

SUPERVISION FROM MURRAY BOWEN'S THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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*Il faut se connaître soi-même:
quand cela ne servirait pas à trouver le vrai,
cela au moins sert à régler sa vie,
et il n'y a rien de plus juste.
Blaise Pascal, Pensée*

Abstract: *In my professional carrier, I had multiple occasions to talk, to comment and debate or to write about Murray Bowen's theory. Speaking from such a background, I think that there still are some ideas and concepts to be developed starting from such a profound and far-reaching theory. In the followings, we will try to extract some ethical ideas and probably a few anthropological perspectives (dimensions so vital in therapeutic practice as well as in supervision), which can be enhanced morally in order to fit to everyone's wish to make at least a few small steps towards one's own development. If for the sake of comparison, we would take Bowen's theory as a paradigmatic scaffolding, it is more than clear that we will build another conceptual construct than he did, one that will be at least slightly different (a different differentiation ...). As such, we will use elements of Bowen's theory as 'bricks', or components in order to build another edifice, one that goes beyond the purely therapeutic aspects (the one that medical doctors, therapists, psychologists or psychiatrists usually enhance). Nevertheless, we have to say it from the beginning, as a preliminary precaution and maybe as a warning as well, that Murray Bowen and his theory are not and cannot be every man's cup of tea. Consequently, we will use the same note of warning Michael Kerr mentioned in his introduction to Bowen's theory: "A note of caution as you embark on reading this book: Bowen theory can be dangerous to your psychological and emotional equilibrium." [1]*

Psychotherapy is about change and as such aspects of differentiation occur as the core item to do it. As such, the differentiation of the self is just another expression for self-development which, of course, can be a dangerous to an emotional equilibrium ... but how else could we evolve?

Key Words: *solid self, pseudo-self, Ego, persona, differentiation, supervision*

INTRODUCTION

Why would Bowen's theory be dangerous to such a hyper-complex system we call our personality or ourselves? Is it just because somebody comes forward with a theory, supposedly a new one, and pretends that his vision reaches deep into our very own ideas we foster about ourselves? And, all matters considered, should we admit such a theory and maybe even admire or adopt it? Is it a sufficient justification to tell us that this theory "*can be dangerous*" or is this just a provocative sort of advertising? Alternatively, is it probable or at least possible that in this theory we could encounter ideas, concepts or hints, which could raise intriguing question marks to our habitual belief systems? Although these kinds of questions seem to be contingent or, to say the least, uncomfortable, they are none the less worth asking. Being at least provocative they are also pro-vocative, which means that they are an implicit 'call' (lat. *vocare*) for something that although is very present, we usually ignore it. The theory we want to present, analyse, and discuss is from the very beginning *pro-vocative* in its own nature and its possible connexions, implications, and developments as well. We will find ideas or insights we cannot easily ignore or rapidly sweep under the carpet of our day-by-day stressful involvement with life. Bowen's theory is very 'vocal', and as such appealing, not in the common sense of course, but vocal and possibly upsetting none the less. And, as with so many things, what for one is appealing, can be appalling for others.

In such a context, we just have to remember Piaget's theory of 'adaptation' [2], which, although very modern and widely used by everyone, is not as simple and one-dimensional or one-directional as it seems to a superficial approach. *Adaptation* is, as Piaget wanted it understood, twofold: there is *assimilation*, on the one hand and *accommodation*, on the other. Assimilation, as the first step of that two-step procedure, is the easy part, everyone can do it without problems: you just have to take it (hear-saying, news, information, knowledge, etc.) from the world and incorporate it into one of your 'mental drawers' or 'files'. This simple operation is possible because you already have the correspondent 'labelled' drawer where to put and register the new item or information. But, in case there is no correspondent 'drawer', 'file', or 'folder' in which to fit the news, you have to create one, and that is what Piaget labelled as *accommodation* – the second step of adaptation. In such a case, the new content has 'to be accommodated' or incorporated into a system that was not designed for it from the beginning. Consequently, the mental system has to enlarge itself in order to create a new 'space', or 'drawer', or 'file' for the information registered and to develop a network of connections, which will appropriate it to the information already existing in the system.

As such, we will consider another of Michael Kerr's observations concerning Bowen's theory:

"Making Bowen theory one's own requires shifting completely from individually based, cause-and-effect thinking to system thinking and shifting from focusing mostly on human uniqueness to understanding human beings in the context of nearly four billion years of evolution." [3]

The great difficulty inherent in every accommodation process is the implicit recognition of one's own limited mental capacity, namely its lack of dept and extension.

We have to admit, at least to ourselves, that we do not know everything; what is more 'dangerous' (for our equilibrium) is that we should recognize that those limits are inherent and, as such, they are the only 'tool' we have to work with. Every accommodation is a challenge to our mental apparatus and its work-patterns. Wherever questions appear, which implicitly are questioning our limits and the possibility to interrogate habitual values, benchmarks, or usual patterns, they can and will be problematic, unpleasant and consequently stressful for our mental system and its equilibrium. What we implicitly have to recognize here is that our own mental system works based on certain patterns and that we have to change some of those patterns when there is an accommodation process involved. Furthermore, changing patterns is not difficult because you have to replace one pattern with another, but because you have to change *your own* patterns with new and unusual ones. It is this alienating process that creates the discomfort or the uneasiness; moreover, the discomfort is not as much a mental or intellectual one but instead it is about the deeper level of emotions, feelings and attachments. It is the feeling of our mental inadequacy or incompleteness that is at the core of the difficulties encountered in the accommodation process. We may think and remember here the core idea of the individual psychology of Alfred Adler [4], namely the inferiority feeling inherent to all humans from childhood onwards. It is probably the sensible point where every need for accommodation hits the mark. Consequently, we have not only to dismiss our own ideas or beliefs just because they are our own. What we have to consider is that they have become our own because we have cherished and developed them as being the only ones we had after all.

