A Pre-publication review of The Evolved Self: Mapping an understanding of who we are

June 1, 2020

Abstract

The Evolved Self (University of Ottawa Press, in press) is an eclectic examination of the self that includes: philosophy and theory, cross-cultural materials, a qualitative study mapping individual selves, and pragmatics aimed at not just improving, but uniting schools of psychotherapy. In providing an academic assessment for the publisher, one anonymous reviewer summarized:

While many of the significant books in the area have been cited as source material—in psychology and philosophy—I have not read a book that has attempted theory development in this manner. It is a very interesting synthesis and its use of qualitative interviews with abstract theory is an excellent one. Finally, the application of the theory to clinical practice introduces a pragmatic element often neglected…

This article reviews the salient aspects of researching the book and places it into its own historical context. Using elemental units of culture, the book maps the selves of individuals who were not in therapy and contrasts those with the self-maps of clients who were in psychotherapy for trauma and suicidality. These qualitative exemplars are embedded within a rich discussion of the concept of the self as presented in philosophy, psychology and cross-cultural literature. Aboriginal, humanist, and selves as modified through participation in sports are examined along with two selves from outside North America. Application of the method of self-mapping to counselling and psychotherapy is explored from the lens of client empowerment. A disciplinary paradigm is proposed uniting major schools of psychotherapy.

A Pre-publication review of *The Evolved Self: Mapping an understanding of who we are*[A],[B]

Please see the footnotes, bibliography, and citation style listing after the interview.

There is a self-help industry built on the notion of becoming the person you "were meant to be," but who is the "you" at the core of such striving? In *The Evolved Self* I attempt to answer that question by drawing on philosophy, psychology, multicultural tradition, and original research. I develop an argument that the self at the core of who we are is a culturally evolved mental structure that underwent significant change as recently as 3,000 years ago allowing for conscious individual volition, a sense of uniqueness, and the idea that there exists a reality separate from one's subjective understandings. The evolution of this "modern self" initiated tensions between collectivism and individualism that remain with us to this day. Core to this work are maps of selves of individuals from both individualist and collectivist cultures, some of whom were in psychotherapy at the time of the mapping and some who were not, and they represented three genders from four countries.[1] *The Evolved Self* begins with a discussion of the case study that prompted this research and it ends with suggested applications to the field of psychology. In-between, it summarizes the self as understood in Western philosophy, in major schools of psychology, and in selected collectivist cultures before reviewing my doctoral research into mapping the self.

Identifying the Issue: A Case Study

Without realizing it, I began writing this book at the turn of the century after accepting a re-referral from another therapist. "Suzie" had previously attempted suicide on five occasions and she was not yet eighteen. Her initial therapist said she had been compliant with treatment but remained "high-risk" after nearly two years of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) coupled with antidepressant medication. I administered a standardized assessment instrument and confirmed that she was still "high risk" for suicide with elevated scores for low self-esteem, anger, suicide ideation and depression. A clinical interview revealed contributing traumatic childhood events coupled with a dysfunctional family culture.

Since CBT has proven efficacy with underlying conditions associated with suicidal behaviour and since the client-therapist relationship contributes to its effectiveness (Warwar & Greenberg, 2000), I decided to start with this therapy even though it had been used by the previous therapist. Despite Suzie's compliance with "homework assignments" and cognitive reframing of some of her salient experiences, she showed little progress. Borrowing from narrative therapy (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998) I had her retell her "story" with suggested amendments to engender hope and positive possibilities, but her emotional progress was short-lived. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (Devilly & Spence, 1999) was used to deal with specific instances of childhood trauma, but again, she suffered relapse. I was running out of tools in my therapeutic toolkit, and I needed to invent something new. I suggested we co-construct a map of her self to find the blockage to treatment.

The idea that we can map cultural elements that form a self flows from the well-established notion that the self is a cultural construct (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Mead, 1934/2003; Shotter, 1997). Fortuitously, Dawkins (1976) had named such elemental units "memes," which he said exhibit attractive and repellent properties on each other. Blackmore (1999) suggested the self consisted of an interlocking collection of such memes. If such a structure existed, it could logically be mapped. We identified units of culture Suzie had internalized as part of her self-definition; explored connotative, affective and behavioural characteristics of such memes that mimicked internal forces of attraction; and, we co-constructed ways of changing aspects of Suzie's self starting with memes that were most accessible to intervention.

