

On self-boundary: A study of the development of the concept of secrecy

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The child's developing concept of a 'boundary' between an inner world of 'self' and an outer world 'non-self' is central to a number of systems of psychodynamic theory. The notion of boundary is also essential to Piaget. Despite the evident importance of the subject, there have been few attempts to discover the age at which this concept emerges. This study of 40 urban Australian children uses the development of the concept of secrecy as a marker. Most children attained this concept during the fifth year of life.

It has long been supposed that the infant does not completely distinguish between himself/herself and his/her world. Josiah Royce, for example, considered that the infant knew little difference between 'self' and 'not-self' (Royce, 1901). Baldwin was another who wrote of this state, remarking that it was characterized by what he called 'adualisms', i.e. an absence of dualities such as inner and outer, subject and object, thought and thing (Baldwin, 1906). Piaget, who was influenced not only by Baldwin but also by Janet's ideas about the child's sense of fusion with the world around him/her, further developed this line of thinking (Piaget, 1929, p. 128). In his system, too, this is an important issue. He wrote that it is 'indispensable to establish clearly and before all else the boundary the child draws between the self and the external world' (1929, p. 34). In addition, the evolution of the concept of self-boundary has become a central theme of several recent psychodynamic theories of child development, the most prominent being those of Mahler, Kohut and Winnicott, whose zone of transitional phenomena (1951) is to be found neither in the inner world nor in the outer, but both. It is a consequence of an immature concept of the 'limiting membrane' (Winnicott, 1965, p. 149) between 'self' and 'not-self'.

Despite the evident importance of the development of the concept of self-boundary, there has been little actual study of it. We do not know, for example, the age at which this concept is attained. Mahler, Pine & Bergmann (1975, p. 110)

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suggest that it is between two and three years of age; Piaget's findings imply that it is considerably later, from seven to nine. One supposes that the relative paucity of our data is a consequence of the difficulties inherent in studying so abstract a notion. Pierre Janet, however, gave us a way of approaching it.

Janet pointed out that the child's discovery of the concept of secrecy is an event of enormous significance, since it heralds the birth of an inner world (Janet, 1927). When the child learns that thoughts and ideas can be kept within him/her and are not accessible to others, he/she realizes that there is some kind of demarcation between his/her world, which is 'inner', and that which is 'outer'. Seen in this way, a study of the age at which children know what it means to keep a secret may allow us to infer the age of self-boundary formation. In this paper we report upon the findings of such a study. Before embarking on the report, however, it is necessary briefly to consider certain problems inherent in the notion of boundary.

First, it is important to emphasize that this study concerns the conception rather than perception of self-boundary. This distinction, which is often a difficult one, implies that the very young child does not *experience* his/her mother as knowing about his/her dreams or other inner states; he/she merely *believes* it. In this way, we differentiate the putative world of the schizophrenic from that of the normally developing child.

A second problem is that the concept of self-boundary is likely to evolve in a complex way through a number of stages, only one of which, albeit a critical one, is approached in this study. An obvious precedent (perhaps partially reflected in hiding) must be an emerging sense of the physical difference between one's self and one's surroundings. We might call this experience 'body boundary' in order to distinguish it from 'self-boundary'. In normal experience, 'body' and 'self' are mingled, so that self is the totality of one's experience including the bodily. In order to make this point, Sartre (1957) remarked 'the body is wholly "psychic" and not an anatomical thing' (p. 305). This experience is not static but depends upon one's changing interrelationship with the world. Under some clinical circumstances, however, 'self-boundary' becomes disconnected from 'body boundary' (Meares, 1980).

A third, minor, problem about self-boundary is its name. Federn, in his pioneering work on this subject, called it ego boundary, a name which has stuck. He was, however, writing in the 1920s before the psychoanalytic movement had distinguished between ego and self. Since Federn was clearly writing about self (e.g. 1927, p. 43), this term is preferred here.

A fourth problem is philosophical. There is some current criticism of the notion of an 'inner' world (Schafer, 1976, 1983). An argument against the position of Ryle (1963) and Schafer has been advanced elsewhere (Meares, 1985) and will not be repeated here.

The study

The sample of 40 children aged between three years and five and a half was drawn from a preschool in the western suburbs of Sydney. Children from all socio-economic levels were represented. None were developmentally abnormal. Children whose first language was not English were excluded.

Three simple tests were devised. Two of these depended upon the child's responses to a large coloured photograph of two adolescents, called 'Cathy' and 'Paul'. A semi-structured interview, in the manner of Piaget, followed a series of questions which were standard for each test situation. The interviews were conducted by W.O.

