

## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AMPLIFICATION OF THE CAPACITY FOR COMMUNICATION

Sunnie D. Kidd

### 1) Interpersonal Theory

Psychology is guided by philosophical presuppositions of the nature of the human being. These presuppositions direct theory and delimit the scope and possibility of a theory's capacity for a comprehensive understanding of lived human life. Regardless of the orientation one question is implicitly asked: how does one become what one is? This is a major task for personality theory. We will look from Harry Stack Sullivan's view of this transformation and then amplify this from a phenomenological approach.

Sullivan investigates this continual transformation from very early in life and moves step by step through this developmental process.<sup>1</sup> Sullivan's starting place is:

...if we go with almost microscopic care over how everybody comes to be what he is at chronologic adulthood, then perhaps we can learn a good deal of what is highly probable about living and difficulties in living.<sup>2</sup>

This theory of interpersonal relations holds that, given a biological substrate, the human is the product of interaction with other human beings. It is out of personal/social forces acting upon one from the day of birth that the personality emerges. According to Sullivan, we are being constantly transformed, "solely for the purpose of living with other people in some sort of social organization."<sup>3</sup> We are all required to adapt or adjust.

The nature of the human being, for Sullivan, can be seen in two inclusive goals, the pursuit of *satisfaction* and the pursuit of *security*. These goals are positively directed, unless interfered with by anxiety. Sullivan's theory states that the character of one's self-system is molded by the social pressures as mediated by significant others. This *dynamism* arises out of anxiety encountered in interpersonal experience. Significant others such as parents, the mothering one or teachers are quite influential in the process of socialization. One becomes the reflected appraisals of significant others.

Developing through experience the self-system grows in such a way as *to admit what avoids and to exclude what does not avoid*, the anxiety resulting from disapproval by the other. Anxiety then, is described in terms of effects, around which this theory revolves. Sullivan utilizes the homeostasis view of human living with euphoria (well-being) at one end and

terror (absolute anxiety) at the other, which is on a continuum.

The very beginnings of the experience of anxiety are lodged in infancy and are first undergone through an empathic linkage with the mothering one. Then, through forbidding gestures such as tone of voice or facial expression produced by the mothering one, sets the stage for a lifetime of skillful maneuvering to avoid this unpleasant experience.

We are born into the society with the sole purpose of being socialized/aculturated into society, becoming a worthy and prestigious being. The worth of the self is at the basis of this theory. The main thrust of our struggle to exist from this view is to be a worthwhile and satisfied person.

Sullivan assumes three principles given from biology: 1) communal existence; 2) functional activity; 3) organization. These principles set the ground for Sullivan's theory:

When I say that man is distinguished very conspicuously from other members of the biological universe by requiring interchange with a universe of culture, this means, in actual fact, since culture is an abstraction pertaining to people, that man requires interpersonal relationships, or interchange with others.<sup>4</sup>

Here we see a deviation from the Freudian view of biological drives, to a person-necessary environment. For Sullivan no such entity exists as the "individual personality":

No great progress in this field of study can be made until it is realized that the field of observation is what people do with each other, what they can communicate to each other about what they do with each other. When that is done, no such thing as the durable, unique, individual personality is ever clearly justified. For all I know every human being has as many personalities as he has interpersonal relations.<sup>5</sup>

Maintaining a consistent continuity of thought Sullivan describes the self in relation to others:

The self is the content of consciousness at all times when one is thoroughly comfortable about one's self-respect, the prestige that one enjoys among one's fellows, and the respect and deference which they pay one.<sup>6</sup>

In these circumstances there is no anxiety to disturb the self, one

remains in pursuit of positively directed goals. Through security operations one maintains self-respect and prestige, which are dependent upon the respect of others. So we see that the self, for Sullivan is:

...concerned with avoiding the supposedly distressing—which is often illuminating—with the exclusion from awareness of certain types of very humiliating recollections, and correspondingly the failure of the development of insight from experience. It maintains selective inattention.<sup>7</sup>

Sullivan speaks of three aspects of interpersonal cooperation: 1) reward; 2) grades of anxiety; 3) severe anxiety. This is where the self or more precisely, the “me”<sup>8</sup> begins to develop the sense of selfhood. This process implies (under certain conditions) restricting and modifying the infant. For Sullivan learning is social, “reward being nothing more or less than tender behavior on the part of the acculturating or socializing mothering one.”<sup>9</sup>

With grades of anxiety, that is, mild anxiety brings about and allows for the possibility of learning. The infant learns by way of mild forbidding gestures or disapproval with some degree of anxiety on the part of the mothering one. A differentiation of anxiety-colored situations in contrast to approved situations is learned. Anxiety is learned. This differentiation, an anxiety gradient, guides the infant into childhood and supplies the necessary experiences of disapproval for self-development.

