LOOKING AT ONESELF AS INNER DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT. The authors investigate from the theoretical and empirical viewpoints the varieties of self-reflection, that is, directing one's mind to oneself. The theoretical model describes systemic reflection (looking at oneself from aside) as distinct from mere introspection. An empirical study based on writing brief essays "I look at myself from aside…" with subsequent expert coding revealed four empirical types of self-descriptions that correspond well to the theoretical model. True inner dialogue unfolds only in the case of systemic self-reflection, when self-detachment is combined with self-involvement. Construct validity of the scheme is proven through the analysis of correlations and comparison of different samples of participants

> "Look at yourself from aside"
>
> Margarita Leontieva,
>
> the first author's grandmother

Theoretical Background

Self-reflection, that is directing one's mind to oneself, as this phenomenon has been characterized since Locke and Hegel, is quite a controversial process. In fact, what we find at both poles of this cognitive process is not the same. The mind cannot literally reflect on itself, like an eye cannot see itself. It was William James (1890) who first pointed out that in the process of introspection our Self becomes split into two asymmetrical parts: the empirical self-as-known (Me) and the transcendent self-as-knower (I). This split is noted in the psychological literature (e.g. Mead, 1934; Bugental, 1981); since 1960s the Me luckily became the object of vast stream of research on self-concept and identity, while the I, that was not so easy to operationalize, emerged in the existentialist concept of the "inner center" (May, 1967; Bugental, 1991). The I is an active process, whereas the Me is a static offprint of all previous activities. Hence the

difference between them is the difference between the present and the past, between the actual living process and the frozen structure carrying the marks of past experiences.

This asymmetrical, or vertical, split is not equal to the multivoicedness entailed by the conception of dialogical Self (Hermans, 2001). It seems however that the conception of dialogical Self cannot do without an idea of the inner center. Indeed, in any group discussion aimed at the elaboration of some important decision there is a leader that integrates the results of the dialogue and reports them to whom it may concern. Without such an integrator the dialogue cannot result in a meaningful product. This refers to the inner dialogue as well: different voices can bring different meanings and contents, but these meanings do not make a coherent structure themselves, without an integrating unit that governs this process.

Another controversy inherent in self-reflection is whether it is helpful or harmful in terms of successful activity in the world. Indeed, though most prominent thinkers in human history treated self-knowledge as beneficial for living, in mass consciousness self-reflection is often associated with lack of decisiveness and incapacity to act. Though in psychotherapy self-reflection is considered beneficial (e.g. Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995), many empirical psychological data does not support self-reflection. For instance, rumination positively covariates with depression and some other clinical symptoms, maladaptive coping styles, pessimism, neuroticism, and negative relation has been found with social support and successful problem solving (see Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, Lyubomirski, 2008). Dominant orientation to one's own inner state rather than to the external situation was shown to positively correlate with induced helplessness, poorer action strategies, lesser optimism and action involvement, poorer goal implementation and complex problem solving (Kuhl, 1987, p. 289). The empirical data in favor of self-reflection is less consistent.

We supposed that there may be different forms of self-reflection: (1) Nonreflection -- forgetting oneself during total concentration on the external situation; (2) Introspective self-focusing -- narcissistic self-absorption at the expense of the view of the external situation; (3) Quasireflection -- the tendency toward abstract reasoning or focusing on something outside the situation; (4) Systemic self-reflection -- the awareness of oneself in the context of the situation (see Leontiev, 2007).

The distinctions between these four forms of self-reflection are based on logical grounds (see Tab. 1). It is suggested that self-focusing at the expense of living, engaged in endless self-concerns, narcissism, autism etc. might produce unfavorable consequences, while the benefits of self-awareness, self-control, self-determination and self-mastery are associated with systemic self-reflection when the subject keeps in mind both the external situation and oneself.

However, sometimes, while looking introspectively into oneself, one indeed can lose the external situation which goes out of focus, and this might bring about the

Table.1. *Logical distinctions between types of reflexive focus of the mind*

		Focus on the external situation	
		+	−
Focus on oneself	+	Systemic self-reflection	Self-focusing
	−	Nonreflection	Quasireflection

 unfavorable effects mentioned above. When is it possible, therefore, to be aware of oneself without losing the view of the external situation? We assume that the key process that makes it possible is taking a special transcendent or detached position toward oneself – the position that allows one's viewing of himself or herself from aside in the context of the whole situation.