In the first situation, 'Cathy' was pictured hiding a box behind her back as she faced 'Paul'. The first question was 'What are they doing?' The interviewer's following questions pursued the child's understanding of hiding, things hidden, and the reasons for hiding. This test seemed necessary in view of the fact that to understand secrecy depends upon an understanding of hiding, albeit of thoughts rather than things.

The second test directly considered the concept of secrecy. 'Cathy' was shown with her hand cupped to 'Paul's' ear, as if she were whispering. Once again, the first question was 'What are Cathy and Paul doing?' The subsequent questions were designed to elicit (a) the child's knowledge and use of the word 'secret', (b) the content of secrets, (c) those who were recipients of secrets, and (d) those with whom one cannot share a secret.

The final test consisted of the simple presentation of a moral dilemma in order to investigate the strategy of lying, which also seems to represent an understanding that a thought or idea can be kept hidden. The first question to each girl was 'If Cathy was naughty, and her mummy asked, "Cathy, have you been naughty?" What would Cathy say?' The same question was asked of the boys, except that it involved 'Paul'.

All interviews were tape-recorded and a transcript made. Two independent raters judged upon the attainment of the concept of secrecy, of the understanding of hiding and the use of the strategy of lying. Since they are easier to describe, the latter two will be presented first. The children were almost universally successful in their ability to hide from the interviewer, and to discuss why people hide things. Only four children were unable to discuss the projective test in terms of hiding. They had a mean age of three years three months – 12 months below the population mean. It seems that when the child enters the fourth year of life, a sense of a *physical* self-margin is achieved, even if there is little appreciation of an inner psychic life.

The findings concerning lying were surprisingly unequivocal. On no occasion did the interviewer introduce the strategy of lying as a possible response to the projective test. Twenty-four children, however, spontaneously recommended such a strategy, consistent with the view that it is 'normal' in terms of the moral development of this age group (Piaget, 1977, p. 133).

Of the 16 non-liars, only seven told the truth. The predominant response of the others was to run and hide, perhaps indicating that the child was in a preceding stage of boundary formation, in which one cannot hide one's thoughts but can still hide oneself.

Other responses of the non-liars included crying (2), indecision (1), and asking for a cuddle (1).

Understanding the strategy of lying was clearly age related. The mean age of the liars was 4:6 and the non-liars 3:11. In detail, the findings were as follows:

<i>Age</i>	<i>No. of liars</i>	<i>No. in group</i>
3-3:6	1	7
3:7-3:12	4	7
4-4:6	8	12
4:7-4:12	6	7
5:0-	5	7

The strategy of lying was also clearly related to the attainment of the concept of secrecy. Of the 19 children who did not understand secrecy, only five lied. Seventeen of the 18 who understood secrecy also lied. (Three children could not be classified in terms of the secrecy concept.)

These findings suggest that at the beginning of the fifth year of life the large majority of children know that it is possible to avoid getting into trouble, disapproval, or punishment by lying. The fact, however, that some children lie earlier than this may not necessarily indicate the achievement of the 'inner-outer' distinction. Although the behaviour of some children might have been based on the knowledge that their thought was not accessible to others, other children may have adopted the strategy through imitation of an older sibling. Therefore, the results of the secrecy interview are the more fundamental data.

The criteria initially used to judge the attainment of the concept of secrecy were:

(1) The child must use the word 'secret' in discussing the projective test. The justification of this criterion is found in the well-known view that language is critical to concept formation.

(2) The child must show that he/she knows what it is to have a private idea.

(3) The child must demonstrate selectivity in to whom one may tell such private ideas.

On reviewing the data, however, the criteria were changed so that children who clearly understood the concept of secrecy were not excluded because they did not know the word.

The interviews showed fairly clearly that most children older than four years of age understood the notion of secrecy. Of the 14 children younger than four, only two had attained this concept. Of these two, one was regarded as exceptionally advanced; the other was aged 3:11. Seven of 12 children between 4:0 and 4:5, and nine of 14 between 4:7 and 5:9, understood the concept of secrecy. The oldest child not to attain this concept was 5:5. The youngest to attain it was 3:5.

Some of the contents and recipients of secrets are illustrated in the following extracts.

Boy - 4:9

What are Cathy and Paul doing?

Telling secrets.

What are secrets?

You tell someone, and they're not allowed to tell anyone.