Uncanny emotion, is a feeling that can be described as severe anxiety. This is the least educative, “because the sudden occurrence of severe anxiety practically prohibits any clear prehension, or understanding, of the immediate situation.”<sup>10</sup> This kind of training is much less useful and is thought to be a forerunner of a less healthy acquaintance with reality than either learning through reward or through milder graded anxiety such as is contained in forbidding gestures or other milder forms of disapproval by significant others.

These three aspects of interpersonal cooperation are the initial personifications of the self-system which Sullivan says will be the “me” or the “my body.” For Sullivan “my body” is an organization of experience that has come to be distinguished from everything else by its self-sentient character. The beginning personifications of “me” are found to be the “good-me” (which is connected with reward), the “bad-me” (which is connected with graded anxiety) and the “not-me” (which is connected with uncanny emotion or sudden severe anxiety).

The “I” of each of us ultimately develops from the initial personification of “good-me.” The “bad-me” personification is connected

with the forbidding gestures and otherwise anxiety producing tenseness of the mothering one. The “bad-me” for Sullivan, organizes experience of increasing degrees of anxiety:

That is to say, bad-me is based on this increasing gradient of anxiety and that, in turn, is dependent, at this stage of life, on the observation, if misinterpretation, of the infant’s behavior by someone who can induce anxiety.<sup>11</sup>

Of particular interest to the field of psychiatry is the “not-me” as this is a very slowly or gradually evolving personification of what Sullivan calls:

...primitive character—that is, organized in unusually simple signs in the parataxic mode of experience, and made up of poorly grasped aspects of living which will presently be regarded as ‘dreadful,’ and which still later will be differentiated into incidents which are attended by awe, horror, loathing, or dread.<sup>12</sup>

These personifications lay the groundwork for the positing of the functions of selective inattention, substitution and dissociation. The self-system is capable (through security operations) of protecting itself from the unpleasant aspects of living. We are blinded, so to speak, with much of our own experience simply because the self-system works on the principle of focal awareness.

The “not-me” or dissociated aspect of experience remains outside awareness. It is fended off, by the security operations of the self-system to prevent the experience of anxiety which inevitably leads to the personification of “bad-me” which is the very experience around which interpersonal relationships are assumed to work. We are, as Sullivan assumes, constantly striving for acceptance, respect and prestige, for self-esteem. Bringing into awareness these dissociated aspects of experience due to the effectiveness of the security operations is apparently the difficulty faced by the psychiatrist working with persons who experience debilitating difficulties in living.

Apparently, from these assumptions regarding the overpowering need for approval and the place of anxiety in disapproval, Sullivan saw social or cultural norms almost impossible to transcend. Approval-disapproval takes preference in Sullivan’s system. This self-system is always in flux and constantly in tension. Only the degree fluctuates, either toward anxiety or toward euphoria, according to the homeostasis conception of human existence. The movement is precipitated by the reflected appraisals of significant others. We satisfy the people that matter to us, thereby satisfying ourselves. Regardless of the era, the process remains the same, only who the

significant others are changes over time.

## 2) Phenomenological Amplification of Interpersonal Theory

We will first present insights by Remy G. Kwant then deepen the phenomenological amplification by presenting the thought of Mary-Rose Barral. Upon first glimpse of Sullivan's idea of self, one sees similarities with a phenomenological approach, which speaks of consciousness. For Sullivan the self is defined as the content of consciousness at all times. Sullivan does though, speak of overt and covert processes:

Thus by unwitting, or unnoted, I refer to the great congeries of covert referential processes which must have occurred, but whose occurrence is completely unknown to the person concerned, and is only to be inferred from the evidence of what the person does know and does notice—in other words, from what occurs within his so-called field of consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

As experiential beings, we are always being directed toward something. Experience is experience of something. So, what one is experiencing, at any particular time, is most prevalent. One can see how a person gets stuck, so to speak, in a certain mode of being, like some of the pathological states brought about through the “not-me.”

Sullivan's theory is grounded in interpersonal relations. We begin in a world with others. Others are before us and others will be after us. As experiential beings we experience the world in relation to others. Sullivan speaks of significant others who matter to us. The mothering one is on the scene before the infant, even before the infant is itself. The infant is in the world before it knows it. We find ourselves relating before we know it. We take up a language, begin speaking it and find ourselves already-there.

