

News Gram

IRWIN SAVODNIK and MEDICAL ASSOCIATES, Inc.

October 2003

Volume 10, No. 3

\$49.95/year

Disorders of the Self

One of the more interesting areas of psychiatry has to do with something called the self. Another word for the self, roughly, is *ego*, which has a technical connotation. We can treat the self as an entity that has both a subjective and objective dimension – an inside and an outside. How the brain actually produces a sense of self is a complex process. Also, when the central nervous system fails to operate properly, the ordinary awareness a person has of himself or herself may be disturbed. It's worth looking at some syndromes in which a disturbance of the self is involved, since it tells us a lot about the brain and ourselves.

Before doing that, let's take a look at one conception of how the self develops. In the first year of life, the self consists largely of an awareness of bodily states – pain, hunger, wetness. Between the first and third years, the child develops a sense of self-differentiation, i.e. an awareness of other people (or selves) who are distinct from him. For the next seven years there is an emerging awareness of relationships, role in the family, as well as a more nuanced appreciation of self based on how others may see the child. During puberty, the issue of self-image assumes substantial proportions and by 18 years of age, it is integrated into a more mature sense of how one fits in with other people and institutions.

Interestingly, psychiatric syndromes often contain disorders of the self that are not fully appreciated. Let's take a look at some of them:

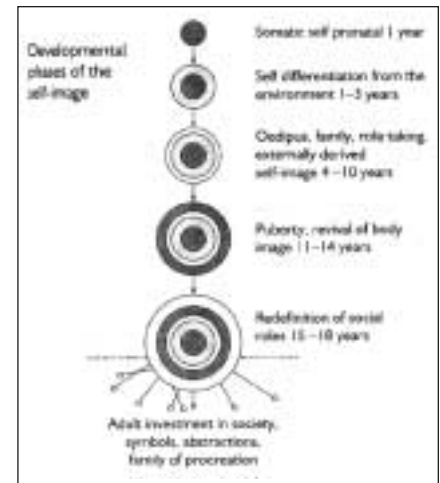
Impairment of the sense of personal existence – For most people, there is no doubt as to whether or not one exists. We take such an idea as the most self-evident aspect of ourselves and rarely consider its opposite. In some syndromes, however, especially affective disorders, an individual may actually experience a diminished sense that he or she exists. We sometimes refer to such a state as a nihilistic delusion. In severe depressions, people may have the sense that they simply don't exist. On a less intense level, we find patients who have a sense of depersonalization, a feeling that they are not as real as they had been in the past. It is as if the person's sense of self thins out.

Disorder of activity – When we do something, we experience ourselves doing it. Sometimes a person's awareness of doing something may become attenuated. For instance, a patient may feel that she is not the one perceiving a certain scene. She may remark that her experience is like a dream. We might say that a person doesn't feel as in charge of herself as she usually does. Sometimes there is a loss of feeling or emotional fullness. Finally, there can be a sense of not being able to will an act; this state of mind represents a profound sense of powerlessness.

Disorder of singleness – We take it for granted that we are a single, unique entity with a name and an identity. On occasion, though, a person may not have the experience of being an integrated unity. He may see himself as if from the outside. This syndrome can take a series of different

forms: There is *autoscopy*, for instance, in which a person sees himself. He is not alarmed and tends to be almost indifferent to what he is viewing. One definition of autoscopy is that it is "a complex psychosensorial hallucinatory perception of one's own body image projected into the external visual space."

The *doppelgänger phenomenon* consists of an awareness of oneself as being both outside oneself and inside oneself. This symptom may be a form of depersonalization. It is important to distinguish it



"IN SOME SYNDROMES...AN INDIVIDUAL MAY ACTUALLY EXPERIENCE A DIMINISHED SENSE THAT HE OR SHE EXISTS."

from autoscopy, which is a *perceptual* disorder, since the *doppelgänger phenomenon* is cognitive in nature. The person believes his double is outside or alongside him. This rare, severe phenomenon is usually associated with some degree of impaired consciousness.

Disorder of identity – Most people have the impression that they are the same person as the one who occupied this body a month, a year, a decade ago. Sometimes, though, that impression is lost and the individual has the experience of himself as someone who is not the same person as before. There is a sense of *discontinuity* in the patient. Just as an individual may not feel as if he is an integrated whole at one particular time, someone may have the impression that he is not integrated over time.

We have some ideas about what causes such disruption in such a fundamental aspect of our existence. The most likely culprit in these syndromes – though hardly the only one – is an impaired parietal lobe. That part of the cerebral cortex integrates multiple sensory inputs and a disruption in its functioning can produce the kinds of disorders described above. —IS

**IRWIN SAVODNIK
and MEDICAL ASSOCIATES, Inc.**

*Call us for
Psychiatric Evaluations!*

PRESORTED STANDARD
PAID
U.S. POSTAGE
Torrance, CA
Permit #754



THE COFFEE BREAK QUIZ

Which of the
following is not a
part of the brain?

- A. Islets of Langerhans
- B. Cerebellum
- C. Basal ganglia
- D. Pons
- E. Temporal lobe

ANSWER: A
The Islets of Langerhans
are groups of specialized cells
found in the pancreas that
secrete insulin, which helps
regulate glucose metabolism.

SAVODNIK'S PICKS

A Monthly Review of Dr. Savodnik's Favorite Books-on-Tape

The Reformation

by Will Durant

It is hard to understand how someone could sit down and write an entire history of human life on this planet. Yet, Will Durant did just that in rich detail, with depth and an appreciation of the ironies inherent in the affairs of the men and women who stepped onto the stage of history for a few short years. In *The Reformation*, Durant continues the saga and states from the outset that the long series of events held together by a single word, was the most important historical process the human race has ever experienced.

A point that Durant makes abundantly clear, is that the Reformation did not simply occur when, in 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on a church door in Wittenberg. Instead, there were numerous events, many of them shattering, that beat a path to that august portal. There was the age of Wycliff and Chaucer in the 14th century, when the fabric of medieval Christendom was beginning to unravel. After a thousand years of a unified effort to deliver God's heaven to the earthly domain of frail men and women, the Christian church was paralyzed by corruption, materialism and a moral stagnation that threatened its continuity and mission.

Wycliff, who lived from 1320-1384, was the first and greatest of the English reformers. He challenged the church with a series of books and disputations regarding the theological interpretation of

Christ's teachings. He criticized the hypocrisy of the clergy, declaring that some monasteries were "dens of thieves, nests of serpents, houses of living devils." He produced frightening turmoil within the church, so much so that Pope Urban VI summoned him to Rome. Wycliff failed to obey, succumbing instead to a stroke.

The peasants' revolt of 1381 was one of the great "wake-up calls" of English history. It shook England to its foundations and was a tocsin of what was to ensue. Chaucer's literature drew people's attention away from the church to life's everyday affairs. He laid the foundation for a self-conscious literary identity in his country that weakened the bond between his fair isle and Rome.

Similar events occurred in France, Spain and the Netherlands. More than 100 years had elapsed when Luther took a step that challenged the reigning authority in the western world. His work told the world that even the most ultimate authority can be brought to the court of human deliberation and subjected to the moral and legal scrutiny from which it had been protected.

This book is a masterpiece of narrative history. It is lively, fascinating and important. Durant helps us to see how we have come to where we are. There may even be a few suggestions about how we can solve some of the problems civilization is contending with as it struggles to survive.—*IS*