

Sophia Schillinger
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Tad Cobb
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Relationality in Constructing the Self

Theories of Self:

For years citizens of the modern West have been fed the concept of “finding the authentic self.” Through enough focus and fortitude, the seed that contains the essential *You* will germinate and grow. In this narrative, the Self is autonomous. Every resource needed to find the true *You* lies within the Self. The only obstacle standing in an individual’s way is the Other. This Other may embody one’s sexual desires, need for care, desire for affirmation, etc. Whatever it may be, the Other represents a distraction from self-realization. Think Hercules from the Disney film *Hercules*. The trope of “finding the authentic self” has developed from the legacy of Sigmund Freud and his trope of the “Tragic Man.” In this trope, man is on a journey to find his “authentic self” but falls short as he becomes distracted by his desires to connect with others (Josselson).

This trope has, too, been guiding my life. I was very comforted at the promise of the complete control over my self-development. I felt empowered by the thought that there is a stability to who Sophia *is* in this world. Until recently I have been telling myself “If I just focus more on my *own personal* issues and ignore the troubled relationship between my father and I, then I will be a better version of Sophia.” I saw my development as a Self, independent from the relationships in my life. I did not realize that my relationship with my father *is* part of myself. I will not be able to find an authentic Sophia deep down inside that has not been modified by my relationship with my father.

With this realization and my time here in a small, intentional community, my thoughts about the Self have begun to change. The trope I once clung to, has since faded as I’ve recently seen changes in the way I think and behave. I truly believe this is because of the relationships I’ve formed close relationships with people here at the Oregon Extension. And, just as my thoughts were beginning to stir here, we read *Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Not knowing what it was about, I dismissed it as a heavy existential model that will lead me toward a state of depression. In some ways it has, but mainly I was struck by a theme he waves through the book that the self is changed by the individuals they interact with. The theme is revealed through monologues from Russian Monks, such as the character, Zosima. Dostoevsky writes, “...in truth we are each responsible to all for all, it’s only that men don’t know this. If they knew it, the world would be a paradise at once” (270). Dostoevsky also demonstrates this theme through dynamic characters in his novel. An example of these dynamic characters is a child in the book, Kolya. Kolya’s actions start to shift when he stops interacting with Rakitin and subsequently forms a strong bond with Alyosha.

Relational Theories of Self and ‘Relatedness’:

Scholars on the same wavelength as Dostoevsky and I call this understanding of the development of self a *relational* perspective. In a relational theory of self-development, autonomy and connection are not dichotomous, as in the Freudian era. Self-concern and care for others are not at two opposite ends of the spectrum. Rather, in relational theory, the Self only develops through the connection and separation it makes between itself and the Other. In her

book *The Space Between Us: Exploring the Dimensions of Human Relationships*, Clinical Psychologist, Ruthellen Josselson explains the development of the Self in congruence with the Other. She says, “the self is realized through others... We know ourselves as separates only insofar as we live in connection with others, and ...we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self (15).

“Realization” of the self happens through a continuous process of life hood that Josselson defines as *relatedness*. Relatedness serves as a context for the experience of the Self, by positioning the self as intertwined in a web of connections with others. The experience of relatedness takes form in different ways depending upon the relationship. This will be discussed later. Understanding this orientation to the self, Josselson says, is a switch from inquiring about the self who is in the relationship to the self-in-relationship. As an individual grows, naturally, development occurs through a recursive process within relationships in the web. The emphasis here is on how individuals continuously modify each other as they interact. Josselson utilizes the mother-child relationship to explain this process. She says, “...’mother’ is not a fixed entity—in other words, that the mother is in part shaped by her child’s responses” (17).

There are multiple dimensions of relatedness that fuel the development-of-Self throughout one’s lifetime, this paper will discuss three of them. Selections of these dimensions were guided by my relationships with people here at the Oregon Extension and the dimensions of relatedness that were heavily present in them. These dimensions are eye-to-eye validation, idealization and mutuality/coregulation. I will then discuss how the multitude of relatedness modalities in an individual’s set of relationships organize to form a *relational network*.

Eye-to-Eye Validation:

One way relationality shapes the self is through eye-to-eye validation. Eye-to-eye validation is connection through eye contact. Through eye contact is the discovery that we have meaning for another, that we exist in them. This recognition fuels the existence of the self. Josselson says, “By becoming real to another we become real to ourselves. Eye-to-eye contact with a responsive other gives us confidence in our own experience” (101).

