

Book Review

FLASHES OF INSIGHT

A review of *I am I: Sudden Flashes of Self-awareness in Childhood*
by Dolph Kohnstamm
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In this work, Dolph Kohnstamm sets out to investigate what is from his own point of view one of the most amazing things that can happen to a child, a sudden experience of herself as a person. Kohnstamm's inspiration for doing so seems partly to stem from philosophical sources (Spiegelberg, Sartre, Russell and Jung) and autobiographic literature (Nabokov, Jean Paul), as well as from his own fascination with the fact that human beings *can* and *do* reflect upon their own existence and their individualities, that they are persons "who occasionally stop and think about who they really are and want to be".

Although I do not consider reflection on oneself as a singular person to be more prominent or even separable from reflections of what one is *part of*, I share the author's basic fascination as a point of departure for a closer study of *I am I*. Since Kohnstamm's focus is on childhood experiences, his book promises a quite rare opportunity for developmental psychologists to relate to processes of development from a first person perspective. Taken as a whole, the theme of the book is quite unique and is therefore of immediate interest to the present reviewer.

Content

The data analysed here consists of autobiographic memories of important self-awareness episodes in childhood, sent as letters or emails to the author by request, via radio broadcasts or German and Dutch psychology magazines. The group of informants of the investigation is not very clearly presented; they appear to be adults of different ages, from different countries, mostly Germany and Holland. The number of informants

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is unknown to the reader, the majority being women. Kohnstamm does some kind of initial sorting of the data, due to (subjective) criteria of relevance, clarity and credibility.

Unfortunately, the procedures used in creating the field of data delimit their utility. Questions regarding the frequency of these flashes of self-awareness in childhood are of course impossible to answer; I thus consider this to be a minor disadvantage in this case. However, the criteria used for sorting this data is a ‘black box’ for the reader, and that is a shame since *relevance, clarity and credibility* do indeed seem to be scientifically obvious and necessary criteria when dealing with autobiographical data..

The data are grouped and organised in chapters dealing with different aspects inherent in the narrative of being or becoming an “I”. To mention a few examples, for one group of informants the experiences of being an I were mediated by looking at themselves in the *mirror*, for another by looking at themselves in new *light* (understood literally, i.e. as light or darkness), whilst the *body* mediated the experienced flash of self-awareness for a third group. Other chapters are organised according to some specific reflective characteristics associated with having these self-experiences, such as relating oneself to the past or the future, or becoming immediately aware of the relativity of one’s perceptions. This organisation of self-narratives into themes or mediators is nonetheless of no help in understanding the dynamics of development of the self, and that is of course unsurprising. Neither a two-factor analysis, nor even a three- or a four-, can introduce order into the complexity of the development of the self. Therefore, the chapters cannot provide theoretical background for each other; thus there is no progression of theoretical understanding from one chapter to the next.

In the last chapters of the book, theories of the self and its development are presented. The author demonstrates an excellent theoretical overview of the field, yet in placing these theoretical considerations at the end of the book, with very few connections to the empirical data, he leaves it mostly to the reader to make use of the theories in understanding the empirical data presented here.

Gains from reading *I am I*

Each chapter of this book is literally packed with excerpts from data; and should one ever have had doubts about the existence of these sudden flashes of self-awareness in childhood years, would be effectively shown to be groundless. The demonstration of the mere *existence* of these sudden discoveries of oneself seems to be the primary aim and advantage of the book.

The lack of a progressive establishment of order is provoking, yet in some strange way, this is also the case with respect to the beauty of the theme. The data ‘resists’ the ordering that the author proposes. Although some of the experiences related can be clustered into situations such as experiencing reflections in a mirror or

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discovering oneself in a change of light, many other can not. For example, one German woman writes:

*One summer morning I was playing in my parent's garden. I must have been four or five years old because my three older siblings were at school. Before me, there was a shoebox padded with fresh lettuce leaves where I had placed several small snails. As I observed the snails and observed what they would do next, it became clear to me that I would never be able to know what it's like to be a snail. At the same time I had an amazing sense of my own self, my own body, of being alive, all the sensory impressions, my light dress on my body, the wind, the sand on my hands, the sun on my back. An astonishing feeling of happiness flowed through me: **I am me, I feel, I make my own decisions, I am inside and outside, I am one.** (p.80)*

Why in the garden and not the house? Why that morning and not the morning of the day before? Why snails and not bees? Why when alone? Why? To the informants themselves, these sudden experiences seemed to rise out of nowhere or everywhere. Perhaps the mirror or the sunlight on their arms triggered such experiences? And yet, these people must have looked at themselves in the mirror hundreds of times, and seen the sun thousands of times. So why there, why at that particular time or in that particular situation? I consider such complexity to be utterly beautiful.

Although this was perhaps not intended, Kohnstamm's selection of empirical data awakens the idea of a multilayered, open-ended, interdependent conception of development. In this theoretical horizon, the rise of novelties – in this case, self-discovery – has endless, although not unlimited (Valsiner, 2006) variations and possibilities. Systemic dynamics can give rise to smooth subtle movements or heavy redundant waves, either as 'small microscopic changes of the child's personality', or as 'stormy revolutionary courses', as Vygotsky poetically (1930-31/1998) formulated it: The more dramatic version is surely the case in these strong sudden flashes. From reading the text, one does not know what configuration led to that result. We only know it was there.

I am I: A flash and unfortunately no more than that

The memories of these specific incidences of self-awareness seems to be both very clear and strong in existential terms, yet, due to their biographical age, quite disparate in terms of concrete details leading up to, surrounding or immediately following the episode. The incidences stand out as flashes. For a demanding developmental psychologist, obvious questions arise: what meanings did these flashes have for the person experiencing them, how did they change the person's life and self-conceptions, and in what directions? Some of the informants give sparse answers, as in the case of a Dutch woman remembering her experiences as a twelve-year old:

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(...) This experience also had consequences for me. At school I was often bullied by other children. At this moment I decided that this should stop. And it did. (p. 54)

Notwithstanding, these interpretations on what followed their flashes are scarce and rather simple in comparison with the richness of details in the specific flash situation. What might not have been unravelled as elements and traits *leading* to the episode could have been specified as *following* the episode, even if that meant interpreting the importance of the situation for adult life and understanding and knowing oneself *today*. Perhaps these interpretations have been omitted by Dolph Kohnstamm as irrelevant material. But for a scholar working on developmental processes, getting a view of the ‘Tsunami’, whilst being truly fascinating, is also almost annoying without the knowledge of what lead to it or without having at least a glimpse of some of its after-waves.

Recommendations

For potential readers who might dispute the existence of these condensed incidences of self-insight in childhood, or have doubts — as many of the informants did themselves — concerning the reality of these past experiences, the book is highly recommendable. If, however, the potential reader looks for dynamics, potentialities, developmental paths and self trajectories, I would suggest that she alternatively listened to her children, grandchildren, parents, neighbours, husband, lover(s) or colleagues.

References

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