by the modern system, and continued successfully with both systems for several months in follow-up treatment before being discharged. (p. 211)

Cramer

Cramer (1980) presented the case of a Chinese-Mexican male, Juan, who was possessed by four spirits – three Catholic saints and a medical doctor. Cramer observed several occasions when Juan was possessed by these spirits. Cramer

¹² www.thesun.co.uk/news/948976/2/husband-witchcraft-zombie-attack/

decided that Juan suffered “from conflicting emotions and cognitions centering around guilt, inferiority and non-acceptance by his peer group. The personification of his personal problems in the motif of spirit possessions enables the subject to maintain a measure of self-esteem, social status and personality integration” (p. 67). The four spirit possessions resulted in Juan having different postures and different voices.

Cramer proposed that each spirit was an *autonomous complex* (Jung, 1920), functioning as a separate personality-like subsystem, similar to what I refer to as a subself, in an individual with a hysterical personality.

Possession and Abuse

Cases have been documented where the assumption of spirit possession has led to abuse. Briggs and Whittaker (2018) gave several examples of this from England. A three-month old baby was killed by her father, who had mental health problems including drug abuse, because she had been possessed by a *jinni*. A 17-year-old girl was starved to death by her father who was trying to kill the evil spirit that possessed her.

A (Weird) Analogy

Graham (1976) saw an analogy between possession by a spirit and pregnancy (in which a baby has possessed its mother).

- In both, the individual’s body is seen to be invaded by and to interact with an alien being, by virtue of which both actor and being occupy marginal, indeterminate social positions.
- In both, the presence of this alien being provides a sufficient explanation of the actor’s behaviour.
- In both, the actor is exempted from responsibility for activities imputed to the spirit’s presence.
- In both, society typically manages instances of possession not by expelling the spirit (aborting the foetus) but by domesticating it, by channelling its demands into socially expected forms.
- In both, diagnosis of the condition, and prognosis of its passage and cure is seen to require specialists.
- Both phenomena predominate among women, where they can be seen to represent a means of expressing and coping with stress.

- Both phenomena can be seen as an oblique method of gaining status and expressing protest, a method tolerated by the rest of society.
- But, in both phenomena, the actor manipulates her superiors without radically questioning the basis of their authority. (pp. 296-297)

Changes over Time

Halliburton (2005) noted that, at least in India, but probably this is true in other countries, the belief in spirit possession has changed over time. In recent years, information is more easily transmitted across cultures (though the Internet and social media) and, therefore, even cultural views and norms change. In Kerala, India, Halliburton noted that there had been a decline in the incidence of possession as well as the homogenization of the identities of spirits. For example, spirits that were described in the past as having names and personalities now are presented as more anonymous.

Treatment Problems

Psychiatrists, of course, view possession as a symptom of psychiatric illness, perhaps culturally-shaped hysteria or culturally-shaped dissociation and divided consciousness (Castillo, 1994a), or schizophrenia. In many cases, the appropriate medication helps the patients. Some psychiatrists do not collaborate with a folk healer (e.g., Alonso & Jeffrey, 1988), but other psychiatrists work with a folk healer who applies the folk treatment common in the culture.

In a study of 100 Chinese psychiatric patients in Singapore, Kua, et al. (1993) found that more women than men felt that their illness was due to spirit possession; but belief in possession was not related to educational status. Thirty-six patients or their relatives had consulted a traditional healer before going to the hospital. However, the duration of illness, sex and educational status were not associated with the tendency to seek help from the traditional healer.

Comments

It is most likely that, when people in a culture are possessed by spirits, their behavior may indicate Western psychiatric problems, and those who become possessed may fit psychiatric diagnoses in ways other than their possession.

In Trinidad Shango's culture, Mischel and Mischel (1958) noted reversal of sex roles, where women behave like men and men behave like women, and sometimes the behavior is childish. The possessed person may engage in intimate interaction with others that would not be permitted in normal interactions.

It is clear that the person's behavior when possessed allows them to behave in deviant ways that their culture would not accept if they did not consider the person to be possessed by an evil spirit. In the words of the subself theory of personality (or theory of the mind), the behavior of the person when possessed allows one of their subselves to manifest itself in culturally acceptable ways. Possession rewards the possessed person and prevents him or her from being stigmatized by the community. The community accepts that the deviant behavior is not the fault of the person, but rather the fault of the spirit possessing the person.

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REINCARNATION AND THE MULTIPLE SELF

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Abstract: This essay reviews current thinking on reincarnation in order to explore whether Lester's multiple self model for the mind is relevant.