Sullivan's interpersonal theory is based on self-relatedness. We find ourselves in relation. From a philosophical perspective, Kwant explicates this process, “in reality we become familiar with things *through* interhuman relations. It is only through the encounter with others that we really get to know things.”<sup>14</sup>

Kwant rejects any attempt to gain knowledge about a human person by thing-knowledge, meaning scientism. As scientism tries to explain how we attain knowledge about other people by applying rational principles from the world of things. It also assumes that self-experience plays a role in knowledge of other people. It further assumes that we would or do distinguish between inner experience and its outward manifestation.

Kwant rejects these assumptions and reminds us that we know others

not only as resembling our own inner self but also that they are different from us. Further, we are (through empathy such as Sullivan describes) able to participate or enter into another's experience without ever having had the same experience. Kwant points out, "This would be impossible if self-experience were the only key to the door of the mysterious inner life of other people."<sup>15</sup>

The assumption that we distinguish between inner experience and its outward manifestation does not seem to agree with reality. We cannot separate inner experience from its outward manifestation. The facial expression as a young child experiences joy, anger or sorrow are of that very experience. An exception could be made for those who are capable or practiced at controlling the expression of certain emotions, such as actors. As Kwant says:

The outward manifestations are spontaneous extensions of our inner life. It seems as if the inner life comes into existence in its exterior manifestation. When expressions of joy are suppressed by a compelling force, joy itself dies.<sup>16</sup>

It would appear that the interior experience and its outward manifestation are so intermingled that for Kwant a comparison of the two is inconceivable. The human being is not seen as concealed behind behavior but exists *in* it.

For Sullivan, the human being understands spontaneously through the empathic linkage with a significant other. Kwant brings this to clarity:

We understand *immediately* the thought which is embodied in behavior and word. Man must learn to understand other people, but this development can take place only within a fundamental understanding that is already present.<sup>17</sup>

From these points we can see a movement toward a fundamental idea of existentialism: the self of the other is the whole person and is immediately accessible to us. The other exists and appears in and through embodiment and that is immediately accessible. Our knowledge cannot be reduced to anything else and in particular, our being-in-the-world-with-others is irreducible and primordial.

Kwant also ascribes to the possibilities of an ever-developing person, as does Sullivan. The human being is a continually developing possibility encountering things and people, although not all possibilities are realized in any single encounter. For Kwant:

The person, therefore, is not to be identified with his actual

existence alone, not because there is more actuality behind this existence, but because the possibilities of actualization are endless.<sup>18</sup>

Sullivan was very attuned to the process of communication. The role of the therapist is that of a participant-observer, which shows similarity to Martin Heidegger's idea of being-with.<sup>19</sup> Sullivan's view, for Mabel Cohen, rests on the propositions that:

(1) a large part of mental disorder results from and is perpetuated by inadequate communication, the communicative processes being interfered with by anxiety; and (2) each person in any two-person relationship is involved as a portion of an interpersonal field, rather than as a separate entity, in processes which affect and are affected by the field.<sup>20</sup>

Immediately one can see a gestalt influence; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. From a phenomenological approach it is seen as being-situated, situatedness. We are always in a situation. It is necessary to look at the whole situation, while being in it. From the participant-observer this is possible. Sullivan gives the therapist the possibility of moving along with the client yet in a disciplined way. This approach moves toward a bridge of the subjective/objective problem in psychology.

Our thinking as interwoven with verbal expression is by its very nature social. The sociality of language and its tremendous impact upon the development of anyone is self-evident. Language is a vehicle for the movement toward becoming a human being. To speak does not simply demonstrate a way in which we can give expression to a thought in a few words but it is a way of human encounter, human involvement. It is a dialogue and by its very nature social. This process can be amplified from a phenomenological approach.

Kwant utilizes the insights in this area provided by Merleau-Ponty in that, "thought seeks the word as its completion."<sup>21</sup> There is a vision which precedes speaking and from it speaking and writing originate. Just as a person comes to full existence through embodiment, so does the thought, the idea, exist in the word. For Merleau-Ponty, "the naming of objects does not follow their recognition, but *is* this recognition itself."<sup>22</sup> The word, it is insisted makes reality exist for us. Kwant points out that, "As long as we are seeking the name of someone or something, we are seeking the reality itself."<sup>23</sup>

One can see how finely attuned to the therapeutic situation Sullivan has been when considering thought, language and embodiment as viewed from a phenomenological approach. Sullivan has been reputed to even go so

far as to adopt the embodiment of a catatonic to move toward an understanding of that situation.

Clearly, Sullivan has provided a network of development for the capacity of the human being for self-relatedness. It is an *intersubjective* view of human existence. The concept of self-dynamism most certainly does not create the self as an object but identifies it as a process. This process includes growth, maturation and development. Personality represents a system that is continuously in a state of development.