It is not easy to recognize that we, as adults, have limits, intellectually and emotionally as well, and that we still have to learn and develop although the school years are since long forgotten. Most adults are not prone to learning, and I mean here the real learning as understood in Piaget's *accommodation*, second part of the adaptation process. What can be observed is that most people are rather inclined to assimilate new information which should fit in their habitual 'folders' or 'files' (there should not be any effort involved besides swallowing pre-digested news or information). We don't even realise the existence of inherent mental patterns, because they are so familiar, prone to dominate and arrest our minds in their intricacies and idiosyncrasies. From a strictly cognitive perspective, as expressed by Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach in *The Knowledge Illusion*, we are living in complete hypocrisy and consequently:

"The answer is that we do so by living a lie. We ignore complexity by overestimating how much we know about how things work, by living life in the belief that we know how things work even when we don't. We tell ourselves that we understand what's going on, that our opinions are justified by our knowledge, and that our actions are grounded in justified beliefs even though they are not. We tolerate complexity by failing to recognize it. That's the illusion of understanding." [5]

There's no wonder, in such a context, that the accommodation process is even harder for people who already know some theories and have an intellectual and cultural background to start with. In such cases, we always will see how the new information, ideas, or theories collide with the already assimilated ones. The difficulty in such cases is the bracketing of the old (information, ideas, theories, or beliefs) in order to free some 'mental space', to create a new work-place. It is remarkable how far and deep we are addicted and emotionally bound to *our own* ideas, inscribed in *our own* mind in order for *us* to work with them as *our own* modes and procedures based on *our own* beliefs imbedded in *our own*

inescapable paradigm. It seems to be always about *us, I, my, our own or mine*, which are confronted and provoked by something strange and unusual, which is threatening our homeostasis. And that is what psychotherapy encounters: the limited capacity to face the new, the unusual, and the provocative. Even in supervision we have to deal with the difficulties created by the same provocations. If we look at Bowen's theory, we will find at least some indications to better ourselves in order to deal with the limits of our understanding and integration.

Why Bowen's theory?

Bowen saw the immense potentialities that his theory contains *in nuce*, and, as M. Kerr emphasizes it, he did not forcefully build on an already existing ground (Systemic Therapy, Psychoanalyses, etc.) but:

"In contrast, Bowen saw the potential for a completely new theory of human behaviour emerging from family research. Many of the other family pioneers were more preoccupied with developing a new therapeutic approach to human problems, namely, family therapy, than developing a new theory." [6]

Although Murray Bowen was a genius of incontestable value and profundity, as a medical doctor and psychotherapist, he was confined to his proper domain of knowledge and practice. Moreover, the practice of psychotherapy is very challenging and needs the outmost implication and devotion of everyone who wants to have serious and durable results and achievements. Psychology and psychotherapy are vast realms of the human knowledge and, as it is very well understood, even a lifetime would not be enough to know, investigate, or to explore them all. However, exactly this vastness of the domain is what arrests and confines psychologists and psychotherapists. Psychology is, as every other science branch or domain, an enclosure; eventually every domain will realize a *closure* by closing itself on the occupants and making them prisoners of its own territory. After all, psychology, as well as every other science, has a precisely defined domain surrounded by a frontier, which protects from possible intrusions coming from the exterior and tries, at the same time, to conserve and preserve its own corpus of knowledge and practices. Unfortunately, such systemic protective mechanisms of homeostasis apply as well to psychologists, psychotherapists, or psychiatrists. As everybody else, they are not without professional sensibilities and vulnerabilities, put in place in order to preserve and conserve what they already have acknowledged or integrated and, as such, consider their very own domain.

If we like it or not, there are many questions to be raised once we stand on the margins of psychology and psychotherapy. One example would be the question of how we could objectively examine something about psychology if we are psychologists (meaning that we are inside the domain and not outside of it and its inevitable limitations). Alternatively, how could we see and understand where we stand as psychologists, and what kind of knowledge we inhabit and believe in, if we are always within the boundaries of one single domain? Are we doing this just because it is the only domain of knowledge we know and we can access? As such, we agree with Feyerabend's opinion that: "The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the *inside*." (...) "The first step in our criticism of familiar concepts and procedures, the first step in our criticism of 'facts', must therefore be an attempt to break the circle." [7]

In my opinion, in order to achieve at least some openings ('a crack where the light gets in'), only a philosophic-anthropological approach can help psychology to overcome its own limitations and self-fixed boundaries. Otherwise, we are in a closed and jealously, even zealously, guarded system of facts, schools, procedures, statistics, practices, beliefs, and concepts. By such a conceptual overture psychology as such (as well as psychotherapy and supervision) will have nothing to lose but rather to gain by accessing a more generous vision of what is to be human and, consequently, what is humanly possible. As such, we want to point out and to discuss some of Murray Bowen's concepts, that are not necessarily on the first line of light, which in our opinion could be further developed into general and insightful anthropological ideas with a generous outcome towards psychotherapy and supervision. Two of the important aspects of human psychology Bowen is interested in are the *pseudo-self* and the *solid self*. We will present them and add some commentaries based on the generous psychological and psychotherapeutic foundation Bowen has constructed.

The Pseudo-self

Omnis creatura subjecta est vanitatis.