Lester (2015) has proposed a theory of personality (really a theory of the mind) that proposes that our mind has several subselves. He phrased his theory in a set of postulates and corollaries, one of which is this:

Postulate 10: Some subselves may be in a dissociated state about which the other selves have delusional, minimal or no knowledge.

Corollary 10a: The concept of dissociated subselves can explain such phenomena as multiple personality, possession, mediumship, reincarnation and auditory hallucinations.

The purpose of the present essay is to explore the research and theories on reincarnation to see if they fit with the proposal that a belief in and a claim of reincarnation is merely a way that one of a set of multiple selves manifests itself.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation is a phenomenon in which, after a person dies, the soul or spirit survives and waits for a period of time before entering the mind of a newly conceived baby. This baby then possesses memories of some of the life experiences of the previous person from which the soul or spirit came. Reincarnation then, if it can be proven, would provide strong evidence for life after death.

There is one good researcher in this field, and he has stimulated research into the phenomenon -- Ian Stevenson.

The Typical Case

Stevenson (1977) has collected many hundreds of reports of reincarnation, often personally interviewing the people involved. He describes the typical case as follows. A child, two to six years old, begins to tell his parents about a previous existence. The child may show unusual behavior from the point of view of his family, but this behavior later proves to be consistent with the previous existence.

The child asks to be taken to the place where he lived previously, and his family tries to identify the previous incarnation. The search for the previous family is successful, and the child is found to be correct and accurate in about 90 percent of the statements he made about the previous existence. After the age of five or six, the child talks less about the previous existence, and his memories fade.

Stevenson reported that he and his colleagues had collected more than 1,600 such reports, mainly from India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and northwest America. These are regions and cultures where the inhabitants believe in reincarnation. Reports from Europe and much of America, where belief in reincarnation is rare, tend to be less numerous and poorer in quality.

Who Has Reincarnation Experiences?

Haraldsson (1995) compared 23 children aged 7 to 13 in Sri Lanka who reported previous lives with 23 who did not. The two groups of children did not differ in intelligence, suggestibility, or confabulation (making up stories). The children who reported previous lives were more cognitively mature (for example, they had better memories of recent events and did better in school). As rated by parents, these children were also more argumentative, stubborn, talkative, nervous, tense, and concerned with neatness and cleanliness. They had a stronger need to be perfect but showed off less. Overall, they seemed to have more problems than the comparison group of children.

Beliefs about Reincarnation

Stevenson (1985) reported on the reincarnation beliefs of the Igbo of Nigeria. The Igbo believe that a person may improve his status from incarnation to incarnation, and this belief comforts those who have not raised their status in their present life. It becomes important for the Igbo to identify the deceased person of whom a new baby is the reincarnation for then the baby assumes the status of that person.

At death, the person's soul goes to a realm of discarnate beings, a joyless limbo from where the souls yearn to escape. Thus, the Igbo have no aversion to being reincarnated (unlike the Hindus and Buddhists). In order to calm the discarnate soul and ease the transition to a new body, there is a special ceremony, the second burial, which takes place from one week to one year after the physiological death of the person. Those who die young are believed to be reincarnated sooner than those who die in old age.

Good behavior in your life leads to a higher status in the discarnate realm and in the next reincarnation. Bad conduct could lead to reincarnation as a twin or being born feet first (both taboo conditions), an unhappy reincarnated life, or reincarnation as an animal. Those whose lives were worthless and those who died prematurely or by suicide may never be reincarnated, and the survivors can prevent a person from reincarnating by denying burial to the corpse or by burying it face downwards.

The Igbo expect to reincarnate in the same family. Changing sex is possible if the soul desires to. A soul may also reincarnate into two or more (even twelve) new bodies. On rare occasions, a part of the soul may reincarnate into a new body before the former body dies. The former incarnations of babies are identified by such things as birthmarks or defects, specific behaviors shown by the child and memories of the child of former lives, or by an expert on these matters in the community.

Some souls do not wish to be reincarnated, and they die quickly after reincarnation into a new body. These *ogbanje* children can be saved sometimes through the intervention of a native doctor with special skills. If this fails, the parents may mutilate the child, before or after death, because they believe that the *ogbanje* tribe expels disfigured persons and so their baby's soul may now become normal.

Many native American tribes believe in reincarnation. Mills (1988) described the beliefs of the Bulkley River Carrier, the Gitksan and the Beaver Indians in British Columbia (Canada). All three groups believe that people are born again into the *same* families from which they come and, incidentally, that animals are reincarnated into the same species. The beliefs are stronger in older Indians than in the younger generation.