Very good. What kind of things are secrets about?

Presents. Like we got a Lilo and it wasn't even anyone's birthday.

Can secrets be about anything else?
 You can pretend things, like dressing up.
 Is that a secret?
 Yes, because I'm a boy and I'm wearing a dress.
 If that's a secret, who can you tell?
 Jade, if you don't let her take the scarf, because she always wants them ALL!
 Who can't you tell?
 Daddy and Mummy because of the paint on my face, even if I wash it off they will be angry.
 Who else can you tell?
 Um, anyone but not if you don't like them, because they don't like me.
 Can I tell Miss Sweeney?
 Yes, she's the teacher, like you. I'll tell her, then. HELEN!

Girl – 4:7

What are Cathy and Paul doing?
 Telling secrets.
 What are secrets?
 (Silence)
 What is she saying to him?
 (Silence)
 Do you know any secrets then?
 Yes, I didn't invite Patricia to my party.
 Can I tell anyone?
 Anyone except Patricia. I know another secret; Boy George is a poofter.
 Why is that a secret?
 Because it's a square word.
 What, 'poofter'?
 Yes, a policeman will come and lock you up if you say it again.
 Who else *can't* you tell secrets to?
 Anyone who isn't your friend.
 What about mummy and daddy?
 I can tell them.
 What about Miss Smythe?
 No, she's the teacher.
 Isn't she your friend?
 No.
 Why did you tell me?
 Because you wear beautiful earrings, and so do I. Can you take yours off?

Girl – 5:2

What are Cathy and Paul doing?
 Don't know.
 Are they playing?
 Playing a game.
 How do they play?
 She tells him a secret.
 What's a secret?
 I don't know any, but I can make up one.
 Make up one, then!
 Um (whispers). We're going to the beach tomorrow, and we'll build a sandcastle, and when we knock it down, *guess* what's inside.

Do I have to guess?
 Yes!
 Shells?
 No!
 Bucket and spade?
 No!
 Goggles and flippers?
 No!
 Surfboard? Egg?
 No! No!
 I give up!
 Promise you won't tell?
 Yes.
 Inside the sandcastle is a princess!
 Can I tell anyone at all?
 No!
 If you could tell *one* person, who would it be?
 No one!
 Can I tell your mummy?
 No one AT ALL!

An example of a child who did not understand secrecy is as follows.

Girl – 3:9

What are Cathy and Paul doing?
 Whispering.
 Why whispering instead of talking out loud?
 Because they're in a picture.
 Why do people whisper?
 To sound like the grass rustling.
 Do you know what a secret is?
 No.
 Do you ever know something that no one else knows about?
 No.

The contents of secrets were, perhaps, surprising, since they were not generally described as negative. Secrets tended to concern pleasant and positive events such as gifts and birthday surprises. There were six such responses. Two examples involved shame (illegitimate pregnancy and being unable to swim), while three concerned sexuality or sexual identity (see above examples). Three more descriptions involved possessions (daddy's money, a new house, the possession of chocolates). This category was probably mixed. The possession of chocolate was associated with the notion of exchange and the formation of alliances. Several children knew the significance of the exchange of secrets in establishing groups. The new house seemed to be a secret because it was a 'treat', reserved only for friends. A cubby-house was another example of such a secret place. The final response was also conspiratorial ('spies have them').

The recipients of secrets were unsurprising. To the query 'If you had a secret, who could you tell?', 10 children nominated their mother. The initial response concerned peers or siblings in three cases, while the remaining five children said they would

refuse to tell a secret. Half the children said they would *not* tell certain peers secrets, but none nominated mother as a person to whom one could not disclose secrets.

Discussion

This study suggests that the majority of children develop a concept of secrecy during the fifth year of life. During this same year they learn the strategy of lying. Taken together, these findings imply that the child who is older than four comes to know that his/her thoughts are not accessible to others. It seems reasonable to infer that this milestone marks the emergence of the conception of a boundary between an inner world of 'self' and an outer world of 'not-self'. This is consistent with Mahler's metaphor of psychological birth. Before going further, it is necessary briefly to consider this notion in relation to other work in this area.

What strikes one, on first entering the field of studies of the development of self-concept, is the scarcity of data, leading some commentators to express surprise and dismay (Brim, 1976). Most studies have concerned self-esteem, a disappointing field of inquiry (Wylie, 1979) rather than the central question of self itself. The notion of the separation between private and public aspects of self, essential to the study presented here, does not appear in the psychological literature before 1972 (Buss, 1980, p. 6). This is an extraordinary omission, perhaps explained by Harter (1983) who remarks that 'with the radical behaviourist purge, such constructs were excised from our scientific vocabularies' (p. 226).

