



The origins and uses of self-awareness or the mental representation of me[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the meaning and the development of consciousness in the human child. The idea of a self is made up of at least two major aspects. These can be referred to as the machinery of the self and the mental state of the idea of “me”. The machinery of the self involves all unconscious, unreferenced action of the body, including its physiology and its processing of information that in turn includes cognitions and emotional states, which are unavailable to consciousness. The mental state or the idea of “me” is that part of the self that makes reference to itself. This mental state develops over the first 2 years of life and is a function of both brain maturation processes as well as socialization.

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1. Introduction

In order to discuss the origins of self-awareness or the representation of me, which is a developmental question, I must divert briefly to try and place my theory within what I will call a brain-culture framework. This requires that we first discuss what is and what is not a self. I do this to emphasize that the confusion of the meaning of self hampers our understanding of its development. The following four questions are essential to understand our notion of self. For the sake of clarity, self-awareness is part of what I mean by self, in particular it is a mental representation of me.

What is a self?

(1) Here I wish to point out that part of the self is awareness of itself, some call this implicit consciousness while other have considered that part of the self that is unaware, implicit consciousness as well as unconsciousness.

If T-cells are capable of some level of intention and go after foreign proteins and kill them, and are also capable of self-versus-nonsel self recognition, do these cells have a self? Infants soon after birth engage in what some have called nonverbal communication, others have called social reflexive behavior, and still others, intersubjectivity. Do these infants have a self? Even more important, from the perspective of human ontogeny, do both the newborn infant who imitates its mother or the 20 month old child who says “me drink bottle” while reaching for the bottle have selves? If they do – a claim made by many – then what develops? The problem is solved by considering that the term *self* is inadequate to the task. A self is made up of many features (e.g., Lewis, 1979, 1992a, 1992b; Neisser, 1988; Stern, 1985). For example, all living creatures have self-regulating and self-organizing capabilities, and all creatures that have social lives have the ability to interact with regard to other conspecifics. Whether or not we call these processes “self” does not alter the fact that human and nonhumans share these features.

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What we might not share with most other creatures is our cognitive ability to reflect on ourselves (self-awareness) and a culture which provides the content of that awareness. It is the aspect of self which can be called self-awareness, the mental representation of “me”. We also are not likely to share with other living creatures the ability to have a symbolic-linguistic understanding of recursive propositions such as “I know, that you know, that I know how to chop wood.” The role of language and conversation and the role of play and pretend play do bear on the feature of self described in this particular way.

It is clear that the field remains plagued by definitional vagrancies for the different aspects of a self, self-awareness or a mental representation of me. This representation is different from all other representations since the subject and object is the same. There is one problem in particular, namely, that even the most basic machine aspects of the self are often discussed in ways that assume that they exhibit mental representations of me, that is, in fact, found only in toddlers and older humans. This is a serious problem in the study of development which needs to be addressed and definitional standards set. Our language and our quest for meaning are likely to confuse us. Consider for example, newborn imitation. We call the tongue protrusion of a newborn to the tongue protrusion of an adult, imitation. We also call imitation when the 6 year old says, “I want the same sweater as my friend Sarah”. Piaget (1952), who also observed early “imitation”, suggested that we need to distinguish between this early imitation, which is a reflective behavior and later imitation that has intention. He argued, as I have over 40 years ago (Lewis, 1967), that the same behavior may serve very different processes and different processes, the same behavior. The developmental literature is full of such examples of the same behavior served by different processes (see for example Kagan, 2008).

Another problem is that humans have the capacity and may be even need to attribute humanness to animate and inanimate things. This anthropomorphizing has to be considered when we talk about infants and the origins of self-awareness. For example, humans have attributed human qualities to inanimate objects like trees, rivers, and rocks. Even the wind has been given human attributes. Moreover, as we are meaning seekers we find in clouds and mountains, recognizable shapes and creatures which we name. The star constellations are still another example of this human tendency. Certainly we do it with domestic animals like our pets, dogs, cats, birds, and even goldfish. We also are likely doing it with infants. Given our adult knowledge of situations and the emotions these situations invoke in us, we readily find these emotions in our infants. As this knowledge is in part culturally given, different cultures should produce different parental beliefs in regard to their infants' emotions. For example, research on cultural differences in parental beliefs shows that in American culture, parents believe that infants show more and earlier expressions of anger than do Japanese parents. Our tendency for meaning seeking and anthropomorphizing is an important feature in the human child's development. The meaning the parents give affects the meaning the child learns. If I find more anger in my child than another parent, my child is likely to be more angry later in life because my attributions are conveyed to the child in many ways, including our verbal labeling of the infants emotion (Lewis & Michalson, 1983). What we attribute to them is, in large part, what the child will learn and include such cultural aspects as emotional labels, expression interactions, as well as rules, goals, and standards.

I tried in several recent pieces to define *what* I considered a self to be and have argued that self-awareness or the mental representation of me is but one aspect of our selves (Lewis, 1997, 2003, 2010). This mental state is flexible in that it can be evoked or not. Indeed it is adaptive sometime to have self-awareness (Mandler, 1975) and sometime not (Wegner, 2009). It is not useful to think about me when I am trying to bring my car swiftly to a stop on a highway after a tire blow-out. My attention is drawn to the tasks of looking at other cars, the feel of the wheel, and the sounds of the tire. It is only after bringing my car to a stop by the side of the road that I can focus on myself. To do so earlier is non-adaptive. For this discussion, self-awareness, an aspect of consciousness will be the focus.

(2) How do we measure a self?

Of course, measurement must follow from theory. If that aspect of self we wish to observe is related to self-other differentiation, self-regulation, social reflexive behavior (called by some intersubjectivity) or self-recognition in mirrors, the way we choose to measure the self will differ. It would be foolish to confuse measurement of one feature of self with another, and to make the claim that one measure reflects all aspect of self. Imitation, perceptual-motor organization, language, role taking or self directed mirror behavior, are all methods that should inform us about various aspects of the self. Measurement issues, as always, must be tied to the particular construct of the self studied. Since we are interested in self-awareness, it is that aspect which will be discussed. Briefly, the mental representation of me is measured by self-recognition in mirrors, personal pronoun use such as me or mine, and pretend play that involves another.

(3) Are there cultural and historical differences in a self?

The issue of cultural differences in the concept of self, certainly those features requiring self-awareness, varies markedly (e.g., Lewis, 1992a, discussion of the cultural and historical changes in this aspect of the self). On the other hand, one might wish to argue for some universal features of a self. For example, self-other discrimination, self-regulating, and self-other interactions observed in the very young infant are likely to be found across cultures and historical time. Moreover, other features of the self also may be pan-cultural. If, as some believe, the left temporal lobe, is necessary for a mental representation of me, then the development that occurs in this brain area in the middle of the second year of life may also exist across cultures (Carmody & Lewis, 2010; Lewis & Carmody, 2008). Its expression, however, may be quite different depending on cultural specifics. The “terrible two's”, described in our culture as part of the emergence of the toddler's will independent of the parent's wishes, may not be as marked in cultures less interested in individual autonomy and more interested in a we-self culture (see Geertz, 1984).

William James suggested over 100 years ago that it is probably wise to separate features of structure from features of content. The problem of cross cultural differences is likely best approached by arguing that some structures are pan cultural but

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