Before being reincarnated, the spirits dwell in the land of the dead. The Carrier Indian spirits spent an average of 180 months in the land of the dead before

reincarnating whereas the Beaver Indian spirits spent only 12 months. The identity of the newborn baby is "discovered" by the mother having a dream prior to the birth, by birthmarks on the baby and similarities of personality and behavior to the deceased person, by the child speaking from the point of view of the deceased person, or by an expert in the community (a *kaluhim*). Mills gave an example of a *kaluhim* announcing that a new baby, Jeffrey, was his uncle Will (his mother's brother), after which an aunt had a dream that this was so. When Jeffrey was five, he was taken to where his uncle had had an accident, a place which he seemed to recognize, and he announced that he was Will. He then went to live with his grandparents as their child.

The beliefs of the three neighboring Indians groups differ in some ways. Only the Gitksan believe that a spirit can be reincarnated simultaneously in several living people, while only the Beaver believe that a change of sex can occur. The reincarnated Gitksan spirits were older at death than the spirits of the other two groups (69 years on the average versus 22 for the Carrier and 30 for the Beaver). Both the Gitksan and the Beaver believe that the spirit can choose the new parents for the reincarnation. There is no goal of escaping from the cycle of death and rebirth as in Hindu traditions.

Since babies are reincarnated relatives, they are treated with great consideration and as if they were quite mature. After all, parents may be raising their own cherished parents or grandparents. They are more willing to tolerate a person's shortcomings.

Objections

Stevenson (1988) has documented many cases of fraud, deception and self-deception in claims of reincarnation. For example, in one case of an Israeli for whom it was claimed he spoke ancient Hebrew dating from the time of King David, Stevenson decided that the journalist who first reported the case had invented the case.

The existence of fraud in some cases, of course, raises doubts about all cases. But it is very unlikely that all of Stevenson's 1,600 cases of reincarnation are fraudulent!

Unsound Investigation

In addition to fraud, there are also incompetent investigators. In the famous case of Bridey Murphy (Bernstein, 1956), Virginia Tighe, a housewife in Pueblo, Colorado, was hypnotized by Morey Bernstein and began to recall an existence in Ireland as Bridey Murphy. The book on the case became a best-seller, but even a superficial investigation would have revealed (and eventually did reveal) that the “facts” recalled by Mrs. Tighe could all be found to stem from childhood experiences in Chicago where she lived across the street from a woman whose maiden name was Bridie Murphy. This type of case is not so much a fraud as a result of incompetence on the part of the investigators.¹³

Cryptomnesia

One common objection raised against reported cases of reincarnation is cryptomnesia. In cryptomnesia, the person learns and remembers information about a dead person but later forgets the source of the information and the fact that he or she ever obtained it. Thus, it is also called *source amnesia*. Cryptomnesia can be called upon to explain all kinds of data which suggest life before and after death, as well as such phenomena as *déjà vu* and unintentional plagiarism.

An example of cryptomnesia is given by Kline (1956). He hypnotized a client who then spoke in a strange language which was eventually identified as Oscan (a language spoken in Western Italy and superseded by Latin). An example of the language is in a 5th Century scroll which the client denied ever having seen. However, under hypnosis, he remembered being in a library when someone next to him was reading a book which had a reproduction of the scroll, and he was able to recall the words in detail under hypnosis.

Stevenson (1983b) reviewed the evidence for cryptomnesia. He noted the bind for investigators. If a source is found to verify the reincarnation report or "other-life" communication, then we have also found the possible source for cryptomnesia. Cryptomnesia can be eliminated as a possible explanation only when the person reports information which could not be derived from printed or other normally available sources. Perhaps the person is too young to read or has no access to television? Perhaps the corroborating evidence exists only in oral testimony or unpublished reports such as diaries? Or perhaps the person shows a level of skill so great that he or she could not have forgotten learning it, as in

¹³ Commentators disagree on whether the “facts” revealed in this case could have been “learned” by Virginia Tighe in the course of her life.

responsive xenoglossy (talking fluently in a foreign language unknown to the person)?

Paranormal Abilities

Some have suggested that reincarnation “memories” are the result of paranormal interactions among living people, in particular, supernormal extra-sensory perception (ESP) and clairvoyance. Anderson (1985) however, noted that there is little evidence for such “super-ESP.” If instead, such supernormal paranormal powers are credited to the deceased (who communicate with the living via ESP), then they display powers in death that they did not possess in life. Anderson also suggested that it would be impossible to provide evidence to support either of these explanations. Personally, I find the existence of super-ESP as difficult to believe in as reincarnation. So, to explain one unlikely phenomenon using another unlikely phenomenon is not progress.