A fundamental difficulty in this area of research is a philosophical one. Self is difficult to define. Nevertheless, over the last few years a kind of consensus has developed about the way to resolve this problem. A major investigation of self-awareness in infancy (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979), an essay on the subject (Samuels, 1986) and two major reviews (Damon & Hart, 1982; Harter, 1983) all depend on William James, restoring him to a primary place in this field after many years of neglect. His central ideas are used to organize the empirical data which these various authors present and discuss.

Although a psychologist, William James has an important place in the history of philosophy since he appears to have had a major influence upon Wittgenstein, who frequently referred to James in his lectures. At one time, James' *Principles* 'was the only philosophical work visible on Wittgenstein's bookshelves' (Passmore, p. 692). James posited a duplex self. He wrote:

Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of *myself*, of my *personal existence*.

At the same time it is *I* who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me* and the other the *I* (1892, p. 176).

It is generally assumed that we are born with a rudimentary 'I' or 'ego', but the 'me' or the 'self' necessarily evolves with experience. Looking back over the studies of the last decade or so, it is apparent that many have concerned the child as 'I' or 'the knower', often showing that the infant has unexpected capacities of awareness (e.g. Bower, 1974). On the other hand, there has been very little study of the 'me'.

A difficulty arises, however, with where to place those studies of the developing child as 'agent'. They show the child acting upon his/her world, and appearing to know it, as early as four weeks of age (e.g. Bruner, 1969, p. 170). Harter considers that these data concern the 'I', the self as subject. This clarification helps to explain the discrepancies between the viewpoint of most authorities and the inferences of Stern (1985) who depends a great deal on observations of the infant as agent and who considers that 'self' emerges towards the end of the first year of life. In what follows, an attempt is made to summarize some of the main pieces of evidence about the emergence of the 'me'.

As a kind of short-hand, James distinguished a hierarchy of selves with a 'bodily me' at the bottom, a 'spiritual me' at the top and various social selves in between. Seen in this way, 'self' emerges in a developmental trajectory from the earliest physical experiences of self as an entity to the later spiritual, or non-material 'me', which has *internality* as its main characteristic:

The more *active-feeling* states of consciousness are thus the more central portions of the spiritual me. The very core and nucleus of our self, as we know it, the very *sanctuary* of our life, is the sense of activity which certain inner states possess...I wish now only to lay down the peculiar *internality* of whatever states possess this quality of seeming to be active (1892, p. 181).

Self as an entity is apparent at least as early as six months. This can be argued in the following way. Since the basis of anxiety is a threat to self, anxiety can only be manifest after the first rudimentary formation of the concept of self. Anxiety clearly emerges at about six to seven months. This is apparent not only in the child's responses to separation and strangers but also in situations of apparent threat. For example, in the visual cliff experiment, nine-month-old babies show polygraphic evidence of fear whereas five-month-old babies show no fear, but polygraphic evidence of attention (Schwartz, Campos & Baisel, 1973). Separation anxiety is explained in the following way: 'the baby at six to seven months experiences himself as an entity, but this entity is intermingled with another, who is perceived as a distinct but nevertheless necessary part of his self-system. Threat of her loss may be felt like the threat to the material integrity of self, as if existence itself were imperilled' (Meares, 1986).

Nevertheless, the self-concept implied by the emergence of anxiety is indeed a limited one on the evidence of studies of visual self-recognition. Amsterdam (1972) using a technique derived from Gallup (1970) studied children's responses to their mirror images. A rouge mark had been surreptitiously placed on the infant's nose. Self-recognition was operationally defined as behaviour directed to the mark on the child's own nose. Using this criterion, self-recognition does not emerge until about 21 months.

Lewis & Brooks-Gunn (1979) followed up this work with an impressive and systematic study. In addition to the mirror-rouge methodology, they used photographs and videotape. They were able to infer that between 15-18 months, infants show featural recognition of themselves. By 21-24 months, such recognition is more clearly evident and accompanied by the use of appropriate pronouns and the baby's own name.

We may say then that the 'material-me' seems to be fairly well established by the

age of two. Damon & Hart (1982), however, remark that this early and physicalistic self-concept should extend to include physical actions as well as body image and material possessions. They cite the studies of Keller, Ford & Meacham (1978) and Secord & Peevers (1974) both of which suggested that kindergarten children tend to describe themselves in terms of the things they do rather than in terms of their appearance.