This form of connection begins with the mother-infant relationships. The mother confirms externally, through eye contact, what a baby is feeling internally. In this regard, eye-to-eye validation simultaneously occurs on a physical and emotional level. The physical aspects of eye-to-eye validation work to create the emotional understanding of the Self. This recognition creates the baby’s first sense of self. The baby learns that they have meaning to another, as the mother responds to their actions. This relationship forms the base for the baby’s sense of self the beginning of a life-long search for the sense of self in the existence of others. Psychologists understand this validation as crucial to the formation of Self due to human’s innate desire to feel understood and “known” by the Other (Josselson).

Beyond the recognition of self, in eye-to-eye relating we recognize we have value for others and thus are important in the world. Josselson asserts that this validation is crucial to the development of the self. She says, “Throughout life, we value ourselves to the extent that we believe that we really matter--vitaly-- to someone else” (99). This longing for existing in others can be understood by thinking about the human experience in airports. When one walks into an airport full of people and scans the crowd, there is often a rush of adrenaline. This rush of adrenaline results from recognition of one’s Selfness in a multitude of people surrounding them that they interlock eyes with (Josselson 100). In this moment one understands they exist as a Self as their bodily being stirs the reaction of another. This is demonstrated through eye contact.

Further, in eye-to-eye validation, we build the characteristics of the self through the responsiveness and type of responsiveness of others. In this aspect of eye-to-eye validations, others are acting as mirrors for ourselves. Josselson says, "In others' eyes, we learn to read what is valued and what is not. We learn that there are limits to what we can express of ourselves" (112). Through eye contact we look for others acceptance, rejection or neutrality to ourselves. These quick glances away or long stares are interpreted by the Self and further shape how we perceive ourselves. Thus, eye-to-eye validation acts a cycle of relation between individuals. In this cycle, we create the Self through our perception of the other perceiving us (Hinde 24).

I've developed through eye-to-eye validation throughout the semester here at the Oregon Extension. I think of one relationship in particular. This relationship is with my housemate, Macy. Macy and I share similar interests, but the way we express our love is very different. Because of this stark difference, I have felt insecure around her about the way I express my love. This insecurity has led me to be more aware of the eye contact she is making with me during interactions, when there is a presence of it or a lack thereof, and how her face is organized during these times. I've found that after interactions with Macy, I unconsciously question my actions and whether they are 'good' or 'bad' when she makes eye contact with me, and her face is in a grimace, or she does not make eye contact with me at all. Macy has acted as a mirror for me to learn about what I find important and how I want to express myself to the world. By connecting with her via eye contact, I have 'anchored' myself in my effects on her. I have found the boundaries of myself via my relationship with her. While the experience of the interactions have not always been positive, these interactions have led me to discover parts of myself. For example, I've learned through the way she looks at me when I physically move around in social situations, like co-cabin dinners, that I can be a bit impatient. I've later talked to Macy about this and confirmed this hunch. This is why eye-to-eye validation is necessary for human development. It brings a sense of value to the human Self through the recognition that we have meaning to another. Josselson says this sense of *valuing* always remains in the eye.

Idealization:

A second way of relating is idealization. Idealization is an internal process that attracts us toward another out of a desire to possess them or their qualities. Idealization can become external. Specifically in romantic situations, idealization becomes a process of desiring to "own" the other in some way. For others idealization remains internal and there is contentment in identification: the means by which we "hold" people internally as individuals we wish to become like (Josselson).

Developmentally, idealization in relatedness begins shortly after eye-to-eye validation when there is the recognition of the Other and their own shareable experience. Idealization starts when recognition of the Other widens to recognition of the Other as having different qualities and capabilities than the Self. Josselson says with adequate cognitive maturation this new recognition naturally leads to comparison of these qualities and capabilities.

Different from eye-to-eye relatedness, our connection with the Other in idealization the qualities we do possess, but rather the qualities the Other possess.' Thus, in idealization we connect with the Other by locating the Self we long for in them. This experience takes place in many forms. Some of these experiences may look like the desire to for another to expand our awareness, to possess another's perceived perfection, or we may consciously identify with and try to become like someone we admire. In all these experiences is rooted the nature of idealization: the modification of the Self via the desire for the "new" that is located in the Other.