The method used to map Suzie's self along with maps showing the youth's progress are detailed in a case study (Robertson, 2011) and they form the basis of the first chapter of my new book (Robertson, 2020). It was not that the mapping process supplanted earlier interventions, but that the visual representations supplemented them allowing for more efficacious processing. Using her map for

reference, Suzie was able to expand her worldview to include an emphasis on social justice. She challenged ineffective and obsessive cognitions by routing her thoughts along alternative pathways. She began to see herself as an activating agent capable of dealing with unfortunate circumstances replacing a plot of ineffective victimhood and dependency. I decided more research was needed to understand this self that Suzie was able to effectively change, and the process by which such change may be understood.

Philosophical, Psychological and Cross-cultural Review

The first millennium before the Common Era (BCE) saw the great religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism evolve into being with Christianity and Islam offshoots of Judaism (Jaspers, 1951; Mahoney, 1991). *The Evolved Self* sets this development into a psycho-historical context and, in the process, explains what I was intuitively attempting to accomplish with respect to the suicidal youth.

Following his analysis of early Greek literature, Jaynes (1976) concluded that pre-Homeric Greeks were unable to exercise self-agency. After his examination of ancient Egyptian and Greek writing Johnson (2003) concluded, "Beliefs and minds did not begin to exist until…the Greek cultural world invented the notion of objective, constant truth and began using that notion to assess…the truth of statements and actions" (108, 109). Operating like Blackmore's (1999) "meme machines," human beings before the first millennium relied on imitating pre-programmed cultural responses to triggering events. In my book, I argue that cultural mutations to the self represented a cognitive program that includes a capacity for objective beliefs, individual volition, and internally consistent thought, and that program is now transmitted to our children in the process of child rearing and education, but with limitations – we do not want them to be too independent. The development of the great religions may be viewed as a similar means to restricting feared excesses of individualism and preserving the collectivity. Thus, much of the philosophical and religious thought flowing from this Axial Age dealt with concepts such as justice, humanity and temperance along with the subjugation of the individual to the collective will.

With the evolved self, Greek philosophy and science flowered based on the idea that there is a reality independent of our perceptions that we can come to know through careful observation and reason. The subsequent Christian view that human reasoning is faulty and true knowledge is divinely inspired led to the subjugation of the self to ecclesiastical authority. The European Enlightenment of the 17th century did not invent the self, it made the individualism already inherent in its structure into a good. This emancipation of the self led directly to the scientific revolution that is still with us today.

This emancipated self is not without its detractors. Religion continues to promote submission and post-modernism disparages our attempts to approximate reality. Heidegger (1962), the leading post-modernist philosopher of the twentieth century, described science and intelligence as degenerate with what passes for truth dependent on contextual interpretation. His answer to the resultant relativism that a few humans are "Dasein" and are equipped to lead the masses because only they have "an understanding of the Being of all entities of a character other than its own" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 34). This echoes the Jesuit teachings that Heidegger experienced as youth that subjugated the self to God or his proxies.

In *The Evolved Self,* I argue that the struggle between collectivism and individualism are not so much at the societal level, but occur primarily within each person's self. Each of us has the capacity, even the necessity, for both. As a spandrel to this evolution we have the capacity for a limited form of free will. We exist at two Vygotskian levels (Vygotsky, 1939, 1986). For the most part we remain the determined beings of our history as a species; however, with hard work and a culturally evolved method with proven efficacy, we have the capacity to rise above our genes and memes. Hard determinists believe that even at this level antecedent factors determine outcome (DiCarlo, 2010). Despite this difference, I am grateful Dr. DiCarlo saw enough merit in this work to offer the following endorsement:

Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson's book offers an interesting and insightful new perspective on explorations of the self and the integration of that analysis with the pragmatic intention for psycho-therapeutic use. By examining the contributing factors that define us as 'selves', Robertson connects the dots between

evolution, culture, the concept of free will, and the goals of counselling and therapy. His use of memetic self-maps in relation to varying psychological perspectives of the self offers unique insights into novel therapeutic approaches.