The Effect of Culture

Stevenson (1983a) compared reincarnation reports from children in America and India and found many differences. The previous incarnation was identified in 77 percent of the Indian cases compared to only 20 percent for the American children. For the American children, the previous incarnation was almost always a family member (94%) whereas this was the case for only 16 percent of the Indian children. Both American and Indian children began talking of the previous life at the same age (37 and 38 months respectively), but the American children stopped talking about it sooner (64 versus 79 months).

Both groups made the same number of statements, but the Indian children more often mentioned the cause of death (78% versus 43%). However, when the cause was mentioned, the American children more often reported a violent death (80% versus 56%). For those who experienced a violent death, the incidence of phobias in the present life associated with the mode of death in the previous life was the same in both groups of children. More of the American children changed sex in their new life (15% versus 3%). Both groups of children had, on the whole, undistinguished previous lives.

Stevenson (1970) compared 52 reports of reincarnation experiences in Turkey with 28 from Sri Lanka and 47 from the Tlingit in Alaska. He noted that the Turkish cases came from Turkish Alevis in south-central Turkey, an offshoot of the Shiites, an Islamic sect which believes in reincarnation. The Turkish Alevis

accept rebirth in animals, but do not believe that spirits can change gender. They believe that deformities at birth or downward changes in status are a result of misconduct in former existences, but not necessarily the most recent existence. Some believe that only those who die violent deaths are reincarnated, while others believe that everyone is reincarnated but only those who die violently remember previous existences. They also believe that reincarnation need not take place immediately after death.

The majority of the Turkish cases were male (85%), compared to 72 percent of the Tlingit and 54 percent of Sri Lankans. No Turkish cases reported being a different gender in a previous existence or an animal. The previous personality was identified in 87 percent of the Turkish cases, 96 percent of the Tlingit cases and 43 percent of the Sri Lankan cases. In cases where the identity of the previous existence was ascertained, in 93 percent of the Turkish cases, the previous personality was unrelated to the present personality; this was similar to the Sri Lankan cases (83 percent) but not to the Tlingit cases where 72 percent were related on the mother's side.¹⁴

Most of the deaths for the previous existence in the Turkish cases were violent (76%), unlike the Sri Lankan cases (48%) and the Tlingit cases (56%). Even after controlling for the gender of the person, this difference was still found for the Turkish cases versus the Sri Lankan cases.

Birthmarks and deformities were more common in the Turkish cases (54%) and Tlingit cases (51%) than in the Sri Lankan cases (14%). Most of the birthmarks were related to fatal bullet or knife wounds on the previous personality, though a few were the result of surgical operations. Stevenson (1973) noted that, in more than 150 cases, he had found only one case where the birthmark was on the person who inflicted the wound – all the others were on the victim.

Dreams announcing the identity of the forthcoming baby, primarily dreamt by the mother while pregnant, were more common in the Turkish cases (44%) and the Tlingit cases (47%) than in the Sri Lankan cases (4%).

The median (or average) age of the previous personality at death was 30 years for the Turkish cases, 25 years for the Tlingit cases and 14 years for the Sri Lankan cases. The median interval between existences was 9 months for the

¹⁴ Membership in a Tlingit family comes through one's mother, and so this relationship is very important.

Turkish cases, 48 months for the Tlingit cases and 21 months for the Sri Lankan cases.

Only two of the Turkish cases and one of the Sri Lankan cases selected their mothers for their present existence, as compared to ten of the Tlingit cases. Stevenson felt that Sri Lankan families were more accepting of children's reincarnation tales than European and American families.

Xenoglossy

Occasionally, it has been claimed that someone can speak a foreign language without ever having any experience hearing, learning or speaking the language. This phenomenon is called *xenoglossy*. If the person can also write the language it is called *xenography*. Xenoglossy is thought to provide evidence for reincarnation since one possible explanation is that the person knew and spoke the foreign language in a previous existence.

If the person can simply speak the foreign language, the phenomenon is called *recitative xenoglossy* but, if the person can also understand the foreign language, the phenomenon is called *responsive xenoglossy*. There have been reports of people supposedly speaking "dead" languages, such as ancient Egyptian (for example, Kautz, 1982), but these are much harder to authenticate since no-one living has knowledge of the sounds of "dead" languages.