The desire to be like or possess the Other stems out of an archetype deep in our mythology and psyches of the “omnipotent perfection,” in which one can do and have everything they may desire. According to Josselson, this image lies deep in our mythology and psyches. Josselson asserts that this archetype has developed from our current understandings of human development and ancient creation myths. Development theories conceive of the infant as omnipotent, in which they can “can command perfect attention and perfect satiety” (129). As the child leaves infancy, the sense of omnipotence is lost as they recognize the limits of their own being and realize completely dependency on a competent being does not last forever. This exit from infancy marks a loss of feelings of security and safety a child feels in the world. The experience of incapability to deal with a world full of danger leads an individual to look for capabilities and competence in another. “We rue our own inadequacy but rest secure in the capacity of others. We may not be omnipotent, but *they* are; and someday (we hope) we, too, will be all-powerful. This image of omnipotent perfection is what drives us to the Other in this form of relatedness. This development theory is the basis for the dominant creation myth, The Garden of Eden, which too encourages idealization. The Garden of Eden tells the tale of perfect beginning, Paradise. This Paradise was lost through human action and has set humans on a search to reclaim this perfection (Josselson)

Psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut says idealization is necessary for an adequate sense of self, as “...the self is partly a product of our ambition and dreams, and these are morsels that people absorb through contact with others” (Kohut 131). Josselson adds that the self can only develop where there are objects of desire. These objects of desires fuel us to “a joyous sense of vista and motion, or transcendence of self and limitation” (Josselson 128). Kohut calls these objects of desire “idealizable self-objects.” Without these idealizable self-objects, these ambitions and dreams we understand as our own, individuals lose a sense of meaning in life. Josselson says this is because “other people provide our link to a sense of meaning in life” (Josselson 146). Without this link to meaning, we are likely to fall to a narcissistic depression. (Josselson).

Idealization displays how the state of the Self is not as autonomous as psychologists once thought. Rather, the Self develops relationally, through idealization partly, by altering the Self to include admired aspects of another. Thus, when looking at an individual it becomes impossible and unnecessary to identify which parts of this individual is “essentially” claims and which part is influences from relationships in their life.

Looking back on my OE experience I see myself as experiencing the identification part of idealization. Identification in the terms of relatedness is the desire to maintain connection with and to value someone whose qualities we seek to absorb into ourselves. I’ve identified with many people here at the OE, but specifically my three housemates (Ellie, Mairi and Macy) when reflecting on my experience here. All three of them share a quality that I have admired. In my perspective, they all seem rather relaxed about sharing food that they have bought with their own money. Before the OE, this is not a capability I would say that came easy to me. Because of the way I feel more possessive toward food that I have bought for myself, especially if it was expensive. When I am in situations where it would be generous to share this food, I become rather anxious.

Seeing my housemates regularly share food that they originally bought for themselves has caused me to question the way I look at food and community and second, realize I don’t like my perspective. I’ve come to realize throughout the semester that I like that they are not possessive over food. I don’t like that I feel anxious, and I don’t like that they might be perceiving me as selfish.

Noticing this quality in my three housemates me to look up to them in this aspect. This admiration led to more intense observation of the ways in which they are more giving of and relaxed about their food. This observation then (very proudly on my part), led to modifications in the way I act and view food. With much more ease I put food on the 'communal shelf' in our kitchen. I see this sharing as not losing something I have bought for myself, rather I see it as gaining food. Because now, more people are fed.

The form of relatedness, idealization, led to growth in myself developing a relationship. By understanding the aspects, I like of my housemates and friends and feeding them (literally) I recursively identified and feed aspects of myself that I did not like.

Coregulation/Mutuality:

A third way the self develops through relationships is through *coregulation*, coined by psychologist, Alan Fogel. Describing the same concept, but from a more experiential perspective, Josselson identifies the concept as *mutuality*. Both concepts reorient their readers to understanding communication in relationships as a product that transcends the idea of the 'Self' and the 'Other' to form a dynamic and emergent *we*. In his book *Developing Through Relationships*, Fogel describes the dynamic and emergent *we* that is created as a set of agreed upon meanings that guide the individuals in different social situations.

