

# True Self and False Self

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November 19, 2022

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *True Self and False Self*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38507>

True self and false self are terms introduced into psychoanalysis by D. W. Winnicott in 1960. Winnicott 'contrasts a basic True Self with a False Self, the latter a self-protective mechanism....The true self feeling involves a sense of all out personal aliveness...feeling real'. 'Winnicott conceives of a "false self" that an infant develops in despairing defence against the trauma of inadequate maternal care; the analytic task is to give the "true self", which can feel and is cowering behind the "false self", which cannot, the strength to emerge'.

### **Before Winnicott**

There was much in psychoanalytic theory on which Winnicott could draw for his concept of the False Self. Helene Deutsch had described the "as if" personalities who have 'succeeded in substituting "pseudo contacts" of manifold kinds for a real feeling contact with other people: they behave "as if" they have feeling contacts with people'. Winnicott's own analyst, Joan Riviere, had memorably explored the concept of the masquerade - of 'the mask of the narcissist...the trait of deceptiveness, the mask, which conceals this subtle reservation of all control under intellectual rationalizations, or under feigned compliance and superficial politeness". Freud himself, with his late theory of 'the ego as constituted in its nucleus by a series of alienating identifications', had produced a theory of 'the Ego, which does bear some comparison with the False Self'.

### **Winnicott**

Despite its many antecedents, it would be wrong to underestimate the quiet conceptual revolution offered by Winnicott's 1960 article, which offered a fresh and compelling, clinically-rooted picture of the human mind.

For Winnicott, in the False Self, 'Other people's expectations can become of overriding importance, overlaying or contradicting the original sense of self, the one connected to the very roots of one's being'. The danger is that 'through this False Self, the infant builds up a false set of relationships, and by means of introjections even attains a show of being real'. The result can be a 'child whose potential aliveness and creativity has gone unnoticed...concealing an empty, barren internal world behind a mask of independence'. Yet at the same time the 'Winnicottian False Self is the ultimate defence against the unthinkable "exploitation of the True Self, which would result in its annihilation"'.

By contrast, the True Self is rooted in, and "'does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness" - this means the body's life-sustaining functions, "including the heart's action and breathing". Out of this the baby creates the experience of reality: a sense that "'Life is worth the trouble of living". In the baby's nonverbal gesture which '... expresses a spontaneous instinct', the true self potential can be communicated to, and affirmed by, the motherer.

'The False Self in its pathological guise prevents and inhibits what Winnicott calls the "spontaneous

gesture" of the True Self. Compliance and imitation are the costly results'. Some would indeed consider that 'the idea of compliance is central to Winnicott's theory of the false self', and add, paradoxically, that 'concern for an object is easily a compliant act'. Where the motherer is not responsive to the baby's spontaneity, where instead 'a mother's expectations are too insistent, they can eventually result in compliant behaviour and an impaired autonomy', as the baby has 'to manage a prematurely important object....The False Self enacts a kind of dissociated regard or recognition of the object; the object is taken seriously, is shown concern, but not by a person'.

It has been suggested that 'in pathology, Winnicott's distinction between "true and false selves" corresponds to Balint's "basic fault" and to Fairbairn's "compromised ego"'.

One persistent criticism of Winnicott's theory of is that it was not theoretically integrated. Neville Sympington writes: "Most clinicians ... when they have a clinical insight, they simply paste it onto existing theory. ... Winnicott did the same with the true and false self: he did not ask himself how the theory fitted with ego and id." Similarly Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Maud Mannoni are very reserved about the theoretical implication of Winnicott's true/false self distinction, but they acknowledge the justice of his clinical observations.

### **Further developments**

The last half-century have seen Winnicott's ideas extended and applied in a variety of contexts, both in psychoanalysis and beyond.

### **Kohut**

It has been suggested that 'Kohut offers essentially the same program' as Winnicott in his descriptions of 'the narcissistic disorders in which he specializes....Like Winnicott's "false-self" patients, these patients develop a shoddy armor (of a "defensive" or "compensatory" character) around their maimed inner core'. Kohut himself 'has noted that his work "overlaps" with Winnicott's investigations', and others have 'regarded Kohut's contribution to psychoanalysis to be an extension of Winnicott's work'.

Thus Kohut emphasises that 'to be...the maintenance of even the diseased remnants of the self is preferable to not being, that is, to accept the takeover of another's personality rather than his actively elicited responsiveness'. Similarly, he stressed that 'there is a decisive difference between the support of self-objects that are sought after and chosen by a self in harmony with its innermost ideals...and the abandoning of oneself to a foreign self, through which one gains borrowed cohesion at the price of genuine initiative and creative participation in life'.

### **Lowen**

Alexander Lowen identified narcissists as having a true and a false, or superficial, self. The false

self rests on the surface, as the self presented to the world. It stands in contrast to the true self, which resides behind the facade or image. This true self is the feeling self, but it is a self that must be hidden and denied. Since the superficial self represents submission and conformity, the inner or true self is rebellious and angry. This underlying rebellion and anger can never be fully suppressed since it is an expression of the life force in that person. But because of the denial, it cannot be expressed directly. Instead it shows up in the narcissist's acting out. And it can become a perverse force.

### **Masterson**

James F. Masterson argued all the personality disorders crucially involve the conflict between a person's two "selves": the false self, which the very young child constructs to please the mother, and the true self. The psychotherapy of personality disorders is an attempt to put people back in touch with their real selves.

### **Symington**

Jungians have explored how 'the narcissistic longings of mothers (or fathers) to amass reflected glory through their children' can result in a situation where 'in place of autonomy, the adult...would come to obey an internal source that the psychoanalyst Neville Symington calls the "discordant source"'. Symington contrasted 'two poles: one in which I am the source of my own action, where I have a creative capacity that comes from my own source of action, and the other in which an inner figure opposed to myself is the source of action. He termed the twin 'sources of action the "autonomous source" and the "discordant source"', and acknowledged that 'although the formulation is different, it is along the lines of what Winnicott talks about - the true self and the false self'.

His main criticism of Winnicott concerned the initial adoption or internalisation of the discordant source - wanting 'to stress that an intentional identification is what brings about the donning of the false self. Winnicott leaves out this intentional aspect in his description of its origins'.

### **Persona and false self**

Jungians have explored 'to what extent Jung's concept of the persona overlaps with Winnicott's concept of the False Self' - noting the way 'the antecedents of such persona-identification in the individual's life-history are usually quite similar to those of the False Self'. However most would agree that it is only 'when the persona is excessively rigid or defensive... the persona then develops into a pathological false self'.

### **Stern's tripartite self**

In *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Daniel Stern considered 'the sense of physical cohesion

(..."going on being", in Winnicott's term)' as essential to what he called the Core Self - providing 'an affective core to the prerepresentational self'. He also explored how selective maternal attunement could create 'two versions of reality....Language becomes available to ratify the split and confer the privileged status of verbal representation upon the false self', so that 'the true self becomes a conglomerate of disavowed experiences of self which cannot be linguistically coded'.

However 'in place of true self and false self, Stern suggests the adoption of a tri-partite vocabulary: the social self, the private self and the disavowed self'.

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