What is the *pseudo-self*? If there is a *self*, how come that we can even speak of such an eclectic word construct as the '*pseudo-self*'? Should it not be clear that a self is a *self*, which is and has to be always *itself*, no more and no less, and as such not something else or something different as a *pseudo-self* for instance? Considering what the dictionary states, '*pseudo*' (from Greek) as a prefix, means either 'similar' as in '*pseudobulb*' or it can be understood as 'false' or 'spurious', which means pretty much the same. [8]. As such, the *pseudo-self* is kind of a *self* that actually is not a *self*, or if we want to insist for it being a *self*, it can only be a false *self*, a spurious and inauthentic one. The *pseudo-self* is to be understood rather as a mask or something one puts on to present oneself – to oneself or to the social world of others. Nevertheless, as we see, the *pseudo-self* has this intrinsic quality of in-authenticity, which is manifested and put forward by its own lack of authenticity. Consequently, the inauthentic *pseudo-self* comes forward with its own in-authenticity, which, as it turns out, cannot grasp its own falsehood or spuriousness. The *pseudo-self* is a mask that does not recognize that it is a mask and instead presents itself as the real thing, undisputable and incontrovertible *self* (of itself); there should be nothing else under that surface and what is presented or showed to us should be taken as being real – although we feel that it is a fake, a mask put on in order to fool us to believe that there should be something behind it. Unfortunately for those who play with the mask of the *pseudo-self*, there is not very much to hide behind the mask itself, which is more like an interface put forward to 'save face' and be socially acceptable in any circumstances. As such we are reduced to simple masks and will evade the idea of complexity; everyone tries to avoid complexity (because it is considered as synonymous with complication) in search for simplicity of opinions, habitual beliefs and the usual common sense instilled in us by social pressure.

"Instead of appreciating complexity, people tend to affiliate with one or another social dogma. Because our knowledge is enmeshed with that of others, the community shapes our beliefs and attitudes." (...) "We let our group do our thinking for us. Appreciating the communal nature of knowledge should make us more realistic about what's determining our beliefs and values." [9] That is not a very flattering picture of how our mind and

intellect works but it seems that the cognitive sciences are at least trying to unravel some of the more commonly and currently accepted opinions of social psychology and anthropology. In order to gain a better understanding of how our belief system works and maybe why this *pseudo-self* is needed in the social psychology of all human interaction, we should consult what Bowen has to say and to infer about it.

Bowen had defined this strange self-entity as a ‘pseudo-something’ or ‘pseudo-somebody’ which has a certain role to play in his theory of differentiation of the self [10]. Humans are, as we know since Aristotle’s time, social animals and, as such, they are born and raised in the midst of other humans, their parents, relatives, neighbours, etc. Consequently, the newborn infant will be under the continuous influence of others who will try to model him or her to adopt the patterns of the group, to assimilate and integrate them in order to conform and function accordingly. The end result of this insistent and persistent socialising process is a conglomerate of psychic and social fragments, key words, phrases, feelings, ideas, and expectations coming from the outside world combined with one’s own reactions to this constant feeding with opinions, beliefs, attitudes, or behavioural patterns. It looks as if our own parents were some ‘influencers’ who induce us with trends, orientation, or maps for what awaits us in life. The baby has to integrate what is good or bad, what it should do in order to please, and what can have unpleasant consequences; all in order to be accepted, integrated, and having its wishes fulfilled, or at least attended to. In order to create a new *self*, the *self* of a specific child, it has to be instantiated first with the models others can offer. As Bowen states it: “The pseudo-self is created by emotional pressure, and it can be modified by emotional pressure. Every emotional unit, whether it be the family or the total of society, exerts pressure on group members to conform to the ideals and principles of the group.” [11]

Therefore, it is always the emotional pressure that drives the process of socialisation which tends to modify the psyche of the child by moulding it into the patterns of the family or the group where it belongs. At the beginning of that long process, it is all about emotions and emotionality, wishes and feelings that are the main drivers of our first steps into the social world of our family. This is only normal because the emotional, conceived by Bowen as a system, is our phylogenetic link with the larger animal kingdom we originate from. More so, this emotional system is not just our phylogenetic link but also our solid foundation as organic and corporeal beings that have to establish a connection with the group we are born into and the world we are living in. It is about belonging to that certain human group because our own survival depends upon them and their forthcoming care, affection, and understanding.

In the history of human evolution, the emotional system was and still is undoubtedly the first violin of a psychic and systemic duet. The other ‘instrument’ of the duet is the intellectual, which was also conceived as a system by Bowen. Our intellectual growth is curdled, influenced, and moulded under the pressure others ceaselessly exert on us, and, of course, we can react one way or another to this intellectual ‘inflow’ of data, opinions, or instructions. The outcome of this process is the composite result of those influences and our own reactions to them; only as such, one can develop a new and distinctive idiosyncrasy, one that can be identified with that supreme word ‘I’. As a result:

“The pseudo-self is composed of a vast assortment of principles, beliefs, philosophies, and knowledge acquired because it is required or considered right by the

group. Since the principles are acquired under pressure, they are random and inconsistent with one another, without the individual's being aware of the discrepancy." [11]

As it is easy to understand, the *pseudo-self* is just an amalgam of ideas or opinions, stereotypes and various hear-sayings unfiltered and adopted just because they are representative or trendy in our social surrounding. Moreover, in adopting them we do not just fashion and model our intellect accordingly, but by doing so we show everybody (ourselves included) where our loyalties lie. Nevertheless, every socialisation has not only its bright side but also its own shadow and handicap. Usually, the shadow part of every socialisation, which presupposes the integration of individuality under the levelling influence of a group, is not discussed very often. Ultimately, the best that socialisation can attain is erasing individuality; as such, total socialisation and integration can be implemented solely by annihilation of every trace of individuality with the end result of collectivisation. The best examples from the animal kingdom for such a successful performance are insects such as bees, ants or termites. Pretty much the same thing in human societies looks like the Third Reich or Stalinist Soviet Union. In those types of societies, the socialisation process is more or less complete, and, as such, individualities tend to disappear behind the collective standards put forward by mass-psychology. It goes without saying that such social success can be achieved solely on the 'solid foundations' the model of *pseudo-self* can provide and promote.