Stevenson (1976) presented a case which others have also commented on. An American Methodist minister learned hypnotism and, in the course of his practicing, hypnotized his wife who uttered German phrases while in the trance. The person who spoke German called herself Gretchen. Of the twenty-two sessions in which Gretchen spoke, nineteen were taped. For several of the sessions, Stevenson, who spoke German, and other German-speaking people who attended asked Gretchen questions.

Stevenson took great care to find out if the woman could have learned or heard German while growing up. He visited the region where she was born (Clarksburg, West Virginia), interviewed relatives and neighbors, and ascertained that the women had no experience with German speaking people. She also passed a polygraph test in which she was asked about her experience with German.

The story which Gretchen told, of being the daughter of the mayor of a German town, of religious persecution and of an early death, probably in the late

1800s, provided details which could perhaps have been checked. However, Stevenson was unable to authenticate her story by going to Germany and searching for such a person.

As far as her knowledge of German was concerned, Gretchen could speak responsively (that is, answer questions put to her in German). Her grammar was more defective than her vocabulary; her pronunciation sometimes good and sometimes inaccurate; the words that she wrote often misspelled. She did not speak with any specific German dialect.

In the nineteen transcripts, Stevenson counted 237 German words which Gretchen first introduced, that is, she spoke them before any of her questioners used them with her. She uttered 120 words before any German was spoken to her. (Her husband who hypnotized her did not speak or understand German.) Many of these words, of course, were similar to the English equivalent. However, about half were not, and Gretchen used a number of archaic and obscure German words.

Stevenson admitted that the woman may have learned some German without the knowledge of her friends and relatives and forgotten that she had learned it, but he doubted this after his checks in her home state. Stevenson suggested that her ability to speak German could be evidence of reincarnation (in which she spoke German in a previous life) or of possession in which, during the hypnotic trance, a disembodied soul was able to take over her mind. She thus might be acting as a medium for this disembodied soul. Stevenson felt unable to decide firmly on this, but he leaned toward feeling that this was a case of possession rather than reincarnation. Either way, however, this case of xenoglossy, if authentic, provides evidence for life after death.

Thomason (1987) pointed out that Stevenson's report of this case is woefully weak. She argued that Gretchen (and other cases reported by Stevenson) showed no convincing knowledge of the language. First, even the most uneducated person soon develops a vocabulary of thousands of words and masters the grammatical rules of the language by age four or five. Gretchen spoke only 120 words, many of which were like the English (brown - braun). Gretchen did not converse. Much of the time she answered "yes" or "no" or repeated what the questioner asked. She responded much more fully to questions asked in English than to those asked in German. She spoke German about as well as someone who learned German for one year some twenty years ago. Finally, most people understand a language better than they can speak it (young children, for example). Gretchen did not – she understood it as poorly as she could speak it.

Thomason suggested a proper test of language skill. Almost all languages have lists of common words. Take the 200 most common words (such as mother and water). Have the subject translate those words into the language of the previous reincarnation (perhaps while hypnotized). Simple phrases can be presented too. After a month, repeat the test (without warning the subject that he or she will be retested). The performance should be identical the second time. Next, read the subject a simple short story in the foreign language and then have the subject answer simple questions about the story (preferably with a yes/no answer or content questions). And finally, have a linguistic expert, such as Thomason, involved in the conduct of the study.

Phenomena That Reincarnation Can Explain

There are many phenomena that reincarnation can explain, phenomena which are quite disparate and seemingly unconnected.

Abnormal Appetites during Pregnancy

Many pregnant women have abnormal appetites during pregnancy, often for very surprising foods. This may be a result of a food preference (or aversion) from the fetus's previous incarnation. For example, in some of Stevenson's (1977) cases, the mother carrying the child also reported having cravings for a food later found to be a favorite of the previous incarnation.

Unusual Skills

Sometimes children possess a skill which they have not learned, which could be a result of skills developed in the previous incarnation.

Unusual Interests

Similarly, children who report previous existences sometimes show interests and appetites which can be related to their previous existence. Stevenson reported cases where the interests were not socially acceptable in children, such as an appetite for alcohol or a desire to smoke cigarettes or *bhang*, an intoxicant.

Child Prodigies

Related to this phenomenon, child prodigies could be explained by the same process, that is, they had some remarkable skill in a previous incarnation which has carried over to the present reincarnation.

Birthmarks

Birthmarks might be the result of injuries sustained in the previous existence, as might congenital deformities and diseases. Children who remember previous incarnations sometimes related scars on their bodies to injuries received in the previous life. Stevenson located medical records in seventeen cases in which he could verify that the previous incarnation did indeed have the birthmark, deformity or disease claimed.