Victor Frankl considered self-detachment, that is taking an objective stand toward oneself, one of the two basic human anthropological capacities that make us human beings; its manifestations are, in particular, humor and heroism (Frankl, 1969). The first author's grandmother was right when she constantly urged him to look at himself from aside: this is not an automatic function. As other complicated, mediated and deliberate forms of inner activity of human consciousness, self-detachment require skills, effort and mental tools. In different individuals, self-detachment can be developed to a different degree. Developmentally, this form of self-regulation evidently develops from taking a stand with another person, in line with Vygotsky's general law of development of higher mental functions: all the higher self-regulatory functions directed at oneself have emerged from interpsychic, interindividual functions initially developed for the sake of regulating the actions of another person (Vygotsky, 1983). We shall not, however, dwell on these theoretical issues: the focus of this paper is a study aimed at empirically revealing different logically construed forms of self-reflection and specifying to some degree their eventual conditions and effects.

The Design and Method of the Study

Our goal was (1) to catch and describe the phenomenon of looking at oneself as a more or less developed mental ability which is distinct from regular introspection, (2) to compare manifestations of this ability in different samples of participants, and (3) to investigate some personality correlates of this ability.

The main methodological task was to elaborate a research technique that would allow the revealing of qualitatively different forms of self-reflection and distinguishing between I-center and Me-image. This task could not be solved through self-report

techniques. The simplest qualitative procedure we tried turned out to be quite fruitful and became the main research method.

The research procedure "Look at yourself" includes writing a brief essay (up to 1 page) starting with the phrase "I look at myself from aside….", followed by expert coding of these essays along with the procedure described below. We supposed that the essays would contain distinguishable indicators of both a self-detached reflective stand toward oneself and more primitive forms of self-reflection.

Having proposed quite an open instruction to write an essay starting with the phrase "I look at myself from aside", we tried to encourage the respondents to take a detached position toward themselves, while leaving the way and style of description to their own choice. As we supposed, some respondents rather easily took self-detached position toward themselves, while others failed to do so. Qualitative analysis of the essays allowed classifying them into the following 4 types:

1. Simple introspective, self-focused self-description was the most typical form of failure to follow the instruction due to the lack of self-reflective capacity. The respondent was merely describing him/herself in a regular self-report fashion, without leaving the usual egocentric position of observation. Sometimes the description is made formally in the third person, but its content is the same static image of oneself as something given, nonmalleable: habits, traits, feelings, ways of conduct, goals, strivings, problems and expectations. There is no split within one's self, no dialogue between the positions: the describing Self and the described Self are one.

   Example: "I look for something all the time, look in different fields, in professional activity, in relationships, in hobbies, in sports. I'm fond of chatting; love both small groups and large gatherings. I value the sense of humor in people and in myself also."

2. Alienated description from aside – the respondents follow the instruction, but only formally. The object of such a "behaviorist" description, usually in the third person, are only those outlook features that can be really noticed by an observer from aside; however, these descriptions do not touch emotions, wishes and thoughts that cannot be observed externally; often the description contains only banalities and stereotypes. Though this type of description indicates a strong changing of the inner viewpoint, that is self-detachment, there is no self-involvement, no interaction between the two aspects of the Self which are both deprived of living soul: the describing "I" is reduced to an impassionate camera, and the described "Me" -- to a flat photo.

   Example: "She wears comfortable jeans and a sweater. She has hair somewhat messed up… Dreams of being happy lifelong."

3. Dialogical self-description (along with the instruction). Such a description embraces simultaneously both aspects of the Self: the describing "I (through moving the observation point outside the borders of one's body), and the described "Me" (which contains something not evident to the observer). The indices of this type of description are, first, the outside viewpoint, second, questions like "who's this?", "how?", "which way?", "what is she doing here" that indicate the inner investigation, self-discovery, lack of ready stereotyped answers. The described "Me" is a puzzle that can only be approached dialogically. Attempts to look at oneself from the estranged detached position sometimes take the form of comparison between the view from aside and direct introspection. Typical examples are as follows: "I see a person who looks successful, but actually is not; one may consider him self-confident, but it is difficult to find a less self-confident person"; "I see, probably, another person, not the one I consider myself to be"; "If I saw myself from aside, I would perhaps not wish to know me better"; "It seems from aside that more humor and philosophical treatment of various issues could be imported"; "It is not clear why this girl is in this room"; "this person seems to be egocentric"; "I see a woman of middle age with a bun on her head, dressed simply but with pretension… so strange, I always grinned unkindly at pretentious women who were trying to look younger".