Unfortunately for us, we see a rise of the same tendencies of collectivisation by the pressure of the marketplace where *pseudo-selves* are fabricated on-line in order to consume all the cheap goods so easily produced. Today, wherever we look, we only have facades, mere pretences of selves, reduced to insignificance – at least from a social point of view. Behind the superficial masks of *pseudo-selves*, there is not very much to be found, at least nothing that can be called personal or belonging to a well-defined individuality. Always in harmony with the peer group, the *pseudo-self* dissolves into the collective values in which it dwells and from which it feeds in order to maintain itself as a pliable and flexible pseudo-entity. On the other hand, the more harmoniously it is integrated in the group mentality – by an all-engulfing self-importance –, the more estranged it is from itself and its own self esteem. The 'warmth' it feels in the midst of the group is the only energy source it has in order to be nurtured and to survive. It is the survival of a strange entity that has to be integrated in the collective in order to be somebody or at least someone. In Bowen's own words:

"The pseudo-self can be increased by a congenial relationship and emotional approval and decreased by a negative relationship or disapproval. An index of pseudo-self is the degree to which people act, pretend, and use external appearance to influence others and to feign postures that make them appear more or less adequate or important than they really are." [12]

As we see, it is a lot about posturing and pretending that the *pseudo-self* puts on display. Such a mask does at least two things: 1) it hides the inner emptiness and psychological weakness of the individual that wears it, and 2) it functions as a presentable and acceptable social interface for somebody who does not have very much of a real *self* to present to the world.

All kinds of inferiority feelings and complexes hide behind the adaptable mask of the *pseudo-self*. Although weak, inappropriate and polluted by complexes or the sheer emptiness of a lost soul, such an individual governed by the *pseudo-self* can present oneself

in a much better light than one really is. Nevertheless, playing such an artificial role or constantly wearing a false mask over years will inevitably consume the energy reserves of the individual. The connection with the natural flow of ‘the great circle of life’ is left behind and forgotten by the continuous effort to maintain, sustain, and nourish the whims of the artificial entity called *pseudo-self*. Although great efforts are continuously made in investing and reinvesting the mask of the *pseudo-self* with sustenance, the results are artificial and more or less superficial; eventually, the real, weak and very thin *self* will collapse (at least psychologically) under the heaviness of the mask and the efforts to wear it. Only then such a person will come into therapy. Only then will he or she be ready to discuss his or her own inadequacy to life. Only then will there be some hope for change.

The *pseudo-self* and *persona*

Bowen’s notion of *pseudo-self* can be discussed, analysed, and corroborated with another important and impactful psychological concept, the *persona*, as it is presented in the psychology of C. G. Jung. Both concepts are conceived as general tendencies of a psyche exposed to psychological pressures and anthropological causations coming from our contemporary civilization and its stereotypical modes of socialisation. It seems that everything that surrounds us is like an open invitation towards the growth of a *pseudo-self* as a showroom for somebody situated on the margins of what could be, but probably never will be, a total, integrated personality. Today’s *pseudo-self* could be compared with a hallway *self*, one that has nothing more to show but window dressing. Actually, there is not very much left for an *Ego* because it seems that every bit of psychic energy has to be invested and reinvested in what C. G. Jung called the *persona*¹ and this is what we want to explore next.

The psychic ‘entity’ of ‘*persona*’ is conceived as a ‘social face’ so to speak, a pseudo-personality with which we can stand in front of the world and present ourselves to others. Our *persona* is ‘constructed’ by our titles (academic or not), our social status and our various roles we play in our family, neighbourhood, place of work and so on. The *persona* represents our very precious social and symbolic capital that can be enhanced as an active instrument in promoting, maintaining, or using symbolic power. As such, all *my* titles, *my* status, *my* merits (acquired in *my* particular field, or branch of activity, or specialisation), or even *my* money, or *my* clothes, *my* car, *my* house, *my* swimming pool, or *my* dog (after all, why not?) define me. All those properties or possessions will make up for *my* image that *I* will present to the world in order to be acknowledged as somebody. It is important to remark here that usually we are not satisfied if we are recognized as being ‘just somebody’; we want to be *important* as well (which rapidly transforms itself in *my* importance or *me* being important). In such a context, it is not surprising that the most used word in the English language (and probably in every other language as well), is the shortest expression possible: ‘I’.

After all, everybody wants to be ‘a somebody’, the weakness and superficiality of the *pseudo-self* cannot live without admiration, appreciation, even envy, hatred, or just

¹ “The persona is therefore a functional complex consisting of reasons of adaptation or necessary convenience, but which does not identify with individuality. This functional complex refers exclusively to the relationship with objects.” [13]

malicious commentaries. The only great fear in this social game played by the *pseudo-self* is indifference, a non-reaction, a non-stroke or the lack of reaction to what one has to present about oneself.

What Jung called '*persona*' can be seen as an equivalent for what M. Bowen labelled as '*pseudo-self*'. We can better illustrate the idea of what the *persona* actually is with a citation from M. Esther Harding's book *The I and the Not I* where the whole process and genealogy of the *persona* is presented (following of course the original thoughts of Jung himself). From the early manifestations of every newborn manifested in every direction "untrammelled by any thought of appropriateness or of consequences" the child will be put under the direct influence of the educational pressure right afterwards:

"But immediately he is subjected to a process of training - a training that has been imposed upon him before he even had an "I" that could protest, a training whose object is to teach him how to adapt to society, what is permissible or not, what will produce love and acceptance and what will be frowned upon or punished. At this very early stage in his development, a child begins to develop a *persona*, a mask of good and adapted behavior." [14]

Accordingly, the moulding process the newborn is subjected to begins in the earliest stages of life. It seems that the lack of an 'I' does not matter at all; on the contrary, it is probably easier to 'fabricate' and induce a *persona* in the earliest stages of childhood. In that process, the *Ego* would only be an impediment, which would complicate things. While the *Ego* is formed out of opposition to someone or to something – the 'I' is different from everything that is 'non-I' – the *persona* is not willing to oppose anything to the social pressure, which is ultimately its mirror and its main contributor. As such, it seems to be much easier to build the *persona* as the desirable and pliable face of the child instead of the antagonistic and difficult formation of the *Ego*.