Phobias of Childhood

Stevenson reported that many cases of reincarnation have childhood phobias that the parents cannot attribute to any trauma which the children have suffered, but which can be related to aspects of the previous existence. For example, Stevenson found several cases of phobias of water in children who had been drowned in their previous lives.

Differences between Identical Twins

It is found that identical twins, although remarkably similar in most cases and in most ways, often do differ in some ways, even "Siamese" or conjoined twins. Stevenson suggested that the differences may be a result of the twins having different previous incarnations. In one case of Burmese female twins, the twins recalled existences as their own grandparents and, indeed, the twin who had been the grandfather was more heavily built and muscular than the other twin.

Inequities in Fortune

Although Eastern religions often claim that future existences will involve retribution for bad behavior in present existences, Stevenson found no cases that fit this, that is, *retributive karma*.

Gender Dysphoria

In some cases where the previous incarnation was of the opposite sex to the present reincarnation, Stevenson found incidences of gender dysphoria and

homosexuality. In one case, a Burmese girl recalled existence as a Japanese soldier stationed in Burma during the Second World War who was killed in battle. She remained resolutely masculine in outlook into adulthood and had no intentions of marrying a woman or having children.

The Excessive Births of Boys after Wars

Stevenson (1974) noted that the proportion of boy babies after wars is often greater than at other times. Perhaps nature compensates for the loss of men in battle, or perhaps a higher incidence of first-born or delayed marriages account for this excess? On the other hand, reincarnation would predict that more male spirits than female spirits are available for reincarnation after wars.

Child-Parent Relationships

Often children reject their parents, dislike them or feel alienated from them. Stevenson (1977) encountered reincarnation cases where these frictions were found primarily because the children claimed that their biological parents were not their real parents.

Déjà Vu

Déjà vu is French phrase meaning "already seen." A definition by Neppe (1983) is "Any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past."

Déjà vu has been viewed as a disorder of memory (you have forgotten the source of the similar experience), a disorder of perception (you have misperceived the present scene), and a disorder of the sense of time. But, of course, those who believe in reincarnation see déjà vu as a result of the perception of a scene in your current reincarnation that reminds you of a scene in a previous incarnation.

Schizophrenic Hallucinations

Schizophrenia, a severe psychosis, is characterized by a cluster of symptoms including hallucinations. The hallucinations of schizophrenics are primarily voices. The voice heard by schizophrenics could also be voices generated inside their own minds from a previous incarnation.

Multiple Personality

Multiple personality is a phenomenon in which a person has two or more distinct personalities. The critical component in the definition of multiple personality, however, is that there must be amnesia, at least for one or more of the personalities, about what transpires when the individual is in one of the other personalities. Thus, multiple personality is a dissociative disorder, that is, a disorder involving psychologically-caused amnesia. From the point of view of reincarnation, however, multiple personality may result from possession of the individual by a spirit or from the individual unconsciously recalling and entering into one of the previous incarnations that he or she had.

Comment

One criterion for a good theory is that it makes useful predictions about human behaviors. A good theory makes few assumptions, that is, it is parsimonious. In this respect then, the notion of reincarnation is excellent since it provides explanations, without requiring further assumptions, about many phenomena. This ability does not, however, prove the validity of reincarnation. A theory can be “good,” yet false!

Do Reincarnation Reports Provide Evidence For Life After Death?

Does the research on reincarnation support the conclusion that there is life after death? Let us look at some of the issues in deciding this.

Problems with the Cases

The problems with accounts of reincarnation are illustrated by a case reported by Pasricha and Barker (1981). They described the case of a five year-old boy in 1974 in India who described a man (a bus driver) from another town about 160 miles away, a town that he and his family had never visited. Eventually, the boy gave enough information to identify him as a man named Bithas Das, born in 1922, who died in 1955 by accidental electrocution. The boy’s father took him to the town of his previous incarnation where the boy made several correct identifications. For example, he reported having been a carpenter, told of his death from electrocution, and described the house he had lived with some correct details. Barker and Pasricha investigated the case in 1976-1979, visiting the region and talking to the participants.

Barker and Pasricha discussed the case separately and came to different conclusions. Barker regretted that there was no written record of the initial statements made by the boy. Thus, the case depends on the memory of the informants. Barker also noted that the members of both families (the boys and those from the previous incarnation) had a deep emotional investment in viewing the boy as the reincarnation of Bithal Das. This throws doubt on the accuracy of their memory of what transpired for, as has been well-demonstrated by psychological research, memory is often faulty and is best viewed as a reconstruction in the present of what happened in the past, shaped by emotions and desires.

