

INDIVIDUALITY IN CONTEXT: THE RELATIONALITY OF FINITUDE

Introduction

A common misconception among critics of relational perspectives in psychoanalysis is the notion that an emphasis on the relational or intersubjective contexts of emotional experience defocuses, or even nullifies, experiences of individualized selfhood. As my collaborators and I (2002) have emphasized, such criticisms tend to collapse the distinction between phenomenological description and theoretical explanation. As a phenomenon investigated by the psychoanalytic method, individualized selfhood is always and only grasped as a dimension of personal experiencing. Explanations of this dimension (or of disturbances in it) in terms of its taking form within intersubjective systems do not in any way imply a neglect or annulment of it. Contextualizing is not nullifying.

Husserl (1900, 1913), widely regarded as the founder of philosophical phenomenology, claimed that careful phenomenological description of structures of experience is a precondition for adequate theoretical explanations of them. Individualized selfhood is a dimension or structure of

1987, 1997) have sought both to illuminate this structure (phenomenological description) and to conceptualize the intersubjective systems that facilitate or obstruct its consolidation (theoretical explanation).

The present chapter is a continuation and deepening of this twofold effort. Drawing on concepts from philosophical phenomenology—the work of Zahavi (2005), in particular—I will first argue that at the core of the experience of individualized selfhood is the sense of “mineness” of one’s experiential life. Next I will contend that attuned relationality—the other’s attunement to and understanding of one’s distinctive affectivity—is a central constituent of the relational contexts that facilitate and sustain the mineness that is constitutive of experiential life. Then I will explore Heidegger’s (1927) contention that it is authentically taking ownership of our finitude that individualizes us. Lastly, I seek to “relationalize” Heidegger’s conception of individualized selfhood by emphasizing the necessity of

The Experience of Individualized Selfhood

A book by Zahavi (2005),

Experiential selfhood: From the experiential perspective, selfhood is claimed to possess immediate experiential reality and to be found in the structure of subjectivity itself. Specifically, originary selfhood is identified with what Zahavi calls the *first-personal givenness* or *mineness* of all of our experiences. All of my experiences are given to me as *mine*, as experiences that *I* am undergoing or living through. According to the experiential conception of selfhood, to which Zahavi gives primacy, the first-personal givenness or mineness of experiential life is claimed to be the source of our most basic or core sense of self.

The self-awareness that is intrinsic to the first-personal givenness of experience is not to be equated or confused with the positing of the self as an entity or object of reflection. Rather, the self-acquaintance that is inherent to the mineness of experience is variously characterized as immediate, prereflective, implicit, unthematized and nonobjectifying.

Nor is the prereflective self-awareness that constitutes the core sense of selfhood to be equated with the self-enclosed interiority of a Cartesian worldless subject. On the contrary, this basic self-awareness is world-

inextricably bound up with one another in a broader contextual unity, such that “any dramatic change in the one necessarily entails corresponding changes in the other” (p. 145).

Zahavi’s position on the interrelations among subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the forms of selfhood is quite complex. He wishes to replace the Kantian self with experiential selfhood grounded in the mineness of experience, but then does not explain how he would account for personal

emotional experiences, the foundation stone of one's sense of individualized selfhood. My distinctive affectivity, if it finds a hospitable relational home, is seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom I experience myself as uniquely being. In contrast, as Brandchaft (2007) has elegantly shown, the mineness of experiential life and the sense of individualized selfhood are undermined when, in order to maintain a needed tie with a malattuned other, one sacrifices one's own emotional experience and accommodatively adopts that which is perceived to be required by the other. Under such circumstances, my emotional experience is no longer felt to be truly mine; it has been co-opted, it now belongs to you.

Kohut (1977) made important contributions to our understanding of the context-embeddedness of experiential selfhood, but his tendency to reify self-experience muddied the phenomenological waters. Zahavi's delineation of the three philosophical conceptions of self can help disambiguate conceptual difficulties found in Kohutian self psychology. According to Kohut, the self is a bipolar structure composed of two basic constituents—nuclear ambitions at one pole and guiding ideals at the other—deriving from the person's developmental and relational history. The two poles are said to be joined by a “tension arc,” which is seen as the source of motivation for the person's basic pursuits in life. The Kohutian bipolar self would seem to

fit well with Zahavi's characterization of the narrative self—an evolving construction or story about who one is, was, and is seeking to become.