In another paragraph of the same book, we find an interesting description of the interconnectedness between what we call the 'I' and the *persona*:

"When the delicate, gelatinous stuff of the immature psyche is met by the reality of the outer external world a hardening process takes place, which we speak of as adaptation, and around the natural psyche there forms a kind of skin, a mask, by means of which the sensitive individual can adjust itself to the requirements of the environment. The initial sense of "I-ness" is largely concerned with this *persona* "I". In the initial stages, in the child, it is quite precarious, and indeed it may even remain so into adult life." [15]

Such a fragility or precariousness is not found solely in the child or in those early developmental stages of the ontogenesis. If everything goes well, as planned and expected, the 'I-ness' represented by the *persona* can present itself in its own shiny and impeccably arranged window dressing. A glowing *persona* will successfully mask a superficial and underdeveloped *Ego*. Even the immaturity of the *Ego* can be very well hidden behind the generous mask a *persona* can provide. Consequently, the 'I' will not be a very *solid self* or *Ego*, but more of an appendix to the presentable and sociable *persona* or *pseudo-self*, for that matter. As such, the growth of the *persona* is an inflationary process, which constantly and continuously devalues the *Ego* until all that remains of it is just an empty and shallow shell (as illustrated in the last Harry Potter film by the remains of Lord Voldemort crouched under a bench in a very bright train station).

The *persona* is like a child that needs constant pampering, a child who has to relay on his image and on what he or she has to show in order to be somebody. In this case the

show window constantly translates in a window show for a continuous exposure. Ultimately, that is what we usually search in the eyes of others, eyes that should reflect and possibly enhance our own image.

Some people are willing even to pay the psychotherapist to listen to his complains and to reflect back on them some kind of understanding ... What should a supervisor say to a therapist who complains about that? How can they understand or integrate such endless flow of self-importance? Can, in other words, the *persona* be healed? Or, can a *pseudo-self* be solidified in order to become some kind of *solid self*? Those are just a few questions that come in mind as we analyse what is happening to our fellow citizens.

The solid self

There is a significant difference between the *pseudo-self* previously analysed and the *solid self*, considered by Bowen and his followers as the more consistent and stable nucleus of personality. As such, this part of the *self* is a more consistent *self*, one that is stable, intimate and built on a strong, durable and permanent basis. The *solid self* is immutable and, as such, not negotiable as the *pseudo-self* is; it is not variable and adaptable to any influences or temptations coming from the social world. As Bowen underlines it: "The solid self does not participate in the fusion phenomenon." [11]. To understand what Bowen wants to say, we need to see how this fusion manifest itself in the family system. The entire theory of the differentiation of *self* builds upon a basic assumption, which is that families, as the main unit for our ontogenetic development, work according to some systemic laws governed by homeostasis, circularity, totality, and so on. Usually, the family system develops and finds itself embedded in a very complex process of emotional fusion transmitted to its members, especially to children; the opposite, namely the fissional forces, on which individuality is differentiated and built, occur later in life and manifest massively in puberty and adolescence.

Although the first signs of the *Ego*, appear at the age of two (at least according to Freud although other researchers, including psychoanalysts, may have different opinions), these first signs will show their full development much latter. Until that time, the child lives in the midst of a process of intense fusion with his mother and other parental figures, which is centripetal given the character and orientation of the psychic energy and investment. As such, the newborn will rapidly adopt attitudes and behaviours in order to obtain what he needs for his survival, well-being, and comfort. It seems that the *pseudo-self* or the *persona* has a certain precedence over the development of the *Ego* or the *solid self*. The more personal and more egotistical components of our psyche are latter arrivals and they obviously need a certain foundation or basis in order to start evolving and developing. It is first fusion and only afterwards fission and splitting of a tiny psychic fragment, that later on becomes the *solid self*. In spite of that, Michael Kerr observed that there has to be some kind of equilibrium between the two forces of attraction and repulsion: "... human beings have a profound need for emotional closeness but are adverse to too much of it. The phenomenon is a fundamental aspect of human nature and exists in people of all cultures." [16]

In the end, it is about togetherness and individuality and one has to have some 'space' in the realm of togetherness for individuality to form and to develop. Nevertheless, right in this process, individuality cannot ignore togetherness for which it has to reserve

some special 'space' to breathe and continue to nurture its processes. Neither of the two extreme directions does have to be exclusive but rather inclusive and tolerant of the other part. It is all in the art of making compromises, meaning reciprocal promises (as the meaning of the word goes) to understand the importance of the other perspective, although situated at the extreme. In such a 'com-promise' it is not just to hand something over but also to gain something in return – like in a symbiosis that works smoothly for both sides. After all, it is, if recognized as such, a win-win situation, one which integrates two apparently different, exclusive and incompatible terms of an anthropological and existential equation of life. Such a magic operation and compromise is facilitated by the sophisticated procedure of differentiation of the *self* and the permanent dialogue or dialectic of togetherness and individuality, between the *pseudo-self* and its counterpart, the *solid self*: "A threat to closeness triggers feelings of rejection; a threat of too much closeness triggers feelings of being intruded upon, overwhelmed, and out of control. Threats of too much distance and too much closeness activate the stress response." [16]