- Christopher DiCarlo, author of *So You Think You Can Think: Tools for Having Intelligent Conversations and Getting Along*, and *How To Become A Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Asking the Right Questions*.

Taking a somewhat different view on the subject of free will than fellow philosopher DiCarlo, Dennett (1991) concluded that memes provide "thinking tools" that allow for self-definition and human consciousness. From this perspective, I was teaching Suzie the thinking tools she needed to change her self-definition.

All current major schools of psychology would have endorsed a similar change effort aimed at empowering the client to change her self (Robertson, 2017a).[2] Freud's project of psychoanalysis involved rescuing the poor ego from the cultural oppression of the superego and the genetic determinism of the id and is compatible with the compatibilist[3] views of Dennett (1995, 1996). Alfred Adler (1927/1957, 1929) recognized that the child is determined in his formative years and that the family constellation, in particular, determines one's future worldview; however, he held one could change that worldview if one understood the determining inputs and considered alternatives. Rational emotive and cognitive behavioural therapists (David & Szentagotai, 2006; Dryden, Neenan, & Yankura, 2001; Ellis & Harper, 1997) view most mental health problems to be the result of irrational beliefs which can be changed, and that cognitive processing difficulties that lead to unwanted behavioural outcomes can be challenged. This group of psychotherapies takes a realist view – that there is an objective reality which the client must approximate to function well.

There is a second group of psychotherapies that takes a postmodern approach with the implication that a client can become anything to which they aspire. Constructivists would suggest that if a client is unhappy with their self, construct a better one. Taking a somewhat more nuanced view that we both create and are created by culture, social constructionists Martin and Sugarman (2001) suggested that with "appropriation and internalization, and the thinking and understanding they enable, the individual's mode of being is transformed from one of prereflective activity to one in which reflective, intentional agency is possible" (p. 105). Narrative therapists view the self to be a story we tell with the plot dependent on context and purpose (Ochberg, 1996; White, 1993).

Readers will note that I used therapies from both realist and postmodernist camps in my treatment of the suicidal youth. I believe this eclecticism is possible because our clients possess an innate sense of the objective. We cannot choose just any self, it has to "feel right" otherwise we have the sense we are merely play acting or worse, fooling ourselves. The inherent problem with postmodernism manifests itself more at the societal level than at the level of psychotherapy. When narrative therapist Tom Strong (2002) described science as a "White, male way of knowing" and that "truth" is something arrived at through the "discourse of knowledgeable people" (p. 3), he was supporting a discourse that dissolves society into competing identity groups each with their own "Daseins" whom they authoritatively reference to support and enforce their worldviews. Despite this difference of opinion, Dr. Strong kindly gave my work the following endorsement:

Lloyd Robertson has developed a powerful and useful method for reflecting upon self-understanding. Exploring the concept of memes as developmental resources in self-making, through a creative approach to meme-mapping, he has developed a welcomed resource for counsellors and educators. Readers seeking new ways to join others in exploring identity development and self-making possibilities will especially treasure Robertson's ideas and approach to mapping the memetic self.

- Tom Strong is Professor Emeritus University of Calgary and author of *Medicalizing counselling: Issues and tensions*

The self as defined here is a representational construct (Harre, 1984; Lock, 1981/1990; Mead, 1912/1990) consisting of units of culture (Blackmore, 1999; Donald, 2001; Price, 1999). We need to also consider the possibility that the conceptualization of the self that has been the basis of psychotherapy is ethnocentric having the effect of exporting Euro-American values such as individuality and self-volition to indigenous cultures worldwide (Adair, 2006; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). The self in modern western cultures is often pictured as self-contained, independent, volitional and materialistic while the self in collectivist cultures is described as contextual, interdependent, community orientated and spiritual (Cushman, 1995; Robertson, 2014).

A stable conscious self is considered evidence of a noncorporeal entity or soul inhabiting a material body in much religious belief. The secularization of Euro-American culture resulted in the splitting self from the soul (Taylor, 1989), and it would be this separation of the two that is exported. The Buddhist doctrine of no-self necessitated such a splitting two millennia before the European Enlightenment with the result that the soul that is reincarnated is a non-sentient life force. Buddhism was exported, and in *The Evolved Self,* I noted that Buddhist missionaries encountered the self in every culture they visited.