4. Reasoning. In such a case the respondent's Self does not become the object of description at all; the essay speaks about any other topic or about the task itself, about problems of different people looking at themselves from aside, recollections and stories not directly linked to the essential instruction. This may be due to the "disposition toward originality" (Barron, 1968), creative professionals' urge to stress their idiosyncratic position in fulfilling the task, rather than merely conforming to the instruction. An example: "One cannot speak of the single reflecting I, there are more than one and they may argue. I like some things in myself and dislike other things, but not everything I dislike can be changed, and not everything that I dislike I want to change"

All the essays have been independently rated by three experts (professional psychologists) who were asked to relate the essay to each of the four description types using the simple scale of correspondence: 0 – definitely does not fit; 1 – not sure; 2 – definitely fits. The concordance between the experts was evaluated by Spearman rank correlation (ρ) and Cronbach's alpha (α). It was pretty high for the aggregate data and for three out of four description types: $\alpha = .80$ for introspection, .76 for alienated descriptions and .83 for reasoning; all pair correlations between individual experts' ratings were significant at $p<.001$. The self-detachment type revealed notably lower, though still significant concordance: $\alpha = .61$ and $\rho = .18$ ($p<.06$), $\rho =.39$ ($p<.001$), and $\rho =.30$ ($p<.001$). The figures are the least significant for this type, most likely because this type was the rarest and the most complicated for expert evaluation. Altogether, the above

figures allow one to conclude that essays do reflect four different attitudes toward oneself spontaneously actualized by the instruction.

We cannot yet propose an explanation of why some respondents are more successful and others are less successful in viewing themselves from aside. The differences between the four types described above can be explained in terms of two functional activities that are necessary to fulfill the task of looking at oneself: self-detachment (producing change in the viewer's position toward oneself, which can be understood in terms of moving positions in the imaginal space, Hermans, 2001) and self-involvement. Both these activities are present in the dialogical self-attitude, the most complicated and strongest of the four types. In this case we face a true inner dialogue between the involved I and the explicated Me. In the case of simple introspective self-description only self-involvement is present, without the inner separation necessary for inner dialogue; in the case of alienated description there is only a position change without self-involvement, and in the case of escape to reasoning none of these two prerequisites of looking at oneself is present. The above is schematically presented in Table 2.

Table.2. *Classification of essay types*

		Self-detachment	
		+	−
Self-involvement	+	Inner dialogue (dialogical self-cognition)	Introspection (monological self-cognition from inside)
	−	Alienated description (formal monological self-cognition from outside)	Reasoning

Quantitative form of expert ratings of essays made it possible to ascribe to each essay four quantitative scores reflecting correspondence of the given essay to each of the four logical types of self-description, by just summing up the scores of all the three experts, with the maximal summary score being 6 and the minimal possible score being 0.

Results

We expected that the ability of looking at oneself would be more advanced in psychologists than in other groups. The samples included: graduate psychology students (n=19, age range 20-25); skilled practicing psychologists (n=14, age range 28 to 35); management students (n=49, age range 17 to 20); creative arts students (singing & writing) (n=23, age range 18 to 21); and schoolchildren (n=9, age range 15 to 17)).

Since the results of psychology students and skilled psychologists were rather close, we collapsed these two groups. By the same reasoning we collapsed the groups of schoolchildren and management freshmen: both were rather close by age and education, were not specially self-selected like psychology and creative arts students, and their results were alike. We used thus three groups for further comparison: educated psychologists (n=33), creative arts students (n=23) and juniors (n=58), in total 114 respondents.

For these three groups we calculated the summary score on all the four types of essays by summarizing the experts' estimates of every essay in the sample. This allowed comparing the samples with each other by Mann-Whitney nonparametric test.

Table 3 shows that the direct introspective self-description showed up more often than all the three other types taken together. This type of self-descriptions dominates in all the groups, though to a quite different degree: in juniors it dominates, in creative arts students its prevalence is not so drastic, though visible, and in psychologists it just slightly prevails over alienated and dialogical types. As we expected, psychologists used both dialogical and alienated self-descriptions significantly more frequently than juniors (Z=3.39, p<.001; Z=4.74, p<.001 respectively). Compared to creative arts students, psychologists were also more inclined to use dialogical (Z=2.27, p<.05) and alienated self-descriptions (Z=2.81, p<.01). Creative art students used reasoning significantly more often than juniors (Z=4.08, p<.001) and psychologists (Z=3.03, p<.01). Juniors used direct self-description significantly more often than psychologists (Z=5.05, p<.001) and creative arts students (Z=4.07, p<.001).