Barker noted that the case was full of discrepancies and contradictions. The witnesses could not agree on whether the boy mentioned the name of Bithal Das before he went to the town or only after people in the town recalled a carpenter who had died from electrocution. He described the house incorrectly, placed it in the wrong part of town, and he couldn't locate it himself in the town. He named Bithal's wife incorrectly at first, and may have misstated the number and sex of his children.

Barker noted that the accuracy of the boy's account of his previous incarnation improved dramatically over time, and so Barker concluded that boy came to identify with the person Bithal Das, particularly because the people around him supported him in this and rewarded him for this identification. Barker noted, however, that the recognition of the driver initially, along with the fact that the boy gave this man sufficient information to suggest who the previous incarnation might have been, cannot be explained by this interpretation, and Barker suggested that paranormal ESP might account for this.

In contrast, Pasricha felt that the boy had been quite accurate in his account of his previous incarnation, but Pasricha too could not accept a reincarnation hypothesis as the correct explanation for the case, preferring instead to suggest that the boy had extremely well-developed ESP which had provided him with the accurate information.

This case indicates what we need in order to be more convinced that reincarnation has occurred:

(1) The investigators must be present from the start. We need a case in which, when a child begins to recall a previous existence, the words that he says are recorded right from the beginning.

(2) The record should involve videos of the child, or at least auditory recordings, permitting verbatim transcripts and observations of whether coaching or prompting of the child took place

(3) Preferably, the investigators must be present continuously from this point on so that they can monitor what the child is told by his or her parents, relatives, friends of the family, and acquaintances.

(4) The desires of parents and others that the reincarnation is valid interfere with the case. The phenomenon of *experimenter bias* involves the experimenter biasing the results of his or her experiment. The results that the experimenter wants can influence how he reacts to the subject, how he communicates with the subject, and the inadvertent errors he makes in recording and analyzing the information. Parents, relatives, friends and the investigators can influence the results to be in line with their “hypothesis” and their desires. Thus, the investigators should include believers and skeptics, and they should take care to minimize the influence of the parents and relatives of the child.

(5) Cases for reporting should not be selected, but rather all cases should be recorded, examined and reported for others to examine.

(6) The child should not be allowed to visit the place of the previous incarnation or meet people who knew the previous incarnation prior to the arrival of the investigators.

So far, no ideal case has been studied.

Alternative Explanations

Before deciding whether reincarnation reports provide evidence for life after death, we need to examine alternative explanations for the phenomenon, explanations other than fraud by the parents of the child or by the investigators.

Explanations of reincarnation experiences include: (1) the person having the reincarnation experience obtained the information through normal means but has forgotten that the information was acquired in this way (cryptomnesia), (2) the reports of the reincarnation experience are modified (consciously or unconsciously) by the subjects and their friends and relatives to be more true to the “facts,” and facts which are later discovered are mistakenly attributed to the

subjects (paramnesia), (3) the subject acquired the information about a deceased person's life paranormally (by ESP) and then personifies this information into a secondary personality, (4) in cases where the subject is related to the previous personality, there is the possibility of inherited memory, and (5) it may be that the subject having a reincarnation experience has been possessed by the spirit of the deceased person.

Regarding explanation number (3) above, that the person acquires the information about the deceased person's life by ESP, if this were possible, there is no reason why the life recalled by the person having the experience should be of someone who is dead. ESP, followed by personification, should be possible, indeed it should be easier, if the other person were still alive. Thus, children should report other lives which are later found to be true for people still living at the time that the child reports the life.

I find it harder to believe in some of these alternative explanations (ESP plus personification, inherited memory and possession) than in reincarnation. Indeed, reincarnation seems like a more reasonable hypothesis, and there is no evidence to support these alternative explanations whatsoever. However, ruling out cryptomnesia and paramnesia is very difficult, especially if the investigators are called to the scene only *after* the child reports the previous existence.

Logical Problems with Reincarnation

There are many questions which those who believe in reincarnation need to answer.

(1) Investigators are not precise with what they assume is reincarnated. Stevenson (1974) noted that what reincarnates might include memories (which can provide facts to be checked), emotions (such as fears and phobias), behaviors (such as skills and preferences) and physical features (such as birthmarks) shown by the previous personality. Why do some cases have only some of these features and not all of them?