Such a new psychic unit needs a lot of time to develop out of the all-engulfing maelstrom of the fusion aspects of life in a family system. At first, the core of the *self* is very weak and insignificant, and, consequently, it has a hard time to express itself and its needs or wants. After all, self-expression goes against the initial fusion with the mother and the family system. In a sense, the *Ego-split* is an act of treason towards the entire corpus of the family and its embrace. That is as logical as the simple fact that fission is the opposite of fusion (and vice versa, of course). Nevertheless, it is one thing to analyse these things intellectually and a completely different one when registered by the very sensitive feelings of the emotional system. Consequently, everyone who went true this process had at least two major things to do and to deal with. One of them was the slow split and detaching from the all-engulfing embrace of the forces of fusion of the first stages of child development. This means to realise and to enforce an emotional process, which has to have a serious string of repercussions. After all, this process is directed against the most near and dear person of our life, namely our mother. At a closer look, one's own mother is the main representative of the family system, it is she who intermediates its values, beliefs, norms, feelings, and every *modus operandi* that characterises it. Hence, the violent and ungrateful character of infidelity involved in such a courageous enterprise of detaching or differentiating oneself from the fusional forces of the family. Nevertheless, somewhere down the line there will be somebody, already constituted as a *solid self*, who will master the courage to say: "This is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or not do." [11]. It is striking in this phrase how much the 'I', or the *Ego* for that matter, is put forward. We have to understand that this 'great leap forward' is expressed on the stage of the family system governed mainly by emotional fusion and the all-encompassing feelings of loyalty based on merits, imbued by an incontrovertible legitimacy.

On the other hand, the *solid self* has not only to detach itself from the relational emotionality of one's own family and its centripetal and pulling forces, but it has also to search for some kind of authentic identity construed out of all the influences, constrictions, and everything one has absorbed from early childhood onwards. As the time goes by, and the child grows, other formative influences and the most diverse pressures of social nature are continuously added to the mould we already are in. First it is the school and the whole educational system we have to go through. Then there is the globalism, mercantilism, and mediatization we live in and which exert a great pressure on each individual, especially

because of the urge to change and adapt to the speed at which everything happens. As Christian Salmon in his *Storytelling* observes: "..., individuals experience an unbearable tension between the need to adapt to a changing environment and the need to assert their identity, between flexibility and individualism. This neo-management therefore has to meet their contradictory demands for autonomy and interdependence." [17]

This is a process that has to be repeated and enhanced at every new step oriented towards one's own differentiation, which is, if we want to make a parallel to Jung's psychology, the long and arduous process of individualisation. It is here the place to accentuate that the *solid self* and its development takes a lot of time, energy, patience and most of all, emotional and psychic investment. Such a process is not for the faint hearted, or the weaklings, and emotional addicts but it is more on the side of a heroic attempt following the incontrovertible calling towards growth and personal fulfilment. In Bowen's terms, this complicated issue is expressed as follows:

"A relationship system is kept in equilibrium by two powerful emotional forces that balance each other. In periods of calm, the forces operate as a friendly team, largely out of sight. One is the force for togetherness powered by the universal need for emotional closeness, love, and approval. The other is the force for individuality, powered by the drive to be a productive, autonomous individual, as determined by *self* rather than the dictates of the group. People have varying degrees of need for togetherness, which constitutes the life style (level of differentiation of self) for that person. The greater the need for togetherness, the less the drive for individuality. [18]

It becomes evident, from what Bowen accentuates, that we are speaking of a dialectical mechanism that drives us in opposite and antagonistic directions which are not easy to reconcile on a day-by-day basis. In the end, everyone has to handle, for good or for bad, these antagonisms inherent to our human nature. Above all we have to pay attention to the possibility of some crooked dialectics involved in taking either one or the other extreme – fission or fusion – and forgetting the complement. After all, it is not about either individuality or togetherness, but it is individuality *and* togetherness, or, in other words, individuality accepted, tolerated and included in an understanding and nurturing togetherness.

As with every opposite, togetherness and individuality are just different sides of the same coin, intrinsically linked and inseparable in their very own nature. If there is a *solid self* to appear and detach itself from the family emotional mass, we have to remember that the individualisation process as such is possible solely on the background of inherent family togetherness. In other words, if there is no togetherness we will not have individualisation and individuality as a result. On the other hand, individuality needs togetherness where it can manifest and develop itself in order to grow and flourish.

Beyond family bonds and all its emotional intricacies, moral formation implied in the evolution of the *solid self* presupposes, from an ethical point of view, a certain type of commitment that is inter-relational in nature; as David Brooks mentions it:

"In this way, moral formation is not individual; it is relational. Character is not something you build sitting in a room thinking about the difference between right and wrong and about your own willpower. Character emerges from our commitments. If you want to inoculate character in someone else, teach them how to form commitments—temporary ones in childhood, provisional ones in youth, permanent ones in adulthood. Commitments are the school for moral formation." [19]

Where that is leading us is the ‘second mountain’, as Brooks calls the complex procedure life is inviting us to undertake in order to grow and to become what we really are, meaning ourselves. Commitment, considered as such, equals complete and irrevocable dedication to a cause that is greater than the individualistic goals one egotistical (pseudo)*self* can have and follow. However, in order to clean the psyche from all the detritus of communal life, social psychology, and all sorts of social entanglements, one has to distance oneself *from* it, to create an inner personalised space, namely a *solid self*.