This new understanding of communication is important because Fogel asserts that human cognition is formed from this dynamic and emergent dialogue between individuals. He says, "One finds that the workings of the mind and the ways in which we perceive and understand ourselves is remarkably like the form of our personal relationships... Human cognition and the sense of Self are fundamentally and originally *relational*" (Fogel 4). Further, he says, "The self is the set of one's personal stories, or narratives, told in inner speech or told to others" (Fogel 139). He refers to this dialogical process between individuals that continuously shapes the Self, *coregulation*. Sam demonstrated how the "inner workings of the mind" develop largely from our interpersonal relationships last week in discussion groups on the *Brothers Karamazov*. When discussing how schoolwork, Sam said he takes it. He revealed that as a child his father would sit him down at night to practice spelling words and as he moved to middle school his mother would ask to see his grades. Now in college, Sam said he no longer needs his parents to pester him, as his inner dialogue is already doing this work.

Like Fogel, Josselson understands human nature as inherently relational. She says we have a "...fundamentally social nature—an evolutionary predisposition, human and emergent, simply to 'be with' others" (149). Describing the same understanding of human nature as Fogel, Josselson uses the term *mutuality*. She defines mutuality as a joint creation that happens in the space between people. It is a product of two individuals contributing and participating in it. Because mutuality occurs in the space between people, it is what makes up most of relationships. Its "...the glue that bind us together" (Josselson 152). Psychologists often use the example of laughter when explaining mutuality. It is possible for two Selves with two different cognitive systems to find the same subject funny because of *coregulation/mutuality*. This process enables individuals to transcend the Self and Other and created a shared meaning of reality.

In the process of *coregulation/mutuality*, an individual resonates with another individual. Josselson defines resonating with another as the somatic experience of *coregulation/mutuality*. It is the shareable experience between individuals that brings pleasure. Those who experience resonance with another often describe their experience as thinking or feeling together. People search out resonance in relationships because of the pure pleasure of existing in a shareable

experience. These shareable experiences produce pleasure because of the human desire to be known. Relationships fall on a continuum of less resonant to more resonant. The more resonant a relationship, the more one feels like they are fully “known” by the other, and thus the more pleasurable. Psychologists define a relationship to have a high amount of resonance when linguistic communication is hardly needed. This is because the amount of shared experience is so large, words are not needed to guide the Other to what each other are thinking and feeling, to get the meaning across. I feel this strong sense of resonance daily with Shelly. When we see each other in the cookhouse during coffee break, or potluck, we will often just make eye contact for a while and then nod at each other. No words are needed to express what we both understand is going on in our heads. We will then often sit in silence for five minutes and then leave each other. Thus, resonance is a signal for how close two individuals are, how much their created *we*, has shaped their *Is*.

The more resonant the relationship is between individuals, the harder it is for the individuals to be apart. This is because the selves of the individuals have been greatly shaped cognitively that they now carry the relationships with them into all other aspects of their lives. Josselson asserts: “mutuality, then, does not exist only in the presence of someone; mutuality changes our way of experiencing” (163). Sam, for example, now carries aspects of his mother and father with him as he moved to college and to Oregon. Resonance can thus be seen through the idea of needing to “catch up” with a friend. Because of this existing mutuality/coregulation, without regular contact, maintaining the being “with,” understandings of our Self that have emerged from both ourselves and the friend will vanish. Josselson describes the “catch up” we long for with a friend as getting ‘relational fuel’ (Josselson 166). ‘Catching up’ often occurs through *sharing*, which Josselson delineates as an aspect of resonancy. The need to share comes from the want to be known. Like in infancy when the infant drags the mother around to their new discoveries to truly experience the sense of self, in sharing we emotionally drag our friend to our discoveries to fully experience our sense of Self.

Writing this paper, I’ve realized that I have experienced coregulation/mutuality in many of my relationships here at the OE. Luckily, I’ve even experienced the feeling of resonance in my friendship with my roommate Mairi. Unknowingly, I even wrote about this experience of resonance with Mairi in my memo on intersubjectivity last week. I wrote how when Mairi walked into the cookhouse at the Thanksgiving potluck I immediately felt at ease. Then we both simultaneously remarked how it was crazy that we hadn’t seen each other all day! I realize now that we were both feeling the need to ‘catch up.’