This data supports our assumptions. Indeed, psychology is a field of professional activity that directly or indirectly challenges and enhances the ability of self-detachment and the skills of looking at oneself. Creative arts students tend to look for the most original way of fulfilling the task. Younger respondents without special self-reflection skills tend to miss the central point and describe themselves in a habitual egocentric fashion, without the shift in the position of looking at themselves.

The next task was to check the construct validity of dialogical self-description in the essay as indicative for systems self-reflective capacity. This type was rare enough even in the group of psychologists, and the variance was narrow where it was present at all. We applied a non-parametrical approach, having selected 12 respondents from all the

Table 3. *Types of self-descriptions across the samples*

	N		Dialogical	Introspective	Alienated	Reasoning
Psychologists	33	The sum	65	87	85	17
		Average per person	2.03	2.72	2.66	0.53
Juniors	58	The sum	44	295	46	22
		Average per person	0.76	5.09	0.79	0.38
Creative arts students	23	The sum	20	63	27	43
		Average per person	0.91	2.86	1.23	1.95
The total sample	114	The sum	129	445	158	82
		Average per person	1.13	3.90	1.39	0.72

samples with a score of 2 or more on the dialogical self-description type. This score meant that at least two of the three experts reading the essay assumed the probability of such a stand toward oneself, or at least one expert is sure about it. We hoped to reveal some other personality variables that would characterize the members of this group as compared to the total sample.

The following additional personality inventories have been used:

- *Self-Attitude Test* (SAT) (Pantileyev, 1993), an original Russian inventory that provides a self-attitude profile by 9 scales.

- *Noetic Orientations Test* (Leontiev, 1992), a modified Russian version of Purpose-in-Life (PIL) test by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1981).

- *Individual Reflexivity Inventory* (Karpov & Ponomareva, 2000), an original Russian test measuring the general self-reflection capacity score, the subscales of the actual, retrospective and prospective self-reflection, as well as reflection of other persons' inner world.

On the last of the above inventories, the group composed of the respondents using dialogical self-descriptions in their essays revealed significantly higher scores than the rest of the participants on the general Individual reflectivity (t(59)=2.44, p<.05), as well as on its Retrospective self-reflection and Reflection on others subscales (t(59)=2.244 and 2.234, respectively, p <.05). This seems to be quite strong evidence in favor of construct validity of our qualitative research technique. On the other two inventories, the differences between the dialogical self-descriptors and other participants did not reach a

satisfactory level of significance except for two subscales of SAT: the dialogical group was significantly lower on expectations from others ($t(54)=2.29$, $p<.05$) and higher on self-blaming ($t(54)=2.43$, $p<.05$), This ambivalent self-attitude is still more manifest if we use a milder criterion for the distinguishing of this group. This suggests that looking at oneself seems to be connected with the lack of inner harmony, a certain degree of dissatisfaction with oneself. Indeed, such a dissatisfaction that may lead to self-improvement seems hardly possible without a possibility to detach from and to take a position toward oneself.

Discussion

The study presented above was an exploratory attempt to apply a new research approach to the complicated relationships between different aspects of the Self.

The most important result seems to be the phenomenon of looking at oneself as distinct from mere introspection, self-absorption or self-concern. Looking at oneself was actualized by special direct instruction and was exhibited in the texts of the essays. As expected, not every respondent was equally successful in achieving a dialogical level of looking at him- or herself: even in trained psychologists a minority was able to achieve this level, and in other professional groups the proportion of respondents who achieved this level was still much lower.

Two basic functions seem to underlie the capacity of looking at oneself: self-detachment and self-involvement. Self-detachment accounts for the shift in perspective, viewing oneself from an independent meta-position, and obtaining an objectified view of oneself in a broad life-world perspective (zoom-out rather than zoom-in). Self-involvement accounts for the self-interest and motivation of self-cognition, seeing a puzzle or a mystery in oneself, and openness to an inner dialogue towards discovering this mystery. No doubt that systemic self-reflection based on the dialogue between the knowing Self and the known Self is the most beneficial way of relating to oneself also from the therapeutic viewpoint.

The ability to look at oneself in a dialogical way seems to be malleable and may be treated as an individual variable, though hardly normally distributed. Its emergence is a matter of development and training; our results indicate, in particular, that it is found in psychologists more often than in other professions. An intervention study aimed at the development of the systemic self-reflection through facilitation of inner dialogue is currently being planned.

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