My chapter on the self in collectivist societies references studies from Asia, the Middle East, Africa and southern Europe; however, the largest amount of attention involves three nations or peoples that are aboriginal to North America. I take a scientific and materialist approach which will be controversial in some aboriginal communities. Despite this, indigenous psychiatrist Dr. Mehl-Madrona found sufficient merit to offer this endorsement:

Dr. Robertson presents a fascinating exposition on the concept of self in relation to mainstream and indigenous concepts. He reviews concepts from Western philosophy, major schools of psychology, and the cross-cultural experience of the self in both collectivist and individualist cultures. He draws a diverse sample of eleven selves representing three genders whom he maps and analyzes, grouping them into clusters: 1) North American selves built through participation in sports; 2) selves centered on notions of North American aboriginality; 3) selves of individuals following a secular humanist paradigm; and 4) selves from China and Russia. He proposes a hypothesis that a healthy or functional self is composed of fundamental elements including constancy, volition, uniqueness, productivity, intimacy, and social interest. His work is original and inspiring and can lead us to better understanding of how we come to believe in who we are.

- Lewis Mehl-Madrona is Associate Professor, Family Medicine, University of New England and author of *Remapping Your Mind: The Neuroscience of Self-Transformation through Story* (with Barbara Mainguy) and *Coyote Medicine: Lessons from Native American Healing*

Method and Results of this Research into Self-mapping

The practice of psychotherapy is often more of an art than a science, and so it was with the mapping exercise used with the suicidal youth. At the time, it was not possible to say how her initial self-map compares with those not in treatment. The method of qualitative research used in this qualitative sample also used the meme as the fundamental unit of the self. Memes sharing connotative, emotive or behavioural valence were considered to be attracted to each other and a line or edge was drawn connecting the two. Each meme was given a referent word or phrase that was taken to include individualized connotative, emotive and behavioural meaning. Drawing on the experience of mapping the suicidal youth Suzie, themes were represented by rectangles. Readers will recall "Depressed person" was an initial theme in Suzie's self and we co-constructed and supported a second core theme, "Human rights." A methodological change was also made in the way memes were identified. Instead of asking the subject to create lists of self-identifiers such as "name ten persons you are" as was used with the youth, I decided to allow these research participants to narrate a personal story of who they were. Participants were given an invitation to explain who they were, and were prompted to elaborate. These narratives were transcribed and each segment was coded using a qualitative software package. Segments with the same referent word were placed in a "bin" to be compared with all other segments with the same coding.

Only those referents that satisfied the definition of the meme were included in the participant's self-map. Those memes that had more codings in their "bin" were taken to be more central to the person's self.

The sample of eleven volunteers included five men, five women, and one transsexual person who identified as a third gender. The racial composition included seven Caucasians, two people of North American aboriginal ancestry, one Chinese, and one person whose mother was aboriginal and father was "white" who identified herself as simply "Canadian." The self-maps were co-constructed in three sessions per participant over a nine month period.

One to two self-maps are presented for each of these participants in *The Evolved Self* along with an edited version of each person's narrative. A majority (7) of the participants said their maps reflected accurately who they were on viewing the first attempt. At the end of the process all but one reported such resonance.

All eleven self-maps evidenced volition, constancy, distinctness, productivity, intimacy, social interest and feeling. The feeling component, beyond the emotive element included in the definition of the meme, was unanticipated. As a result of this development, the structure of the mapped selves was revised to include an emotive and psychological characteristics component at the base of self-maps that could trigger various aspects of the self represented by meme clusters. This meant there were two routes to triggering a particular presentation of the self, 1) the long reflective route of proceeding meme by meme to a location within the self, and 2) the almost instantaneous triggering of the same location through emotion. In *The Evolved Self,* I describe this system as a small world network as has been developed in Graph Theory (Robertson & McFadden, 2018; Watts & Strogatz, 1998).

The three people from collectivist cultures in this sample had the same basic structure to their self-maps as those from individualist North American cultures. A possible cultural difference involving emphasis surfaced with respect to one participant from China.