The notion of an interior life, or 'internality', necessary to the attainment of the Jamesian self, is difficult to study. Piaget himself did so only indirectly. He considered that the magical and animistic qualities of pre-operational thought were a consequence of an immature concept of boundary between self and the external world. Pre-operational thought lasts, in Piaget's studies, until seven or even later. Some reconciliation between Piaget and the present findings is found if it can be assumed that a changed conceptualization or understanding of the world is not immediately followed by an alteration of beliefs and behaviours which flow from the prior conceptualization, but may take some time to dissipate. Direct approaches, however, to the concept of 'internality' do not all support our findings.

Broughton (1978) tried a direct approach with questions such as: 'What is the self?' 'What is mind?'. Broughton concluded that the young child confuses mind, self and body. It is not until about eight years of age that the child distinguishes between mind and body. The problem with such an investigation is that it depends very much on the child's use of language. In other words, children may understand the concept of an inner life but direct questioning may not bring this to light. Selman (1980) used a different more indirect method. Children were told a story. Questions were asked which posed a dilemma. Follow-up questions included: 'Is there an inside and an outside to a person?'. From their responses, Selman inferred that by the age of six, children realize that psychic experience differs from the physical. This finding is nearer to our own and may reflect methodology which was superior to Broughton's.

A better way of investigating the development of an inner life, since it is less complicated and less dependent on language, is reported by Flavell (1968, pp. 164-166). Children were shown a number of objects (silk stockings, necktie, adult book, toy truck and doll), which they were asked to choose as gifts for their parents, their siblings and themselves. Three-year-olds generally selected gifts for others which they would choose for themselves. Some four-year-olds, half the five-year-olds, and all the children of six chose appropriate gifts.

The distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' brings with it the sense that others are not merely extensions of oneself, or self-objects as Kohut (1971) would put it. Rather with conception of oneself as unique, with an interior life of one's own, rises the simultaneous realization that others have their own individual universe, with personal wishes, feelings, etc. The emergence of self-boundary allows one to choose appropriate gifts. When the data from the Flavell study are seen in this way, self-boundary arises between three and six, which is consistent with the findings in our study.

It is apparent that although the notion of an inner self can be observed at least as early as during the fifth year of life, this conception develops during life so that it is much stronger in adolescents than younger children. For example, Rosenberg (1979)

compared eight-year-olds with young adolescents. One of the questions asked was: 'Now who really knows best what kind of person you really are deep down inside – your mother, your father, yourself, your best friend?' About half the younger children, and 36 per cent of the older children, thought the parent would know better. Thus the locus of interior self-knowledge is not securely established, even in older children.

Buss has pursued the notion of the private self into adult life. He devised a 10-item questionnaire which reflected 'private self-consciousness'. Considerable individual variation is apparent in the development of the 'privacy of the self' (Khan, 1974). Those whose evolution of an interior life was well developed seemed surer of their own reality, were better able to describe themselves, and were less likely to have the reality of others thrust upon them. For example:

In one study, subjects drank a peppermint flavoured drink and rated how strong the flavour was. Then a second drink was presented, and half the subjects were told that it was stronger than the first drink. Subjects high in private self consciousness (Highs) gave almost the same intensity ratings to the second drink, but the Lows rated it as much more intense. The rest of the subjects were told the second drink was weaker. Again, the Highs hardly changed their ratings at all, but the Lows rated the second drink as much weaker. Thus the Highs were not susceptible to suggestions about their taste reactions, but the Lows were (Buss, 1980, p. 48).

We might infer from the data of Buss that the development of an interior life is a desirable state bringing with it a certain stability. This inference leads to the problem of personality development and its disorders.

Kohut (1971) suggested that the more severe personality disorders are a consequence of deficiencies in the parental environment which lead to a developmental arrest in the field of social relations such that the individual treats others as extensions of himself/herself, i.e. as self-objects, rather than true objects in relation to the subject. The evidence of this study helps to locate the period of life when these deficiencies of parental responsiveness were occurring. It is evident, in extrapolating from Kohut, that those with severe personality disorder (or 'disorders of self') will show certain pathologies in the sense of privacy and of the ownership of experience (Meares, 1976, 1986, 1988). These pathologies, however, and possible therapeutic approaches to them (Meares, 1987*a, b*) are beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, it is necessary to note that until this study is repeated in different social settings the conclusions must remain tentative.

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