On such a level it seems that one has to isolate oneself from a lot of things coming from the outside world, especially from its bad, disturbing, and energy consuming influences and intricacies which deviate the spirit from his right way toward some kind of equilibrium or imagined *samadhi*. What is not very clear, and a great source of confusion, is that in the process one can throw out the baby with the bath water. On the other hand, we are part of the world and as such we cannot throw out our *pseudo-self* without risking to lose at least a part of ourselves. The question that can be raised is what remains after such a procedure? It is important to see that even from the detachment of philosophical reflections, we are prone to stick to some sort of compromise which extends to the personal level as well as to the family level. We have to understand, as Bowen puts it, that: “The mix of togetherness and individuality into which the person was programmed in early life becomes a ‘norm’ for that person. People marry spouses who have identical life styles in terms of togetherness-individuality.” [18]

It becomes evident now that it is about the mix of the two forces, of togetherness and individuality, that we are speaking of and that here lays one of the greatest difficulties in life which extends also to the therapeutic relation as well. There too we have those antagonistic tendencies of togetherness-individuality, and even more than that, we have to take into account the same tension in supervision, namely between to supervised and the supervisor. If we put all the details and concrete intricacies aside, and distance ourselves to a more abstract and rather intuitive level, we can see how problems transport themselves from one level to the next. It all starts with the client arriving in therapy. They come with their problems, transporting them into the therapy room. As such trivial problems of family and of domestic life see themselves upgraded – in the eyes and understanding of the psychotherapist – into systemic or psychoanalytic problems. They are in a way uplifted onto another level and benefit, by that operation of transmutation, of a strange but implicit metamorphosis. And that is not the end! With that problem – already translated from domestic into systemic or psychoanalytic or other psychological perspective – the therapist can have a problem of his or her own. Consequently, they will go into supervision, to clarify or untangle their implication in it. In doing so, the initial problem is elevated to another level of discussion and understanding, which is very far from the concrete domestic problem that is at the origin of such a multi-level process. And now, if we detach ourselves from all that, we could see on every step or level the same dynamic of individuality and togetherness: first between the family members, then between client(s) and psychotherapist, and then between the latter and their supervisor who has probably a family of his or her own ...

As we can understand from the above-mentioned line of thinking, it is about a continuous dialectic between individuality and togetherness. A process that Bowen named the differentiation of self:

“The solid self is made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles. These are incorporated into self from one’s own life experiences, by a process of intellectual reasoning and the careful consideration of the alternatives involved in the choice. In making the choice, one becomes responsible for self and the consequences.” [11]

As such, Bowen seems to be on pretty much the same page as Brooks with his ‘freedom to’. In both cases there is a commitment to something very intimate and basic, something that becomes, once adopted, self-defining and, in the same time self-fulfilling. Such a commitment is however, something that is first of all a self-building, in the sense that it is not only the end of a process or the process itself, but it is at the same time its own commencement.

Those commitments are only possible on the most conscious level someone can apply, a level that has to be maintained and continuously enhanced afterwards. Adoption of life principles, as in Bowen’s theory, or attachments and commitments to moral formation, as in Brooks’s ideas of the ‘second mountain’, are touching in fact the same core of differentiation of *self*. The main paradigm is the long and arduous process of humanisation, respectively going beyond the simpler but more common purpose and finality of hominisation. After all, it is the *solid self* that has to be constructed out of everything that evolution (as in hominisation) had put into our hands as humans. Such a *solid self* can solely be found in the core of what a fully-fledged human being can offer as basic building material. The *solid self* is the apex of humanisation, which is the main objective of that long process of hominisation. The consequence of such a massive undertaking is that we will have a solid core of life conceptions and principles, which are well integrated in the conscious construct of the *solid self*. Because of this advanced integration: “Each belief and life principle is consistent with all the others, and self will take action on the principles even in situations of high anxiety and duress.” [11]

Bowen points here at the differentiation between the intellectual system, where those principles are seated, and the emotional one which is the main source of anxiety and every problem that can disturb the equilibrium of the intellect. Not everyone who can think clearly in the midst of any duress is ‘cool’, but s/he is cool because s/he has succeeded in the process of differentiation of *self* (namely to detach from the imperatives of the emotional system). Such ‘coolness’ is an ulterior quality that comes and emphasis one’s own evolution on the differentiation of the *self*. But, as we see every day, not everyone is cool, although almost everyone nowadays tries to look as such. Why is that so? Because, although most of us make great efforts to look cool, underneath the superficial varnish of the *pseudo-self* (or the *persona*) there is the underlying anxiety, which has a chronic and ubiquitous character.

The marvels and endless problems of psychotherapy and supervision

Authors S. Sloman and P. Fernbach are right when they accentuate that we are captive in a collective cloud, which is practically inescapable:

“This is because our beliefs are not isolated pieces of data that we can take and discard at will. Instead, beliefs are deeply intertwined with other beliefs, shared cultural values, and our identities. To discard a belief often means discarding a whole host of other beliefs, forsaking our communities, going against those we trust and love, and in short, challenging out identities.” [20]

Although statistics indicate that such disquieting data is true and that the individual faced with the power of social pressure is too weak to resist, there is still space for a personal attitude towards the invasion of the collective mass of beliefs, norms, or values. Although cultural values are meant to impose their benchmarks on every individual, he or she should have the psychological power to resist, by ultimately affirming their individuality, which, in turn, could resist the constant and powerful pressure coming from the social intrusion.