If then, as Sullivan says, the self becomes the reflected appraisals of others, the capacity for self-relatedness is in a very clear position for confirmation. The person is not seen as an object but as a process, one that is always in a state of becoming. From a phenomenological approach self-relatedness is seen as co-constitution. This means in Sullivan's theory that the self-dynamism comes to be from personal/social aspects of one's encounters with others. One is influenced while one influences the other.

One can then see the reason for Sullivan's therapeutic view of staying with those things that are very probably significant and going to a lot of trouble to avoid misunderstanding. Sullivan would say, express it in language that is meaningful to the patient. Arriving upon two ideas that meet this criterion Sullivan says:

Long ago I realized that it was not how much time I spent that counted, but the seriousness of my attempt to avoid any possible misunderstanding in communicating what I had to say, and the keenness of my interest in what had happened to the patient.<sup>24</sup>

*Therapy is a special case of social interaction.* The thought of Heidegger lays a firm ground for Sullivan's interpersonal theory. For Heidegger our most primordial existence is being-with-others:

By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*].<sup>25</sup>

Ontologically existence without others is inconceivable. The others are not viewed as objects but as others. With this understanding we come to appreciate the acuity of Sullivan's appropriation of this primordial aspect of human existence into a theoretical formulation of the structure of personality.

Barral in discussion of language as encounter displays the depth of the complexity of intersubjectivity. As Barral says:

The possibility of communication, Merleau-Ponty has said, results from the meaning which is already contained in the word as a true gesture. But this is not sufficient; nor is it sufficient to know the language and vocabulary of the others. When I communicate, I actually come to an encounter with another whose personal being endorses a certain view of the world, just as much as I endorse the view of my world. Hence in this communication there is much ambiguity: our mutual relation is not clearly defined in expressed significations, it is rather a mutual expectation for an intention, the one from the other; hence, not yet at the intellectual level, a kind of meeting of existences takes place wherein each seeks to synchronize his existence to that of the other.<sup>26</sup>

Barral goes on:

Understanding seems to take care of itself with the expressions of common language. This is the reason why we somewhat take the linguistic intersubjective exchange for granted; our reflections are carried out in the interior of a world already speaking and already spoken to. We actually lose sight of the contingent in our communication: this happens not only to the child who is learning to speak, but even to the creative writer who has suddenly seen a new light or to the man who witnesses an event which evokes a response: then silence is transformed into words. Then we come to the moment of realization: “everyday language” pre-supposes expressions already accomplished by a personal decision.<sup>27</sup>

Barral further says that Merleau-Ponty comes to a very enlightening statement with regard to intersubjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty:

Whenever I speak or I understand another’s word, I experience the presence of others in me and of myself in others—which is the touchstone of the theory of intersubjectivity.<sup>28</sup>

In concluding the philosophical implications of the phenomenology of language Barral hones in on the resonant ground of dialogue. As Barral tells us:

It is Merleau-Ponty’s contention that as long as what I say has meaning and in the measure in which I understand, I do not really distinguish between [myself] the speaker and [myself or

an another] the listener; the parties to a dialogue are one.<sup>29</sup>

### Notes

- 1) That one's becoming is a process, already presupposes that the human being is continually in a state of transformation, that one moves toward the future.
- 2) Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, eds. Helen S. Perry and Mary L. Gawel, intro. Mabel B. Cohen (New York: Norton, 1953), p. 4.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 5) Harry Stack Sullivan, "A Theory of Interpersonal Relations - The Illusion of Personal Individuality", *Varieties of Personality Theory*, ed., intro. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (New York: Dutton, 1964), p. 143.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 8) Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, *op. cit.*, p. 161. Sullivan speaks of "me" that is invariably connected with the sentence of "my body" and three different kinds of personifications: "good-me" "bad-me" and "not-me" of the prehended body.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 14) Remy G. Kwant, *Encounter*, trans. Robert C. Adolfs (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 15.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 19) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 159. For Heidegger to “leap ahead” essentially pertains to authentic care, “Everyday Being-with-one-another maintains itself between the two extremes of positive solicitude—that which leaps in and dominates, and that which leaps forth and liberates.” *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 20) Mabel B. Cohen, intro. to Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, *op. cit.*, p. xii.
- 21) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as quoted by Kwant, *Encounter*, *op. cit.*, p. 36. This is Kwant’s translation from the French edition of *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 206. This particular translation of this sentence is preferred to the English text.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 37. Merleau-Ponty translated from the French by Kwant, p. 207.
- 23) Kwant, *Encounter*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 24) Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Psychiatric Interview*, eds. Helen S. Perry and Mary L. Gawel, intro. Otto A. Will (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 208.
- 25) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
- 26) Mary-Rose Barral, *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of The Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 185.
- 27) *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 28) Merleau-Ponty, as quoted by Barral, *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 29) Barral *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of The Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.