(2) Stevenson admitted that it was a problem that cases of reincarnation are reported more often in societies which believe in the phenomenon than in those which do not. If reincarnation is a valid phenomenon, why does the frequency of reports vary from society to society?

(3) Stevenson noted that his best cases involve reincarnations are cases where the previous personality lived in the same region as the current person. There should be more cases where the previous personality is from a different nation for there is no reason why deceased spirits should be constrained by space. So far no case involving a previous incarnation from a different country had produced sufficient information that the previous person could be traced. Why do reincarnation reports typically involved deceased people from the same region?

(4) Stevenson noted that rarely do cases report events from between lives. A child in India may recall meeting with Krishna or Lakshmi, or a Tlingit may recall crossing a lake in a canoe and returning across the same lake to be reborn, but such reports are rare. Why are events from the period between lives not remembered?

(5) Why doesn't everyone remember a previous life? Stevenson felt it was more pertinent to ask why anyone remembers a previous life. Isn't one life enough? Remembering a previous life does not make the person happier. The previous personality often died violently, died young, and their personalities are often greedy wealthy men and devout generous women. This is not convincing. Stevenson and others must explain why all of us do not remember a previous incarnation.

(6) Related to point (5), since there is no reason why people are reincarnated only once, why do the children remember only one previous incarnation rather than many?

Comment

Having reviewed all of the research and reports on reincarnation phenomena, I remain unconvinced that it provides evidence for life after death. In reviewing the evidence for near-death experiences as evidence for life after death, the cultural variation in the reports was disappointing (Lester, 2005). Similarly, in reincarnation reports, there are large cultural variations. The characteristics of Stevenson's cases vary significantly from culture to culture, and there is no reason why this should be so. The cultural variation in the reports suggests that the belief system of the culture determine the content of the reports. If a culture believes that sex change does not occur from one life to another, then it does not occur in the reports; if the culture believes that sex change is possible, then it occurs. If reincarnation is a valid phenomenon, then there should be no cultural variation at all.

Second, in the only cases examined by experts in the area, those involving xenoglossy, the experts indicated clearly that the investigators made errors in their investigation of the cases and that the evidence presented was not convincing. The experts in these cases suggested the way in which such cases should be approached, but no one has yet reported doing such an investigation.

Third, I find the absence of memories of existence between incarnations puzzling. Spirits should remember these times as well as times from the previous incarnation.

Finally, no adequate case has yet been reported. I find this puzzling. Many of the investigators are in India, a country where reports appear to be very common, yet no investigator has had a child of their own, or grandchild, or child with whom they are closely acquainted, report a previous life so that video recordings could be made from the beginning for inspection by others.

My conclusion is that people who report experiences from previous lives are shaped in this behavior by the beliefs of their culture and their own needs or those of their parents and relatives. Children in India report previous existences in nearby towns of recently deceased, ordinary people, just as their parents expect; children in Native American families in the Northwest report existences from the same family line, just as their parents expect; Shirley MacLaine reports previous existences as famous people from bygone eras, just as Westerners expect. The reports conform too closely to cultural expectations.

Does the Multiple Self Explain Reincarnation?

Because the research on reincarnation has failed to produce convincing evidence that reincarnation, *per se*, ever takes place, an alternative theory is warranted. Lester's multiple self theory of the mind would view memories of previous existences as subselves of the person that he or she has created, often stimulated by the culture and by his or her family members who want their child to be a reincarnation and to satisfy the desires of the person. This explanation has not been studied in cases of reincarnation, but it is the best explanation for reincarnation.

Several scholars have introduced the concept of possible selves (Hooker & Kaus, 1992). Hooker and Kaus's concept of possible selves refers to goals and fears for the future. Hooker and Kaus (1992) instructed their subjects to think about "the kinds of experiences that are in store for us and the kinds of people we

might possibly become...what we hope we will be like” (p. 395), and they give an example of “one of my own [possible selves] is to win the lottery and become a millionaire” (p. 305).

Reincarnated subselves appear to be similar to the concept of possible selves. Although they are shaped by the family members and the community, as well as cultural beliefs and rituals, often the reincarnated subself is what the individual would like to be true. Instead of a possible self for the future, it can be viewed as a possible self for the past. It is noteworthy that, for example, in Shirley MacLaine’s reports of her incarnated past, she was not a humble peasant but a prestigious individual. For example, in one of her past lives, she lived on the mythical island of Atlantis two million years ago. People’s reports of past lives brings many rewards from family members and the community such as attention and becoming highly valued by significant others. Subself theory is the best explanation of reincarnation.

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