Just today Mairi approached me about this weekend. She is going to her friend’s wedding and will be away in Nashville, gone from the OE for four days. She told me that she will need to call me this weekend and talk. I realized that she was experiencing a feeling of resonance with me. This to me is evidence of coregulation. Our *we* is so strong that we cannot go a few days without needing to share our discoveries to fully experience ourselves. Our co-constructed interpretation of the world that we’ve created together has altered ourselves so deeply that we cannot go a few days without needing ‘refueling’ or we will feel lost from our Selves.

There are many more types of relatedness that are necessary for the development of the Self, such as holding, attachment, passionate experience, care and embeddedness. While all of these dimensions have their own distinct phenomenological experience, they all work toward “reaching through the space that separates us both physically and psychologically (Josselson 8). As I’ve demonstrated through my relationships with my cabin mates, each relationship has its own combination of modalities of relatedness. Josselson refers to this as a relationship’s ‘recipe’

(26). This recipe is formed and reformed continuously based on the history and needs of the individuals in the relationship. Relationships often include many forms of relatedness, but never all. The next section of this paper will discuss how these differing relationships organize to form the *relational network* that supports the cognitive development of the Self.

Relational Network and the Self:

While one relationship cannot fulfill all of the relational needs of an individual to support healthy self-development, it is likely that a relational network can. The relational network of an individual is the equivalent, more formal, definition of the previously mentioned ‘web of relationships.’ Within this system of relationships, “relationships are constantly enhancing, counterpointing, or clashing with other already there...” (Josselson 27). The variety of relationships in these networks come together to support the formation of a healthy individual. Thus, it is important for an individual to have a diverse set of relationships with diverse dimensions of relatedness to support the continue growth of sense of self for an individual.

Josselson describes this relational network as the nutrients that sustain the individual’s developmental needs. Each relationship in the relational network is a different type of nutrient sustaining the network in a different way. The individual cannot be reduced to their nutrients. In this, the individual *is* not their relationships. Still, the individual cannot develop without these crucial nutrients (Josselson). Like Josselson, psychologist, Robert Hinde, understands the relational network as crucial to the development of the Self. He views this relational network as ‘stored information,’ providing the individual with scripts detailing how to interact in certain situations. It guides our behavior and influences how we interpret information and plan for the future (Hinde). In synthesis, like Josselson, Hinde understands the Self to grow through its relational network that acts as a dynamic road map to Selfhood.

Over my time here at the OE I have seen the conceptual of the relational network become crucial to my life here at the OE. As mentioned above, I’ve become extremely close with Mairi. This happened at the beginning of my time here. This has brought me a lot of joy and led me to want to spend a lot of time with Mairi. To look for Mairi when I am struggling and confide in her. Because of this my relationship with Mairi has grown. Over time, I realized that Mairi cannot be my only sense of support. While Mairi offers support through making me feel known (resonance), I realized I need other relationships to feel like a healthy Sophia. This has led me to form strong friendships with other people here at the OE. I’ve connected with Clara, whose constant offering of tea when I come to Alyosha has made me feel loved (care). I’ve formed a relationship with Lyd who has enveloped me in bear hugs whenever I see them, providing me with security and safety (holding). I’ve grown fond of Henry whose constant philosophical inquiries during our conversation have made me want to steal his mind out of his body (idealization). I’ve deeply connected with Macy whose long eye contact as we walk by each other outside the bathroom in cabin 9 has made me feel warm inside (eye-to-eye validation). I’ve formed a crucial relationship with Will whose constant questioning of “how are you doing?” has each day made me feel like I belong at the OE (embeddedness). I’ve become attached to Shelly. Whenever we see each other, our arms find each other and grab on to each other (attachment). My time here at the OE would not be the same without any of these relationships. All these relationships have led me to recognize different aspects of myself and how they are shaping myself and this world.

I believe a relational understanding of the Self, like the objectivist understanding that poses the “authentic self” can offer comfort and stability. Relational theory does not demand a

loss of control or understanding of self, rather, it requires a shift of energy. Relational theorists are asking us to look for comfort in our relationships with the Other. It is a call to take care of these relationships as they shape us and our perspective of the world. It is a reorientation to the Other as a player in the journey to the “authentic self.” I believe this is Dostoevsky’s vision in the *Brother’s Karamazov*. Like Kolya, we all must go to our Ilyusha’s bedside when they become ill. We must push aside the idea of finding the “authentic self” by our lonesome on a mountain top. Who knows, if we do this, we too may be eating pancakes at a funeral.

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