One big question our contemporary civilization is confronted with is why are there so many mental or emotional disturbances and issues, substance abuse, and so many suicides. Why, for instance, is depression such a pandemic like issue? Is it because we have to sell ourselves as flexible, adaptable, unattached, and mobile, imbued with superficial feelings and able to slip into anything society considers to be successful – independently of one's sense of identity? The background for such questions is made of the overwhelming findings of anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, or paleo-scientists that show that primitive humans hadn't had such problems or issues with their life. Among the most frequent and impairing contemporary conditions are depression and the more recently and trendy: the panic attack. Very modern and very posh, so to speak, depression, anxiety, and other mental problems have created, as a consequence of medical care, whole branches of psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, or other collateral chemical and pharmaceutical industries. As the authors Ronald Giphart and Mark van Vugt underline, regarding depression as a contemporary problem in Holland: "A veritable depression industry has cropped up since then and some people believe depression has become the most common disease. Some research classes the Netherlands as the 'happiest country in the world', others claim we have well over a million people on antidepressants." [21]

Nevertheless, why are we exploring this line of thinking? What would be its connection with our subject, which let us not forget, is referring to the differentiation of the *self*. However, once we consider our original human background of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, we'll see that psychic or psychological issues are not problems that affect humans in general (they are not inscribed in our genes, so to speak). Psychic illnesses and sufferings are affecting only modern, civilised humans who live the most comfortable and easy-going life that could appear on this planet. Mental issues and emotional problems are not intrinsic to humans in general but just to us, namely, the modern and contemporary humans. The conclusion that these issues are somehow 'fabricated' by our modern way of life becomes pretty obvious. Moreover, they are not only 'fabricated' but also initiated, maintained and enhanced by our contemporary civilisation and globalised market place culture. Why would that be so? If we want the simplest answer to such an outrageous question, it would be the following: because they sell! Suffering, illness, various issues, difficulties or problems will be transformed (or transmuted) into money and profit. On the other hand:

"Research into mental illness amongst the Kakuli, a hunter-gatherer people of Papua New Guinea, shows that clinical depression is almost completely non-existent, despite the fact that these people, like westerners, are plagued by major setbacks such as illness and the death of loved ones. A hunter-gatherer life appears to be profoundly anti-depressant." [21]

Why is that so? How did we come to this? Is it because, as Erich Fromm showed: “Everything is important to him except his life and the art of living. He is for everything except for himself.”? [22]

As a consequence of all our analyses shouldn't we consider and focus on the human itself instead of his or her problems, therapies or medication? Our academic education has led us into the very narrow streets of our own specialisation which does less and less for the human in front of us and more and more for our own status, finances and many other, very complicated economic issues.

One of our problems is the fact that psychic and psychological issues are on the rise although the motives for those issues are in most cases not apparent. Although there are less and less motives for us to be depressed, because of all the well-being society, technology and consumerism, we find ourselves in the antechambers of mental unbalance, emotional breakdowns of the unfulfilled. Such difficulties and issues become then associated with the various dependencies, addictions, or bizarre beliefs, values, or conceptions of life. We should not forget that: “One of the most important predictors of depression, loneliness, did not feature within the strong social structure of our ancestors.” [23]

There, in their rudimentary culture and way of life, our ancestors seem to have known that humans are, after all, social animals and that the social systems they live in are very important for their mental health and wellbeing. However, in order for one to differentiate, one will become more and more isolated from one's peers and here we have the paradox of the differentiation of the *self*. That is one of the many puzzling problems we are confronted with in our modern existence. Psychotherapy, as one of the leaders and sources for discussing and confronting those paradoxes, has a very important mission. Individuality and togetherness are just one of many others. Differentiation of the *self* is another important aspect, one which cannot be separated from the ominous tendencies of collectivisation that gain power over us.

As we have shown, the *solid self* is a very important psychological tool able to face the problems we are confronted with. If society excessively accentuates the superficiality manifested by the *pseudo-self* and all that is under the large umbrella of social psychology, our mission as psychologists (therapists or supervisors) is to point toward the more personal aspects of our human nature and the importance of developing a *solid self* as a basis for a good, integrated and fulfilled life. We can differentiate at least a few steps in the implementing of such a complex goal:

1. The first and most important step is involving the psychotherapist and psychotherapy in general. From this perspective it seems to be a good thing that more and more people are interested in it. As such, we will have a growing number of qualified specialists which can enhance the idea that the concept of a *solid self* is of the outmost importance for every direction of self-development. As a consequence of one's self-development we can expect, as in a chain reaction, the idea to spread not only into one's own family but also in one's social circle. On the other hand, in what concerns the therapist and his or her construction of a *solid self*, one has to have at least a practical basis and profound knowledge of the intricacies involved in the process. And, as every therapist knows, therapy itself is one of the best testing grounds for the validity of one's own *solid self*. Family life being the other. The therapist is, seen from this perspective, a transmitter of knowledge and

models which can be transposed in at least three or four directions: a) in therapy; b) in his own family, c) in the family of the client and, from there d) in their social circle.

2. It is needless to say that supervision is like a meta-positioning to the previous points. The supervisor has to verify and to conform the correctness of the process mentioned above. It is easy to understand that one can encounter difficulties on the road, it is not a very easy one. That is why there are supervisors; they control and check the very complex orbit of humanisation via the *solid self* and its continuous solidification, crystallisation and complexification. The supervisor has an even more complex task as the therapist. He/she has to look after the solidity of the therapist's *self* for the best transmission of the main idea to the client, and, at the same time, to look for the solidity of one's own *self* in order to be an example for the therapist in supervision. And, at the same time, to consider the solidity of one's own family relations that will reflect back a constant feeling of solidness on the supervisor.

What becomes evident here is a cascading effect that goes from the supervisor to the therapist, from this one to the client, and from there further into the social fabric we live in. In an idea of systemic circularity, we also have to take into account the upward movement of influences beginning with the social psychology of everyone that comes with it to the therapist that goes to the supervisor embedded in a social network. And, of course, we shouldn't forget that on every step of this ladder we can find influences of both extremes: *solid self* versus *pseudo-self*, individuality or togetherness, man for himself or psychology of the masses. In other words: social psychology or personal development?

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