But consider the following sentence, whose structure is typical of many that appear in the self psychology literature: “The fragmented self is striving to restore its cohesion.” Who is the self that is engaging in such striving?

Clearly it cannot be Kohut's bipolar self, since a narra

most valuable contribution—illuminations of the phenomenology of self-experience in varying relational contexts.

Unlike the Kantian and narrative selves, experiential selfhood, at whose heart is the mineness of emotional life, is not an entity or a thing. It is a central dimension of personal experiencing and, as such, is exquisitely context dependent and context sensitive. Transforming such a dimension of emotional experiencing into an ossified thing automatically severs and isolates it from its constitutive relational contexts.

Selfhood and Finitude

The emphasis on the mineness of experience as being constitutive of experiential selfhood brings to mind Heidegger's (1927) conception of authenticity or *Eigentlichkeit*, which literally means ownedness or mineness. Authentic existence for Heidegger is owned, as opposed to disowned or unowned, existence. Does Heidegger's conception of authenticity as entailing ownership of one's existence deepen our understanding of how individualized selfhood is constituted within formative relational contexts? At first glance, Heidegger's idea does not seem to help us, as he appears to regard authentic existing as a singularly nonrelational affair.

For Heidegger, authentic existing is grounded in nonevasively owned
being-toward-death. Torn f

ontologically constitutive for death. (Heidegger, 1927, p. 284).

Thus, in Heidegger's view, it is authentic being-toward-death as our ownmost, nonrelational possibility that individualizes and singularizes us, enabling us to seize ownership of and responsibility for our own existence.

The Relationality of Finitude

Heidegger's claims about the nonrelationality of authentic existing might seem jarring in view of his monumental efforts to recontextualize the Cartesian isolated mind and his insistence that human existing is always a "being-in-the-world" and a "being-with-one-another." I have contended (Stolorow, 2009c), however, that another view of authentic existing, in which it is relationally constituted, is implicit in Heidegger's conception of "solicitude." Authentic or emancipatory solicitude, for Heidegger, is a mode of being-with in which we "leap ahead" of the other, welcoming and encouraging his or her individualized selfhood by liberating him or her to exist for the sake of his or her ownmost possibilities of being. But recall that, for Heidegger, being free for one's ownmost possibilities also always means being free for one's uttermost possibility—the possibility of death—and for the existential anxiety that discloses it. So if we are to leap ahead of the

other, freeing him or her for his or her ownmost possibilities of being, we

connected. Hence, I have contended (2007), authentic being-toward-death always includes being-toward-loss as a central constituent. Just as, existentially, we are “always dying already” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 298), so too are we always already grieving. Death and loss are existentially equiprimordial (Agosta, in press). Existential anxiety anticipates both death and loss.

Recently I encountered unexpected support for my claim about the equiprimordiality of death and loss in some works by Derrida. In *Politics of*

that one of the two of you will inevitable see the other die. One of us, each says to

It might be objected that being-toward-loss cannot be a form of being-toward-death because, whereas the uttermost possibility of death is “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Heidegger, 1927, p.

whole world, the only world ... sinks into an abyss. (p. 115)

My effort to relationalize Heidegger's conception of being-toward-death is captured in my poem, "Finitude" (2009a):

If we're not self-lying,

we're always already dying.

If we're not self-deceiving,

we're always already grieving.

The answer to the existential quiz?

"Good-bye is all there is."

Conclusions

I have contended that attuned relationality, the other's attunement to and understanding of one's distinctive affectivity, including the horror and anguish that derive from the traumatizing emotional impact of our finitude and the finitude of all those with whom we are deeply connected, is a central constituent of the relational contexts that facilitate and sustain a sense of individualized selfhood and of the often excruciating mineness of our experiential life, indeed, of our very being. In the course of developing this

thesis, I have delineated two constitutive dimensions of the relationality of