"Maomao" described herself as a "robot" awaiting the command of others, most often her parents. Her self-map illustrated a volitional-active cluster and a deferent-family cluster with the deferent cluster more highly developed. She experimented with making her own decisions concluding that it takes too much time and energy to adequately research possible choices. She decided being a robot was a preferred way to live. Maomao's volitional-active cluster still functioned to the degree that she had to choose the authorities to which she would defer, and she felt resentment when they made decisions for her she did not like. Maomao may not be representative of her culture. A recent study of 2,299 Chinese adolescents revealed that 85% associated free will with their own subjective well-being (Li, Wang, Zhao, Kong, & Li, 2016).

Discussion

The example of Maomao, who was raised to deny a volitional self, belies the relativistic notion that self-attributes like volition and uniqueness are culturally dependent. While she preferred to not act volitionally, she continued to have that capacity, supporting a hypothesis that feelings of volition, uniqueness and constancy are consequences of having a self, and that while cultures and religions may attempt to repress these attributes, they cannot be eliminated entirely.

All of the participants in this study recalled transitions leading to self-change that were evolutionary in nature. If the self is malleable, and if clients recognize the reality of self-change, then planned transitions are possible.

As a result of this research the mapping process was amended to include emotional triggers and psychological characteristics in addition to the meme structure thus extending the model. The research participants supported the view of Quinn (2006) who argued that a purely cognitive self was insufficient and that a comprehensive view of the self would include physical, biological, psychological, social, and

cultural characteristics. A case study of the use of this improved memetic self-map to treat a client with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is included in *The Evolved Self*.

If a therapist can successfully introduce new memes to the self of a client in the course of treatment, then it is conceivable that outside memes may be introduced to the self unbidden and those memes could thereby act in a viral fashion. The concept of the mind virus has been introduced elsewhere (Berman, 2006; Dawkins, 2006; Ray, 2009; Robertson, 2017b), and therapists should be aware of the possibility. This concept is explored further in the final chapter of *The Evolved Self*.

As discussed earlier, this method of mapping the self has been demonstrated compatibility with CBT, Adlerian psychotherapy and narrative therapy. I believe that the evolutionary model of the self outlined here has led to a common paradigm across schools of psychology and that paradigm is elaborated in my book. As a result of that paradigm, we all attempt to teach clients to have volitional and meaningful selves with a sense of uniqueness and constancy as first suggested by William James (1890, 1892/2003). If this is correct, then the method of mapping described here should be compatible with all schools of psychotherapy. Two methods of generating the memes needed in self-mapping are described in *The Evolved Self*. As a second anonymous reviewer of this work kindly said:

Readers generally will be interested in how language shapes and limits our self-definitions. Psychotherapists will be interested in applying memetic self-mapping to counselling and therapy helping their clients become the author of their own transformative change.

The mapping technique developed lends itself to the practice of psychotherapy, but *The Evolved Self* is primarily a theoretical text with general application to applied psychology. Teela Joanne Robertson, a psychotherapist who has used memetic self-mapping in her practise (and who is also my daughter), and I are co-authoring a companion manual that will give practical guidance in assisting professionals who wish to use this method in their work.

Memetic self-mapping has application to all fields interested in the structure of the self. As has been demonstrated, the method owes much of its development to philosophy. It would also be of interest to social workers who are doing counselling, indeed, it can be seen as an elaboration of the social work technique of eco-mapping (Hartman, 1995; Vodde & Giddings, 2000). The method will also be of interest to fields that regularly research some aspects of the self such as sociology, anthropology, cross-cultural studies, and gender studies. I have co-authored a book chapter applying the concepts discussed here to adult education (Robertson & Conrad, 2016). My co-author has kindly offered the following endorsement:

Bridging several cultural and educational worlds, Robertson's work thoroughly and movingly explores the concepts of self and identity from his insightful perspective as a counselling psychologist. Educators as well as practicing psychologists will benefit from his experience and insight. Detailed case studies enliven foundational tenets of counselling and psychotherapy and highlight issues of empowerment, individuality, community, and intimacy.

- Dianne Conrad is the author of *Assessment Strategies for Online Learning: Engagement and Authenticity* and co-editor of *Open(ing) Education: Theory and Practice*

The Evolved Self: Mapping an understanding of who we are will be published by University of Ottawa Press September 15, 2020. Pre-orders are available through the U of O Press website at: **https://press.uottawa.ca/catalogsearch/result/?q=Lloyd+Hawkeye+Robertson**

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